

ABOUT THE AUTONOMY EFFORTS
OF THE HUNGARIAN MINORITY COMMUNITY LIVING IN SERBIA

PÉTER KÓKAI

Péter Kókai is a journalist, former Editor in Chief of the daily 'Magyar Szó'

Abstract

The change of regime in 1990 enabled the political formation of the Hungarian ethnic group numbering about 300,000 ethnic Hungarians living in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, an area belonging to Serbia. However, the introduction of the multi-party system did not mean the beginning of democracy automatically: the political situation of a country going from one war into another was not favourable for any kind of formation on national grounds. Thus, the idea of a Hungarian autonomy remained on paper at that time, and could be first realized in 1999, with the passing of the war years, in the form of the Provisional Hungarian National Council. The federal minority act passed in 2002 ensured the legal background and legitimacy for the operation of national councils, by this way the Hungarian National Council could also come to existense. The mandate of the Council, which was elected indirectly, through electoral college system and had a limited authority, was extended to 8 years, from the previously intended 4 years, as a result of the disintegration of the state union of Serbia and Montenegro, and the extinguishment of its legal system. Finally, Serbia settled the minority matters with a law passed in 2009. The new legislation means a great leap forward from more point of view, consequently, the Hungarians of Vojvodina have their own complementary minority voter registry, and can elect their own parliament on 6th June 2010.

Keywords: Serbia, minority matters, autonomy, Hungarians in Vojvodina, Hungarian National Council

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THE BEGINNINGS: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF VMDK

To think and, especially to speak about Hungarian autonomy in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina belonging to Serbia is possible since 1990. This was the year of the first multi-party elections in the country. Despite of the relative liberality of the preceding communist era marked by the name of Tito, it did not tolerate even the idea of formation on ethnic grounds in the multi-ethnic Yugoslavia, nor any restricted form of the Hungarian political formation or self-determination.

The political changes in 1990, the end of the one-party system, the deletion of the 'socialist' marker from the official name of the state, and the chance for the organisation of a multi-party election made the political formation on ethnic grounds possible for the first time. (Certainly, they did it hand in hand with all the negative consequences in the Southern Slav region, since it is undisputable that the worsened conditions contributed also to the bloody Balkan wars of the 1990s – but this do not fall within the scope of this study). Hungarians of Vojvodina have taken the opportunity, and were among the first to push the advantage of the new situation: on 31, March in 1990 the *Democratic Community of Vojvodina Hungarians* (Vajdasági Magyarok Demokratikus Közössége - VMDK) was established in Doroslovo (Doroszló), the political organisation, since then called as historical VMDK, avoided the phrase 'party', and determined itself as interest representative organisation. Though, in its statutes adopted on the general assembly in Doroslovo, the VMDK has firmly and clearly expressed in several significant points that by interest representation it primarily means the representation of interests of Hungarians, and it is also notable that the expression of the demand for collective rights has happened there. Therefore, the first section of the statutes of VMDK declares that "the Democratic Community of Vojvodina Hungarians is a political organisation based on the voluntary association of citizens that, in accordance with the minority rights determined in the constitution

and legislation, reveals, expresses and represents the collective interests of Vojvodina Hungarians”¹.

Among the goals laid down in the statutes are ‘the proportional participation in the elected public agencies and co-operation with them, as well as the right for appropriate representation in governing and judiciary bodies’, ‘the right for the use of mothertongue in communication with public agencies and the judiciary, and in public life generally’, ‘the right for the establishment and operation of minority institutions, organisations, associations, and clubs’, ‘the right for public communication in minority languages’, ‘the promotion and patronage of artistic activity in minority languages’, ‘the right for primary and secondary education in the mothertongue, and for the assuring of adequate higher education’, and ‘the right for organised relations with institutions of the homeland, for the open use of allowances in the area of culture and science provided by the homeland’. These goals draw explicitly the outlines of a cultural autonomy, therefore, this statutes is considered to be the basic document and starting point of the autonomy efforts of Vojvodina Hungarians.

