QUEST FOR AN AUTONOMOUS VOIVODINA

A multicultural solution

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(1992)

"It is at last possible for our generation
to see the emergence of a settlement
of the nationalities' question in Europe,
a peaceful settlement grounded in treaties
rather then imposed military solutions."

Francois Mitterrand
February 29, 1992

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Quest for an Autonomous Voivodina
A Multicultural Solution

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A comparison of the ethnic atlas of Europe with its political atlases will show hardly any change in the former since the time of the mass migrations, (6th century A.D.) with linguistic and cultural groups, by and large, remaining in the one region, while national borders have changed constantly. Naturally, there have been exceptional cases of countries maintaining their borders throughout this constant change while some intermediate territories often changed hands.

Comparing the map of Europe as it was 80 years ago with today's leads to the inescapable conclusion that only the use of great force could have produced a change of such magnitude. Indeed, two horrific world wars have ravaged the continent which, during earlier, relatively peaceful centuries, had set the standard of human civilization and civic culture. Both wars ended in unconditional surrender and allowed the map of Europe to be redrawn in the total interests of the victors. The supervision of this political map by two super-powers provided Europe with almost half a century of stable borders. Now that one of the pillars of world stability has collapsed the logical and natural forces of history can prevail. Interestingly, this new trend first appeared in Yugoslavia.

No doubt, to the distant observer it would seem natural that on a relatively small piece of territory like the Balkans small ethnic groups belonging to the one family of languages would coalesce, constitute a common state and, thus unified, play a more important role on the international economic and political stage. Contrary to this, at a time when the ethnically and linguistically diverse peoples of Western Europe have for decades been attempting to unite ever more closely, the apparently so ideally constituted Yugoslavia is breaking up into its constituent parts. Obviously, something exceptional must be causing this. Some forces, intentions and passions must be at work which are not present elsewhere in Europe.

The war raging in Yugoslavia is now in its second year. It is no civil war but the battle of two peoples who were not able to find the means of living together in a common state. It was in 1918 that, amidst great hopes, a common state for the southern Slavonic peoples first came into existence. These great hopes were soon shattered. The attractive theory, when put into practice, was disturbed by the question as to which ethnic group should be the leader. In appointments to the shared posts of the common fatherland it suddenly became of interest who was a Serb, who a Croat. (Naturally, there were those who honestly declared themselves to be Yugoslav but these merely constituted a third, new category.) The Serbs, more numerous and more aggresive,

emerged the winners from this competition. They provided the king, they were the allies and favourites of the victorious super-powers.

Joseph Eötvös, the famous Hungarian political theorist of the nineteenth century gave the following definition of the concept of nationality. „Nationality is but a consciousness of affinity brought into existence amongst large number of people by the memories of their shared past, their present situation and, as a result of these, their common interests and passions". Those who created Yugoslavia were unaware of this definition by Eötvös and pulled together peoples with nothing in common except, in a way, their languages. That a common language is, of itself, insufficient to constitute the necessary affinity is now becoming clear. Cohesion based on language is quite recent, having been brought into fashion by the spirit of nationalism which emanated from the French Revolution when in place of royal proprietary rights an alternative basis had to be found for the establishment of states. The case of Yugoslavia proves that similarities or differences anchored in a shared culture are more powerful unifying or dividing forces than language. As members of a different cultural grouping, the Croatian and Slovene peoples feel themselves just as ill at ease in a union with Serbians as do Slovaks with Czechs, Ruthenians with Ukrainians or the Roumanians of Transylvania with the Roumanians of the Regate region or of Moldavia.

It would take us too far afield to analyse the components of a sense of affinity, but in our region, besides those based on linguistic categories, there are the strongly conflicting cultural traditions of Greek and Roman Christianity which often act as a divisive force to preclude —as is now apparent— the possibilty of coexistence. And for the most part this is not a conflict of theologies but rather is a result of the Orthodox Church's taking on the role of preserving the people's ethnic identity during the endless Turkish occupation.

The five hundred years' presence of the Turkish Empire isolated the peoples of the Balkans from developments in the rest of Europe and created a primitive national religion out of Eastern Christianity. While Christianity enforced internationalism amongst the countries of Western Europe and thus gave cultural uniformity to the continent, the Eastern Church became the lackey of great czars and small despots, alike. Tyrant and Church, later State and Church were one and the same. This completed the extent of the earthly and heavenly (physical and spiritual) rule of the authorities. Within this circle there was neither spiritual development nor rebellion leading to the establishment of civic society. Time stood still under this corporeal and spiritual tyranny.

At the time when the Turkish Empire was slowly withdrawing from the Balkans a new philosophy of Statehood was emerging in Europe: the idea of the nation state. This idea immediately attracted the attention of the emancipated peoples of the Balkans in whom the yearning for national independence had been kept alive by the long period of oppression and who began to see being resurrected then and there that large and powerful country of whose greatness and glory their legends and heroic songs so dazzlingly spoke.

