

POLICY PAPER

Overcoming the legacies of the past together: Serbia and Hungary

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- Hungary and Serbia have a shared history which can be characterized by both cooperation and conflict. In the center of the most recent debates has been the territory known since mid-19th century as Vojvodina that was ceded from Hungary¹ after World War I as a consequence of the Trianon Treaty. The area – which usually enjoyed a special government status – over centuries experienced significant changes in the composition of the population either because of the Ottoman invasion or intended population settlements by the Austrian emperors and Hungarian leaders.
- WWI and the decision in Trianon in 1920 had a major impact on the relation of Serbs and Hungarians living in that area. Hungary lost 71 percent of its territory and 59 percent of its population. This national trauma contributed to the revisionist efforts in the Hungarian foreign policy in the first period. At the same time the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes received the territory of Vojvodina with significant number of Hungarian inhabitants (appr. 28% of the population).



During WWII, Hungary regained control over Vojvodina with the support of the Nazi Germany and in January 1942 their military forces carried out a razzia against Partisans that was accompanied by mass killings of civilians, mainly against Serbs and Jews. As the war ended with the fall of Axis powers, Hungary again had to withdraw behind the Trianon borders. In 1944-45 the Partisans and Communist forces gained control over the Yugoslav territory and took revenge against their former enemies. The actions caused also massive civilian losses. Hungarians (and Germans) were executed based on collective punishment.

As part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Vojvodina gained a special status of autonomous province (Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, hereafter APV) with wide range of rights and authorities. After Tito's death, Slobodan Milosevic fostered centralization and he cut the province's rights and privileges that also partially restricted the rights of the Hungarian community (for example in education). The wars in former Yugoslavia and growing nationalism undermined the ground of peaceful coexistence. The dissolution of former Yugoslavia and the "loss" of Kosovo became a Trianon-like trauma for Serbs and contributed to an increased suspicion also against the Hungarian minority, one of the most organized ethnic groups in Serbia living right next to the border of their motherland. Unfortunately, growing nationalism among Serbs also led to some ethnic clashes with Hungarians, raising concerns of the Hungarian governments. The first freely elected Hungarian government determined Hungarian minority protection as one of the main pillars of its foreign policy, but it also respected the internationally defined borders and rather supported relations with the Hungarian minority communities under the umbrella of Euro-Atlantic integration process.

After the change of regime in Serbia, the choice of the European path as the strategic priority was a game changer in the relations. The Hungarian foreign policy considers the Euro-Atlantic integration of Serbia and the wider Western

Balkan region to be the guarantee of peace and security for the region and for Hungary as well. Thus, Hungary strongly supports Serbia's accession to Euro-Atlantic structures and building friendly relationship became a common interest of the two countries. Interestingly, two right-wing parties managed to build strong intergovernmental relations and high-level symbolic acts recognizing former atrocities on both sides took place. Since then intergovernmental cooperation reached the highest level in history, contributing to the development of economic relations too. However, the cooperation of the Hungarian community with Serbs should be further developed in order to strengthen the social ground of reconciliation.

Best practices and lessons learned

The reconciliation process between Serbia and Hungary was lately supported by several factors: a) the significant amount of time that elapsed since the last conflict; b) the existence of Hungarian/Serbian minority in Serbia/Hungary and the improving minority rights frameworks; c) the process of the EU integration; and d) friendly relations of the elites running both states based on common interests.

Time doesn't solve problems but helps to heal wounds

The last major conflicts between Hungarians and Serbs that were accompanied by massive human losses as a consequence of ethnic based violence happened in the mid-1940s so more than half century has passed without major conflicts between the two countries. This time also helped the Hungarian political elites and society (at least the large majority) to overcome the Trianon syndrome so revisionist approach could not return to the Hungarian foreign policy after the change of regime in the beginning

¹ Together with other territories (Slovakia, Ruthenia, Transylvania, Eastern (Temes) Banate, Croatia and parts of Austria).

of the 1990s which was essential for building trust between the two countries. Furthermore, as the time passes, the number of people who were directly affected by those atrocities is decreasing which ease the circumstances of the reconciliation process.

Minority protection in Hungary and Serbia, and the position of the Hungarian minority

The war in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s resulted in “ethnification” of general politics and thus, the deterioration of approach towards minorities in Serbia, which was seen as a potential factor of instability. The Hungarian governments were worried about the worsening situation of the Hungarian national minority in Serbia during this period and that became a main bottleneck for improving bilateral relations. Hence, the first step for the reconciliation between the two states and two peoples was the change in minority policies in Serbia and the continuation of the improvement of the general framework for minorities in Hungary, as well as the full participation of the minority elites in the political system of the country.