Thus, the social circumstances that had undergone a change made the Hungarian political formation possible, and as we could see, the community of Vojvodina Hungarians took this opportunity. Then came the first successes that entailed such disagreements within the community that have not been ceased since then. In the first multi-party elections in Serbia in December, 1990 the VMDK nominated 32 candidates, and the candidates won in every constituencies where Hungarians live in majority. The VMDK had 8 representatives in the Serbian parliament, which consisted of altogether 250 members, and the Community received 80% of the Hungarian votes. In the elections in December, 1992, three VMDK representatives managed to get into the federal House of Representatives, 9 into the republican, and 17 representatives into the provincial House of Representatives. At the local municipal elections the VMDK gained absolute majority in Kanjiža (Kanizsa), Ada, Senta (Zenta), Subotica (Szabadka), Bačka Topola (Topolya) and Bečej (Becse). In May, 1993 at the federal elections it got 3 seats in the Yugoslav parliament, while 5 seats in the Serbian parliament in December, 1993 at the elections of the republic. At the same time, in 1994 a group of opponents seceded from the Community and established the *Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians* (Vajdasági Magyar Szövetség - VMSZ). Another two years passed, and the remaining of VMDK was further divided, creating the *Democratic Party of Vojvodina Hungarians* (Vajdasági Magyar Demokrata Párt - VMDP) in 1996. Further Hungarian parties were established, divided, and fused, later other new ones were created - the politics of Vojvodina Hungarians became pluralist. The analysis of this situation would worth a case study, but it can be concluded without the study that the political situation was not favourable for the autonomy².

MEMORANDUM OF 1992

However, as early as at the time of the uniform VMDK another significant event happened that meant a milestone in the history of the autonomy efforts of Vojvodina Hungarians. The VMDK adopted a Memorandum at the annual general assembly in Kanjiza (Kanizsa) on 25, April 1992, that was actually an elaborated conception of autonomy³. The basic principles of the conception are expressed by the following sentences selected from the text of the Memorandum: ‘From a national point of view the personal freedom cannot be ensured, unless protection is provided for the national minority group (ethnic group). For national minorities or ethnic groups only the assurance of collective rights offers the real possibility of freedom and the act of will.’ This model aims to put into practice the very same idea, and, by taking into consideration the ethnographic and geographic peculiarities of Vojvodina Hungarians, leads to the three-pillar autonomy.

The three pillars refer to the three possible ways of manifestation of collective rights. The Memorandum (its full name is Memorandum on the self-government of Hungarians in the Republic of Serbia) expresses the three pillars as the followings:

1. Personal autonomy,
2. Local Hungarian government, and
3. Regional Hungarian government with special status.

¹ The full text of the statutes is available in Hungarian at:
<http://www.angelfire.com/my/vekasjanos/EBib/VMDKdok/D900331.html#dok8>

² At the moment there are 5 Hungarian political parties in Vojvodina: Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, Democratic Communit of Vojvodina Hungarians, Democratic Party of Vojvodina Hungarians, *Hungarian Civic Alliance* (Magyar Polgári Szövetség), *Hungarian Hope Movement* (Magyar Remény Mozgalom).

³ The base of the model was the draft of Lord Carrington, the leader of the peace negotiations aiming the settlement of the Serb-Croatian conflict, that was originally worked out for the peaceful settlement of Serbians living in Croatia.

According to the Memorandum the personal autonomy here refers to an elected body (that would be ‘the parliament of the Hungarian ethnic group’), while its leaders would be elected through ‘general, fair, direct and secret election’, that have to be ‘empowered to legislation in questions falling within the competence of autonomy, especially in the area of education, culture, communication and use of language, that is, the fulfilment of all kind of tasks that are required for the protection of provided rights’, ‘the financing of it is secured by the state from the national budget, and from other incomes’, to which belong ‘all the institutions and organisations established by the local government, and all institutions and persons who declared their wish to operate or work within the framework of personal autonomy, and are registered according their declaration’, that has ‘local council and a president’, that ‘submits proposals on education, culture and communication’, that ‘adopts codes on the enforcement of the rights of Hungarians’ use of language in regions where it is not realizable within the frame of local governments’, ‘submits proposals on the establishment, reorganisation and operation of Hungarian schools, from nurseries to universities, in every required field of study’, that ‘supervises the operation of educational, cultural, communicational and other institutions belonging to personal autonomy’, that ‘secures the free communication expressing the interests of Hungarians’, that ‘intercedes in the case of infringement of rights of persons, groups and organisations belonging to the minority community with the authorities responsible, if the issue does not fall within the competence of the court’.