This most aptly characterised the Serbs, who lived in the centre of the Balkans. A heroic period commenced in the nineteenth century, with small battles being waged in the mountainous region. When Turkey became the „sick, old man of Europe", the Balkans became a major focus of interest for the

great powers. Expressing the greatest interest was Russia, followed by France and England. This made Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy uneasy. The collapse of the latter during the First World War resulted in the Orthodox East's (which is essentially an ethnic, not a religious term) acquiring territory which had hitherto constituted the borderland of the European mentality.

What was this borderland like? In the Hungarian language there is a word (gyepű = marchland) for that piece of no man's land which is intentionally left between the territory occupied by different peoples. The great powers have reverted to this ancient practice in modern times too. After the First World War, the demarcated territory on Polish soil known as the Cordon Sanitaire was of this nature.

Voivodina

From an administrative point of view, the territory to the north of the Danube in Yugoslavia is officially known as the province of Voivodina. This territory, the southern region of the Kingdom of Hungary, was a frontier zone (marchland) during the Turkish occupation of the Balkans. Like every frontier zone, it endured all the miseries associated with military campaigns. This is also manifest in the presence of the many different ethnic groups still living there.

The liberal Hungarian state which came into existence in the second half of the nineteenth century (within the framework of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy) took upon itself the task of developing this territory. And a very necessary task it was, too, since, as a type of Cordon Sanitaire, it had been woefully neglected over the centuries. The marshes were drained and by regulating the flow of the Danube (but even more of the Tisza, which is particularly prone to freakish flooding), by settling proprietary rights and by raising the level of administration to European standards the region was transformed into one of the most valuable in Hungary, particularly for agriculture. Railways were built, a food-processing industry, milling industry and other manufacturing industries were established.

When this territory was annexed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1918 it was the most developed and richest part of the new state. The population was composed of many different nationalities, of which Hungarians, accounting for 45%, were the most numerous (Serbs, in comparison accounted for 21%). Until then, these nationalities had worked together productively, prospered and lived peacefully as neighbours. With the birth of Yugoslavia, the situation changed overnight. Serbia had been given the territory as spoils of war. For her, changing the ethnic situation was far more important than maintaining the economic standard of the territory. Instead of developing the territory, their main concern was to impose excessive taxes. They developed a policy of exploitation through which they successfully siphoned off the goods which the peoples of Voivodina had by their industry produced over a period of time and used the territory as a means for supporting the other, helpless parts of the big country. Between 1920 and 1928 Voivodina contributed more than 25% of the total taxes collected by Yugoslavia. The administration was totally in the hands of Serbian officials.

While the period of peace produced years of bitter oppression, with the aim to change the the ethnic composition of the region to render it more favourable to the interests of Serbian imperialism, after the Second World War, when Voivodina again became a part of Yugoslavia, Serbian policy to bring about this end took a turn which under normal circumstances would have shocked the world. If the super-powers had felt any sense of responsibilty to the victims they would have withdrawn this region from under the inhumane government of the Serbs. Briefly, the following took place. A German-speaking population had been living in some parts of Voivodina for many centuries. These people, by labelling them fascists (since they were Germans), were now totally eliminated from the region. Two hundred thousand Germans lost their ancestral abode and a great proportion of them, their lives. The Hungarian population at the time numbered more than half a million. These were decimated, with more than forty thousand being slaughtered within a few months simply for being Hungarian. Serbs were immediately settled in their place. One can but imagine how those Hungarians must have felt who had to live there without even being free to mention the slaughter of their parents and brothers and sisters. It is only now that the gruesome details of the dreadful genocide are seeing the light of day.

It was under such circumstances that the people of Voivodina lived to see the present internal war whose main object is the elimination of the Hungarians and Croatians from the region.

All this is occurring in Central Europe in the interests of the concept of the homogenous nation state. This idea is turning into a vale of tears in an area where, for centuries, numerous peoples had been living undivided side by side. Within the borders of states brought into existence in the twentieth century, under the concept of the nation state, the life of ethnic minorities has become unbearable and the protection of any minority rights rendered hopeless. Yugoslavia has been torn asunder by the endeavours of Serbian imperialism to dominate within the state borders. This process is not the result of some momentary breakdown. Serbian efforts to achieve supremacy commenced with the establishment of the southern Slavonic state and have focused on systematically building a Greater Serbia.

It was the political interests of the super-powers that brought about Yugoslavia, consequently they must shoulder the responsibility for current events. The present military communistic government of Serbia continues to pile up its crimes in the current international political network, which values unification so highly, and which speaks so finely of human rights, and so loudly proclaiming world peace, there is not a single country or leader with the purpose and will to tell these madmen that their game is up.

The free world must realise that it must insist on certain basic international standards of conduct from every state, also from those states which abuse their sovereignty. It must be appreciated by all those who take part in determing the fate that befalls ethnic peoples that a political idea which enables hundreds of thousands of people to be persecuted and hounded from their homeland, simply because they are different from, or do not wish to assimilate with, the people constituting the majority is untenable and is endangering mankind's peaceful co-existence.