The change of regime in Hungary and the Euro-Atlantic integration process provided a positive atmosphere for developing the minority policy framework in Hungary. The Democratic Alliance of Serbs was actively involved in the preparation of the Law on National and Ethnic Minorities (adopted in 1993) which also facilitated the establishment of minority self-governments at national and municipality levels. In 1995 the national level Serbian Minority Self-Government was founded. As a result of the elections in 1998, 34 local level self-governments were formed in Budapest and on the county-side. In the period of 2014-2019 the number of those has been 45. The cultural and educational rights of the Serbs along with the other recognized national minorities have been granted. In the preservation of Serbian culture, the Serbian Orthodox Church in Hungary plays an important role. The legal framework of parliamentary representation of the national minorities was only set in 2010. In line with the new Election Law the national minorities can have a delegate in the Hungarian National Assembly.

The general course for shaping of the framework for minority protection in Serbia was set up in early 2000s, after the fall of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic. As the first step, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) finally ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter on Regional and Minority Language, and in the following years signed several bilateral agreements for protection of minority rights with the neighboring countries including Hungary. The current system of protection of national minorities is based on the 2002 Law on Protection of National Minorities (amended in 2009 and 2013), 2006 Constitution, 2009 Law on National Councils of National Minorities (amended in 2014) and the 2009 Anti-Discrimination Act (2009). Serbia has also adopted a number of laws that further defined some of the rights of national minorities including the Law on the Official Use of Language and Script, 2009 Law on Culture, 2009 Law on Textbooks and other Teaching Materials etc. The democratic turn in Serbia also allowed the adoption of the Bilateral Agreement on Minority Protection between Hungary and Serbia in 2003.

The Constitution and Laws provided specific regulations for national minorities to ensure a complete equality and to help them to preserve their identity. They defined that national minorities enjoy collective autonomy in the following areas: a) culture: national minorities have the right to “establish specific cultural, artistic and scientific institutions, societies and associations; b) education: right to education in their own mother language at the “pre-school, primary and secondary education levels.” c) information: the right to full and impartial information in their native language, and the state is obliged to provide “information, cultural and educational contents;” d) official use of language and script: in municipalities where national minorities constitute more than 15% of population there language and script minority language could become

official.² National minority councils (NMCs), elected by the respective minority they represent, are the bodies tasked with decision making in this areas. At the local, provincial and state level elections, parties registered as national minority parties enjoy positive discrimination, as they can get at least one seat if their list reaches the “natural threshold” (total turnout number divided with the number of mandates in the local, provincial or state assembly) instead of the regular threshold of 5 percent.

According to the census in 2011, the number of Hungarians were around 250 thousand (3.53 percent of total population, or 13 percent of the population of Vojvodina) in Serbia who predominantly live in Vojvodina.³ The Hungarian minority in Serbia is one of the best organized and with the best connection with the central authorities. For almost two decades their representatives participate in almost all ruling majorities at the state level and the level of the Province of Vojvodina, and in a number of municipalities in AP Vojvodina, allowing them to significantly influence drafting and major changes in acts that regulate the minority protection framework in Serbia. The first Hungarian NMC was elected in 2002 by an electors committee, while the first direct elections were held in 2010. Legal framework has been further improved as result of the EU integration process and pressure coming from EU member states, including Hungary (see below).

While these improvements are welcomed on both sides, the current regulation framework could form the basis for segregation. The minority policy should also encourage integration of minorities into the wider society so there is

still space for development. One of the best methods is to find solutions for implementing intercultural approach within the minority policies, which would make a process as a two-way path (i.e. engaging both minority and majority) for the full implementation of minority policies and standards. This approach has been actively advocated by the civil society in Serbia.

Post-2008 cooperation – EU integration of Serbia and beyond

Serbia-Hungary relations improved after the 2000 regime change in Belgrade, and they were steadily growing, despite the few “hiccups” due to interethnic incidents in Vojvodina⁴, lack of understanding regarding the interpretation of certain historical events,⁵ and unclear notions that Vojvodina Hungarians could demand a territorial autonomy in 8 (or 10, depending on the version) municipalities in the north of Serbia where they constitute a majority.⁶ However, due to the 2008 proclamation of independence of Kosovo and its Hungarian recognition, the relations reached the lowest level in years. However, the two countries overcame the crisis soon through pragmatic approach to cooperation, based on the EU integration, urge for good neighborly relations and security concerns. Serbia, which was at the time seeking to become the EU candidate needed the Hungarian support. One of the first steps was a bilateral defense and security agreement which outlined the framework for cooperation in this area and immediately resulted in Serbia’s joining the Hungarian-Slovak

² In the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, individual settlements, parts of municipalities, can achieve this if there is 25% percent of minority population.

³ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, “2011 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Serbia”, Belgrade 2014, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2014/PdfE/G20144012.pdf>, [1 November 2019].