According to the Memorandum, the establishment of local Hungarian governments is necessary in the case of Hungarian communities forming majority and living in isolated villages. The competence of this body is determined by ‘the constitution and the law’, but ‘in villages and settlements with Hungarian majority the law and regulations have to enable the empowerment of this body with special authority and duty – bearing the cultural and linguistic interests of Hungarians in mind’.

According to the Memorandum the *Autonomous Hungarian District* would be a ‘special administrative and governmental unity’, whose authority would extend ‘to religious and educational issues, economic and social issues, public health, communication, to justice and police, to the expenses and the cover of expenses of local governments, to local administrative issues that, according to the law regarding autonomy and other regulations, fall within the competence of local governments’, that ‘has own arms and flag’. The Memorandum lists even the settlements one by one that would belong to the district⁴.

To put it in a simpler way: personal autonomy aims to ensure the principle stating that every person has the right to preserve his/her national identity, to exercise his/her rights deriving from it after the expression of this wish, while territorial autonomy wants to enforce the interests of Hungarians living in the given area, and is connected to geographical situation, just like the third pillar that wants to enforce the same conditions for Hungarians living outside the district.

THE PROVISIONAL HUNGARIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL

The following period was not favourable neither for the Hungarian autonomy efforts in Vojvodina, nor any kind of idea representing the divergence and mutual respect of nations and cultures. The consecutive independence of the members of one-time Yugoslavia (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia) meant significant territorial losses for Serbia, and the Hungarian autonomy was stigmatized as separatism (especially the Hungarian territorial autonomy). The atmosphere of the consequent bloody wars (in Slovenia, in Croatia, in Bosnia, and in Kosovo), the national embargo, and the resulting xenophobia and general feeling of being closed precluded the possibility of the further development of national autonomy.

Thus, nothing significant happened in the history of Hungarian Autonomy in Vojvodina for 7 years. However, on 20, August, 1999 (in the year of the NATO bombardment in Kosovo, still in the time of Milošević) in Subotica (Szabadka) the *Provisional Hungarian National Council* was established. Indisputably, this body was, on the basis of the Memorandum of 1992, to embody the ‘parliament of the Hungarian ethnic group’, but at the same time its operation and sphere of authority were not secured and regulated by any kind of legislation. For all that, it regularly held meetings, had a leader and different bodies, formulated strategical ideas primarily in connection with culture and communication, and its operation was understood tacitly by the authorities of that time, was not hindered, but at the same time was not promoted.

Law on the Protections of the Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities

In order to establish a legal background for national autonomy, another change in the political situation of Serbia was necessary. The failure of the Milošević government at the elections in 2000, the rise to power of

⁴ The full text of the Memorandum is available in Hungarian at: <http://www.vmdk.org/content/HU/magyaut.html>

the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, the opening of the state union of Serbia and Montenegro towards the European Union and the whole world, these events have created totally new conditions, and the new government felt important to demonstrate on international stage that they take care of their minorities or any other ethnic groups living in Serbian areas. These closely related events served as a basis for the law on the protections of the rights and freedoms of national minorities passed on 26, February in 2002.

The law passed at federal level opened the door for all ethnic groups living in the area of Serbia and Montenegro to establish their own national councils. The number of representatives in the councils depended on the number of inhabitants of the ethnic groups, the smallest council had 15, while the biggest one had 35 members. At first, the national councils had power on four certain areas. These were the social issues, culture, education, communication, and language use. The principle, stating that in order to maintain the identity and culture of an ethnic group a limited autonomy in these main areas, was generally accepted and sanctioned by the law. Within these areas the national councils had the right to establish and operate new institutions, to undertake the place of existing institutions, and to present bills and amendments. For the financing of these steps the government has ensured financial resources, though, the system of the distribution was not worked out precisely. Returning to the memorandum and its definitions passed by the VMDK in 1992, it can be stated that this law meant the realization of personal autonomy.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL

Vojvodina Hungarians were, again, the first ethnic group who took the advantage of the new situation. On 21, September in 2002 in Subotica the members of the Hungarian National Council was elected in the electoral general assembly. The council of 35 members held its statutory meeting on 19, October, where it accepted its statutes and working order, elected its President, Vice-President and Registrar, and started its operation.

Structurewise and operationwise the Hungarian National Council intended to follow the logic of the parliamentary structure and operation.