Let not weapons determine borders but the will of the people and international decisions founded on historical truth. The super-powers whose

decisions affect the future of the world must realise that those nations which first founded a state only at the time of the emergence of the concept of the nation state can not understand peaceful co-existence, they have not matured to the point of exercising patient government over those of their subjects who belong to different nationalities.

It is for this reason that it would be of supreme importance in the present crisis regions of Central Europe, especially on the border regions of the Balkans, to withdraw from under the sovereignty of the ruling state those territories with the most diverse ethnic minorities. These territories, constituting a separate unit, should become a multi-ethnic state, be kept under European supervision and granted the right of self-government. This multi-ethnic state would conceivably last until the eventuality of a general, conclusive settlement of European affairs. This solution would be suited to a conclusive Europe-wide settlement which, if it were to take account of the exceptionally diverse population of the states to be found in the eastern region, would not keep those states with their present borders when ranging them in the continent's greater area. Rather, shaking off the untenable borders originating from the wars and based in territories which belong together, it would create multi-ethnic, administrative-economic regional units at the expense of those states in which there is no hope for full self-government of all nationalities.

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The current fighting in Yugoslavia has demonstrated clearly and decisively the absolute necessity of finding a solution to the ethnicity problem there.

At the same time, in one of the component parts of Yugoslavia, the multi-national Voivodina, the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Voividina (DAHV) has been founded to protect the interests of the original inhabitants, the ancestral Hungarian population, still living there.

This newly established institution, as a result of the oppression and humiliation suffered in this time of internecine war between the ethnic minorities has provided the blueprint for multinational co-existence, in the hope that it will win the ear of the democratic powers of the free world and that their suggestions, arising out of their great suffering, will serve the general interests of mankind, too.

Voivodina is a historical entity. Once, it was for many centuries a part of the Hungarian state but in the course of history it became the home of a good half dozen different peoples. The rearrangment following upon World War I took this territory away from Hungary and attached it to Yugoslavia. During this time the non-Serbian ethnic groups suffered immensely at the hands of Serbian nationalism. There is a great danger that if this territory is allowed to remain in the hands of the Serbs after the disintegration of Yugoslavia the non-Serb ethnic groups will face the peril of annihilation. The current attacks being launched against Bosnia-Hercegovina are perfect examples of the impatience and imperialistic ambitions of chauvinistic Serbia. The danger of total annihilation threatens the half million strong Hungarian ethnic group unless it is possible to halt in time this new fascist madness.

It is only natural that this ethnic group would welcome the establishment of a completely independent multi-national state referred to in the first section of this essay. Naturally, this wish can not be expressed within the borders of the Serbia of today. The very most that can be raised for discussion is the creation of an Autonomous Territory of Voivodina. At the same time, if international

pressure can be brought to bear on the Serbian government, this is the very least that could guarantee freedom and peace for non-Serbs living under the authority of Belgrade.

The proposals of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Voivodina could be summed up as follows:

1. The creation of an Autonomous Territory of Voivodina must be the result of a free vote of the citizens of Voivodina, which would also be the basis for the establishment of the institutions of the Autonomous Territory.

2. Autonomy means political, economic and cultural independence for the ethnic groups living in the territory, in their entirety.

3. Within the territory, every linguistic group must be absolutely guaranteed their cultural freedom, including the freedom to use their own language and establish their own schools. Based on this guaranteed freedom, all persons have the right to freely express and accept the national community or ethnic group to which they choose to belong, to nurture their language, culture and traditions, to practise their religion in word and deed and to freely use their mother tongue.

4. Local self-determination must be instituted and, alongside the common language of the state, official recognition must be given to the language which is the mother tongue of the people of that self-determining region.

5. A „Hungarian Autonomous Municipality" must be created, based on the free union of territorially united towns and villages with Hungarian majorities.

6. The powers of the Hungarian Autonomous Municipality will find particular expression in the following areas:

a) the administration of religious, educational, economic and social matters,

b) the news media,

c) the administration of justice and provision of law and order,

d) an independent fiscal policy.

7. Within the territory of the Hungarian Autonomous Municipality, the Hungarian, Serbian and Croatian languages will have equal official status. Within this territory, all authorities, offices, schools and other institutions may employ only persons who are familiar with all three languages.

8. The freedom and constitution of Autonomous Voivodina must be acknowledged by the Serbian legislature. It must be reinforced by a bilateral convention between the states of Hungary and Serbia and by mutual treaties between the minorities. Further, the Serbian government must be compelled in international forums to give guarantees that she will uphold the constitutionally legal status of Voivodina.

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The preparation of the above points was formed by a desire that there should at last be created in Europe an international social order which obliges every sovereign state to uphold the full range of human rights, on all levels of linguistic, religious or any other area of communal affinity. Law and order must be guaranteed a place in international relations, too.

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