⁴ For example, Vukmirović, Đ., and Preradović Lj.. “Nacionalni sukobi tresu Temerin.” *Vecernje Novosti*, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/aktuelno.69.html:346843-Nacionalni-sukobi-tresu-Temerin>, [September 4, 2019].

⁵ For example, when the Hungarian President was asked not to participate at the celebration of 1848 Revolution organized by the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians. See “Tadić i Šoljom najutili

vojvodanske Mađare.” *Autonomija*, <http://www.autonomija.info/tadic-i-soljom-najutili-vojvodanske-madare.html>, [September 4, 2019]. The other example is the renewed trial of Sandor Kepiro, a former Hungarian military officer who participated in the war atrocities (according to the court rulings in 1940s, during Horthy’s regime) in the city of Novi Sad in 1942, who was declared innocent by the first instance court in 2011. Serbian officials, the mayor of Novi Sad in particular, were displeased with such a decision. See Zori, Ognjen. “Presuda Kepiru šokantna, najavljene žalbe.” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/presuda-kepiru-sokantna-najavljene-zalbe/24270357.html>, [September 4, 2019].

⁶ See “Vojvodanski Mađari o autonomiji Vojvodine.” *Autonomija*, <https://www.autonomija.info/vojvodanski-madari-o-autonomiji-vojvodine.html>, [September 4, 2019].



peacekeeping mission in Cyprus. Also, it was the foundation for joint military exercises, and to this date of all NATO member states, Serbia had the highest number of bilateral exercises with Hungary and Romania. During its 2011 EU presidency, Hungary was very supportive of Serbia's EU bid, which opened the way for obtaining the status of the EU candidate in 2012. Serbia also supported drafting of the Danube Strategy. Cross-border cooperation between the two states within the EU framework is very active and most of the funds are usually utilized.

Still, Hungary's support was not unconditional, as it depended on Serbia's implementation of its minority policy framework and the approach to Hungarian minority in general. For instance, Hungary conditioned Serbia's candidacy in 2012 with the changes in the draft Law on the Restitution of Collectivised Property between 1945-1965 or Payment of Damages, insisting that it cannot apply the principle of collective punishment which, in this case, was supposed to be applied to almost the entire population of ethnic Hungarians in Serbia. The solution was eventually found through bilateral political consultations. The second example is that Hungary, together with Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania, pushed for the special mechanism regarding the protection of minorities in Serbia within the Chapter 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights.), which resulted in the creation of the special Action plan for the implementation of the rights of minorities. Serbia adopted the Action plan in 2016 and began its implementation, in coordination with the national minority councils.

Strengthening inter-governmental and inter-party cooperation

⁷ Laketić, M. "Pastor i Nikolić zajedno u Budimpešti." *Blic.rs*, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/pastor-i-nikolic-zajedno-u-budimpesti/j82sk14>. [September 4, 2019]. In that moment, SVM was mostly in coalitions (local, provincial and state level) with the Democratic Party in Serbia, their long-term partner. However, there was a noticeable trend of transformation of SVM from officially social democratic to center right party which paved the way for closeness with both Fidesz and SNS.

⁸ Five Hungarian young men severely beat a Serb man (who was provoking them because of their nationality) in Temerin in

The major breakthrough came after the advance of the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka*, SNS) to the power in Serbia, and with the slow forging of their partnership with the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (*Savez vojvodanskih Mađara*, SVM), the biggest minority party in Serbia. It seems that SVM has played a key role in establishing links between Fidesz (ruling party in Hungary since Spring 2010) and SNS already in 2010.⁷ This early brokering of the understanding between Fidesz and SNS soon bared the fruits, when SNS took power in Serbia. SVM did not participate in the first SNS government mostly due to lack of understanding between SNS and other coalition partners, but the two parties already formed a partnership, and SVM and SNS were together in the government following all next elections.

What was hard for the liberal governments to adopt, two right-wing leaders, prime minister/president Aleksandar Vucic and prime minister Viktor Orban quickly achieved. The two heads of state Janos Ader and Tomislav Nikolic met in Budapest in November 2012 where they announced a new beginning of relationships and discussed also sensitive issues like the case of boys of Temerin⁸. Already in June 2013, the Parliament of Serbia passed Declaration condemning the acts against the civilian Hungarian population in Vojvodina, committed from 1944 to 1945. Couple of days later, Janos Ader, the President of Hungary, held a speech in the Serbian Parliament condemning also atrocities carried out by the Hungarian militias against Serb civilians in the WWII.⁹ Since then, several commemorations and honors took place with the participation of high level representatives of both states. Viktor Orban opened a cultural center in Belgrade in 2014. These symbolic acts opened a path for reconciliation between the elites of the

2004 and were sentenced for 61 years in prison in total. The tough sentence was heavily criticized by the Hungarian community. The Hungarian government lobbied for easing sentences which partly happened because of the Amnesty Law.