Beside the President, three Vice-Presidents were elected, who are, accordingly, parliamentary Vice-Presidents. The executive body of the Council is the Executive Committee, which intended to function as a government, the government of 'the parliament of the Hungarian ethnic group'. The Executive Committee has a President (Prime Minister, head of the government) and members (ministers) responsible for certain areas. In the Executive Committee sit the members responsible for public education, for higher education and science, for communication, for language use, for cultural, for financial, for local governmental and for informational issues. Other features parallel with the operation of parliament are the different committees of experts having reportive, initiative rights, and the right to codify the laws on areas of the given fields. The members of these committees are experts of different fields, but not necessary members of the Council itself. In accordance with the four fundamental functions, the Hungarian National Council has communication committee, cultural committee, language use and education committee (this is divided into public education committee and higher education committee), budget and economic committee, and agricultural committee.⁵

INSTITUTIONS OF THE COUNCIL

In 2004, two years after its establishment, the Hungarian National Council in compliance with the new opportunities provided by the new minority law on the one hand, and with the political intention of preventing the state from having any kind of control over the press on the other, took charge of the founder rights of the daily paper titled *Magyar Szó* (Hungarian Word), and of the weekly paper titled *Hét Nap* (Seven Days) from the House of Representatives of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, which has founded the two papers.

At the same time, the state, or in this case the provincial parliament, has maintained its commitment to finance the communication in minority languages, in this way, the papers *Magyar Szó* and *Hét Nap* receive further normative subsidies from the state. *Magyar Szó* is the only daily paper published in Hungarian in Serbia, while *Hét Nap* is one of the two Hungarian weekly papers in Vojvodina. In the case of these two publications, the exercising of founder rights means that the Hungarian National Council appoints their leading and managing bodies (the directors, the general editors, and the managerial committees), receives their annual reports, development programmes, annual accounts, and can decide on issues of investment and reorganisation. Later, the Council has acquired the same rights of the monthly magazine *Mézeskalács*, a periodical for children under schoolage, of the weekly paper titled *Jó Pajtás* for primary school children, and

⁵ For the structure of the Hungarian National Council see: www.mnt.org.rs

of the weekly addressing secondary school students, titled *Képes Ifjúság*, therefore, the communication from nursery to retired age falls within the competence of the Hungarian National Council. In the same way did the Council take charge of the founder rights of Forum Publisher Institution, which publishes the works of Vojvodina Hungarian authors, poets, prosewriters and literary critics since 1957, but it also deals with scientific and sociographic writings as well.

Beside the previously mentioned institutions, the Hungarian National Council has two other ones founded by the Council itself, the *Cultural Institution of Vojvodina Hungarians* and the *Szekeres László Foundation*. The primary task of the Institution is the collection of books, paintings and archives to establish a documentation centre (Bibliotheca Hungarica); the operation of a national database, collection of professional information, the encouragement of the public use of the database; the operation of a Hungarian educational network; the examination of social effects of cultural values and of the change of cultural institutions, the analysis of activities of communities refining, the conduction of experiments serving the development of them; training of experts in the fields of public education; encouragement of activities developing the community and the settlements; the maintenance of the Vojvodina educational website (www.vmmi.org); the nursing of international relations and relations with the home-land in the fields falling within the competence of the Institution. The Szekeres László Foundation collects resources necessary for the institutions founded and run by the Hungarian National Council, and supports the maintenance of identity and culture of Hungarian communities with competitions and programmes.

The Foundation has launched a separate program for the assistance of small and medium-size Vojvodina Hungarian enterprises, like the loan program supporting small business enterprises.

DECISIONS OF THE COUNCIL

The most important decisions of the four year period lasting till 2006 of the Hungarian National Council:

- drafting of a proposal on the official Hungarian name of Vojvodina place-names and geographical names⁶,
- the identification of national symbol (the flag) of Vojvodina Hungarians, and also the identification of national holidays and further national symbols,
- initiative on the introduction of the official use of Hungarian language in Vojvodina villages, where Hungarians live scattered,⁷
- initiative on the commission of experts to work out the subjects of Hungarian Literature and Language for Hungarian-speaking secondary schools.

Furthermore, owing to the mediation of the Hungarian National Council, the competent ministry has approved the use of course books published in Hungary in more subjects for Vojvodina Hungarian students, moreover, within the framework of a new program, it reimburses the costs of the registration of university degrees in the case of Vojvodina Hungarian students graduated at universities abroad, promoting the returning to and staying in the home-land.

THE TRANSITION PERIOD

The four year mandate of the Hungarian National Council expired in 2006, though during this period again significant events took place in the political life of the country. From the point of view of the HNC the most significant change was the cease of the country itself, upon which the existence of the national councils were based. After 2006, when the inhabitants of Montenegro decided on a referendum in favour of quitting from the state union, Serbia has come to existence as an independent state. The new country did not inherit automatically the law on the protection of minorities of 2002, still, it did not have own law concerning this area, nor any ministry dealing with minority issues. In this situation, with a hole on the legislation, the legitimacy of national councils was based on only one document, on the regulation of the competent under-secretary of the state, which empowered the national councils to do their work until the law provides otherwise. This transition period lasted almost three years, and during this era the legitimacy of HNC was questioned many times. At the same time, the Hungarian National Council continued its work, held its meetings, adopted its own budget and final account, and run its institutions.

⁶ The complete list is available at: www.mnt.org.rs

⁷ The Closing Regulation of 3/2003 proposed that, in accordance with the third paragraph of Article 8 of Provincial Decision On the Official Use of Minority Languages, the Hungarian language is to be introduced as official language in the following settlements: Kupusina (Bácskertes), Svilojevo (Szilágyi), Dobrodol (Dobradó), Šatrinci (Sattrinca), Ivanovo (Sándoregyháza), Boka (Bóka), Busenje (Káptalanfalva), Konak (Kanak), Neuzina (Nagynezsény), Šurjan (Surján).

THE SERBIAN MINORITY LAW OF 2009

Finally, the Serbian parliament settled the matter with a law passed on 31, August in 2009⁸ that regulated the situation and authority of the national councils of minorities living in the area of the country. The law means a great development from more point of view, especially in comparison with the federal minority law of 2002. The most significant measure among the changes was the regulation concerning the way of election of national councils.

The law of 2002 restricted the elections to an indirect elections through electoral college. This meant that the voters belonging to different ethnic groups could not vote directly for lists or individual candidates in the elections of national council members, but only by means of electors. An elector could be any person who had managed to collect 100 signatures, or who was authorized by a civil organisation with cultural activity relating to an ethnic group, or any representatives on republican, provincial, or local level. Every elector had only one vote, and can vote for lists.

The government of that time explained this system with the lack of a separate minority voter registry, at the same time, the Hungarian National Council, during its mandate expanded from 4 to 8 years, suffered a series of political attacks (within the Vojvodina Hungarian political public life, that is, not from the side of Serbian parties) because, as it was put into words, its election was not democratic, therefore, its existence is 'legal, but not legitimate'.

Before decision making, the greatest legislative problem was caused by the establishment of voter registries of different minority groups. The Serbian government claimed that it did not have such kind of database, and the latest census took place 8 years ago, therefore the data deriving from it was already out-of-date, additionally, in a multi-ethnic country it is a really delicate issue to determine who has the right to decide on who is recognised to be Hungarian, especially in the case of children from mixed marriages. The question can be answered simply, a person is Hungarian if he/she acknowledges himself/herself to be Hungarian, and starting from this principle, finally, the law provided an alternative solution, it made possible, but not compulsory, for the ethnic groups to establish their own voter registries. This solution enabled the ethnic groups to decide on themselves whether they want to elect their national council through electoral colleges, or they undertake the compilation of the voter registry and elect their national councils directly.

THE HUNGARIAN VOTER REGISTRY

The registering for the voter registry was voluntary, happened through general administrative procedure, and take place between 11, November, 2009 and 11, March, 2010, after which the competent minister of human rights and minority issues has declared the results. Accordingly, the Albanian, Ashkali, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Bunjevac, Vlach, Greek, Egyptian, Hungarian, German, Roma, Romanian, Ruthenian, Slovak, Ukrainian and Czech national minority groups can elect their national councils directly, while Macedonians, Slovenians and Croatians decided to maintain the system of election through electoral college. The validity threshold of the voter registries was determined by the law that runs 'the national council is elected directly, if, till the announcement of the date of election, 50% of the total number of inhabitants at the latest census reduced by 20% have registered themselves for the voter registry of the national minority group'. Regarding Vojvodina Hungarians the law can be interpreted as the followings: the total number of Hungarians in Vojvodina according to the latest census in 2002 is 293299. The 50 % of this number is 146650, that should be reduced further by 20%, that means 117320 Hungarians. The registering campaign organised by the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians proved to be successful, as this requirement was fulfilled long before the deadline determined in the law, thus, Hungarians can elect their national council directly, without electoral college.

According to the announcement, the elections are taking place on 6, June, 2010 in the whole territory of Serbia, simultaneously for all national councils, while the necessary issues of organisation and settlement are being managed by the Ministry and other bodies competent in elections. The citizens entitled to vote can vote for lists, and the electioneering is already in progress at the moment (May, 2010)⁹. The law enacts also

⁸ Zakon o nacionalnim savetima nacionalnih manjina (Službeni Glasnik Republike Srbije Br. 72/2009)

(Law on the national councils of national minorities. Published in: Official Journal of the Republic of Serbia 72/2009)

⁹ The Central Election Committee has adopted two Hungarian lists so far, the Hungarian Collaboration list supported by the VMSZ, and the Humentis civil organisation Towards Europe as Vojvodina Hungarian list, which is related to the Democratic Party, but other parties will also compile their electoral lists.

about the lists as the following: ‘a group of voters registered for the national minority’s voter registry, an organisation of them, a group of citizens and the political organisation of the national minority are entitled to nominate candidates’ and ‘the electoral list has to be supported with signature of at least 1% of the voters registered for the national minority’s voter registry, but not less than 50 persons’. The law also provides that “those organisations, group of citizens or political organisation can be regarded to be national minority organisation, union, association or political organisation whose name contain the ‘minority’ marker, or which, according to their statutes, are organisations, unions, or political organisation rallying minority citizens or act in their interests”.

COMPETENCIES OF NATIONAL COUNCILS

Beside the way of election, the law also determines the competencies of the national councils. What kind of rights, authority the national councils have in Serbia according to the new law? It worths to present the main points of the law itself, as it also demonstrates how the matter of Hungarian autonomy in Serbia took shape in the past 20 years. The followings fall within the competence of national councils:

- to confirm the proposals regarding the national symbols, the emblems and holidays of the national council,
- to found institutions, unions, associations, and economic associations in the area of culture, education, communication, and official use of language and writing, and also in other fields important for the retaining of national minority identity,
- to initiate bills and other regulations in areas listed previously, and to follow their application,
- to participate in the preparatory work of regulations, and to propose the
- amendments of regulations on the rights of national minorities secured in the Constitution, in the fields of culture, education, communication, and official use of language and writing,
- to take legal actions at the Constitutional Court, at the citizens’ ombudsman, at the provincial ombudsman, at the local ombudsman, or at other institutions, when it meets with infringement of human rights or rights provided by the law for citizens belonging to national minorities.

The competencies of the national councils in the four areas determining personal autonomy are the followings:

Competencies in education

- the National Council has the right to establish institutions, that means ‘in accordance with the law, it can establish pedagogical, educational, and student welfare institutions and can exercise its rights in them’,
- it can report on proposals regarding the personnel of managerial and teaching staffs (director, directorate committee, school board) of educational institutions founded at different levels of the state (at republic, provincial or local) educating in minority languages, and it can also nominate candidates,
- it can make proposals for the National Educational Council on the basics of pre-schoolage program, on the curricula and program of public and secondary education, and on the basics of pedagogical program in fields that promote the characteristics of the national minority, especially in the fields of history, music, and fine arts,
- it can make proposals for the National Educational Council on the public and secondary educational and pedagogical program of the minority language, and the educational and pedagogical program of the minority language, speech and elements of national culture,
- it reports on the educational program of ‘Serb as foreign language’ for the National Educational Council,
- it can make proposals for the minister of education on the use of course books published in Serbia in the minority language, or course books imported from abroad,
- it can report on the distribution of sources attainable by open competitions provided by the local governments, by the autonomous province, or by the state for institutions concerned with education,
- it can establish stipends from its own sources, and regulate the process of the distribution, and arrange the distribution,
- it elects its representative for the National Educational Council, who participate in the work of the council without decision-making rights,
- it elects its representative for the National Higher Education Council, who is a member of council with full power.

Competencies in culture

- the national councils can establish cultural institutions, and can exercise their rights in them,
- in institutions established by the state, the autonomous province, or local governments, playing significant role in the maintenance of national identity, the national councils can appoint one person of the directorate staff; can report on the proposals regarding the personnel of the directorate staff of the institution; can express their opinion during the election of the director of the institution,
- the national councils can identify cultural institutions and events significant from the point of view of the characteristics of the national minority, and of the maintenance of national identity of the minority,
- the national councils can determine the development strategy of the culture of the national minority,
- the national councils can determine the movable and immovable cultural goods significant from the point of view of the national minority,
- the national councils can take legal actions, at the competent body or institution, in favour of declaring moveable and immovable goods, significant from the point of view of national minorities, protected by the law,
- the national councils can nominate at least one person for the list of members of the National Cultural Council,
- the national councils can elect their representative for the National Cultural Council, who participate in the work of the council without decision-making rights in discussions of issues significant from the point of view of national minorities' culture.

Competencies in communication

- the national councils can, in accordance with the law, independently, or with other legal entity, establish institutions or economic organisations, be engaged in publication, broadcasting, or printing,
- the national councils can express their opinion, during the appointment of the members of the board of directors, the members of the broadcasting council, and of the general manager of the Broadcasting Institution of Serbia, if the institution provides broadcasting in the minority language,
- the national councils can express their opinion, during the appointment of the members of the board of directors, the members of the broadcasting council, and of the general manager of the Broadcasting Institution of Vojvodina, if the institution provides broadcasting in the minority language,
- the national councils can identify the conditions of election of the editor of programmes in minority languages in the institutions,
- the national councils can nominate a person, at the broadcasting institution from the candidates meeting the requirements of the competition, for the position of editor of programmes in minority languages,
- the national councils can elect their representatives for the National Broadcasting Council, who participates in the work of the council without decision-making rights, when it discusses issues relating to communication in minority languages.

Competencies in language use and writing

- the national councils determine the name of local governments, settlements and geographical names in the minority languages, if in the territory of the local government or the settlement the minority language is in use,
- the national councils propose to the competent bodies the display of the names of the local governments, settlements, and other geographical names in the minority languages,
- the national councils make a proposal to add the national minority language and writing to the official languages in the territory of the local government,
- the national councils propose the change of names of streets, places, districts of towns, farms and other habitations and institutions that are significant from the point of view of the national minority,
- the national councils can express their opinion during the identification of the new names of streets, places, districts of towns, farms and other habitations, if in the territory of the local government the national minority language is in use.

Additionally, the section of the new law about the transfer of founder rights is also significant, which declares that national councils can take over the founding rights over institutions they regard significant from the point of view of the maintenance of their national identity: “At the initiative of the national council, the Republic of Serbia, the Autonomous Province, or the local government can transfer the founder rights of the following institutions: educational-pedagogical institutions operating exclusively in the minority language;

cultural institutions, whose primary function is the maintenance and development of the national minority identity; mass communication institutions communicating exclusively in minority languages.”¹⁰

AFTERWORD

In the past two decades the history of the autonomy of Vojvodina Hungarians was full of turning points and movements. Also, it was not free of inner conflicts and tension, outer attacks and distrust, it had bad patches and long stagnate periods, but in spite of all that its development is unambiguous and tracable.

An idea committed to paper, adopted in war-time in a location enclosed by cordons of police in the passed 18 years has been realized and has attained as far as that now Vojvodina Hungarians possess an own national council, which can operate self-established institutions, can take over existing institutions, can report on, propose and initiate in almost all field of issues regarding cultural identity, possess an own headquarters, national symbols and holidays, and an own budget.

With the elections in a few days time, on 6 June, 2010 an era will come to an end, while another one will just start: the Vojvodina Hungarians have an own separate voter registry, therefore, they can elect their own parliament in compliance with the principles of free and secret elections, equal suffrage, and with more candidates. Certainly, it does not mean an ideal final condition, as, because of the lack of strict and precisely determined rules of financing, the operation of existing institutions, and the taking over of the power of further institutions are still challenging and risky. Nevertheless, a regional (conducted in the Karpathian-basin, or in Southeastern Europe) examination would result fascinating lessons, as certain elements of the Serbian model on the settlement of minority matters serve as a good example for any other country in the region.

Translated by Mariann Horváth

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www.southeast-europe.org
see@southeast-europe.org

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Thank you for your kind collaboration. *Editor-in-Chief*

¹⁰ The full text of the law in Hungarian is available at the website of VMSZ: www.vmsz.org.rs