⁹ "Magyar bocsánatkérés a szerb parlamentben." *Múlt-kor*, https://mult-kor.hu/20130626_magyar_bocsanatkeres_a_szerb_parlamentben, [September 7, 2019].

two states, as well as for close cooperation between the two governments.

Symbolic acts were followed by enhanced cooperation between governments. Since 2014 joint government meetings have been organized regularly to facilitate the development of bilateral relations in various fields, including economy, agriculture, infrastructure, investment facilitation, culture, and education. These meetings also aim to outline work plans for supporting Serbia's EU integration process. Thanks to the strengthened cooperation, bilateral trade turnover rose from 1.4 billion EUR to 2.5 billion EUR from 2013 to 2017. Unlike Slovakia and Romania, Serbia readily accepted the initiatives of Budapest to give Hungarian citizenship to ethnic Hungarians in Vojvodina.¹⁰ As a country with large minorities in neighboring states, Serbia is used to double citizenship of its citizens (Bosnia and Hercegovina, Croatia, Macedonia etc.), and does not see it as a threat to its sovereignty. It also allowed the Hungarian government to directly support Hungarian institutions and media in Vojvodina, and to launch an economic development program for Vojvodina. The close cooperation of the governments also made it easier to overcome some contradictory situations. Particularly interesting was the acceptance of Hungarian policies during the 2015 migration crisis and erecting the fence on Serbia-Hungary border, although Serbia was one of the main transition countries.

Government level cooperation overlapped party level cooperation. SNS allowed Fidesz to carry out political campaigns in Serbia before Hungarian elections, but in exchange the Hungarian government party openly supported SNS in its election campaigns. Political closeness of Fidesz and SVM was also not an issue, and in 2014, one Serbian citizen, Andor Deli (member of SVM), Vojvodina's former secretary for education, administration and national

communities, became a member of the European Parliament in 2014 under Hungarian mandate.

Many criticize the close relationship between the two governments, mostly due to illiberal style of rule of both leaders, Vucic and Orban. Some see this cooperation opportunistic, with Serbia obtaining the support for the EU integration and investments from Hungary, while Budapest got a partner that does not oppose its initiatives regarding Hungarian minorities in neighboring states.¹¹ Nevertheless, the situation is currently beneficial, as seemingly there are no misunderstandings and political clashes between the two states, and one of the biggest fears in Serbia, that Vojvodina Hungarians would push for the territorial autonomy, is seemingly out of the table. Hungary firmly supports the EU integration of Serbia, and sometimes its officials issue very strong statements regarding the treatment of Serbia by the other EU member states and the EU institutions.¹²

In total, the current level of relations between the two countries could be described as the best in the modern history, but the question remains if the "political reconciliation" is being translated into the "societal." While there is symbolic approximation of historical narratives, the historians did not manage to close the issue and neither did the Mixed Interstate Academic Commission for war crimes against civilians 1941-1948 that was established in 2010. Undoubtedly, the number of interethnic incidents dramatically fell. On the other hand, looming issue of de facto segregation of the biggest minorities in Serbia, including Hungarians, could become a problem in the future.

Conclusion

¹⁰ To descendants of citizens of Austria-Hungary prior to 1918 who could prove that they speak Hungarian language.

¹¹ For example, see Milošević, Ana. "Cinične igre Srbije i Mađarske oko prošlosti." *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/04/06/cinične-igre-srbije-i-mađarske-ok-prošlosti-04-05-2018/?lang=sr>, [September 4, 2019].

¹² See "Sijarto: Evropska komisija veštački usporava integraciju Srbije u EU." *Politika Online*.

<http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/427455/Sijarto-Evropska-komisija-vestacki-usporava-integraciju-Srbije-u-EU>, [September 4, 2019] or "Sijarto: Srbija što pre da postane članica, 2025. Dalek Datum." *Radio Television of Serbia*, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3213715/sijarto-srbija-sto-pre-da-postane-clanica-2025-dalek-datum.html>, [September 4, 2019].

The Serbian-Hungarian reconciliation process achieved significant results in terms of cooperation of governments and dominant parties. Accordingly, this process could be rather considered as a top-down approach in which the political parties played a crucial role, including the facilitating role of SVM. Confidence-building at state and party level enabled not only the development of minority policy framework and its better implementation but facilitated also the increase of economic, political, educational and cultural cooperation. The mutual support for minority protection for Hungarians in Serbia and Serbs in Hungary was essential to changing the course of bilateral cooperation. Hungary's leverage has been significantly strengthened by the EU integration process. On the one hand, the EU integration framework itself provides strong incentives for reforms but as each step of the accession process requires the support of all member states, the member states can put great pressure on the (potential) candidates.

However, it is questionable how such a top-down approach can work in the long run. Although the position of both ruling parties is stable, it is important to ensure that the reconciliation process does not rely only on the political will of leading politicians. Therefore, societal aspects of reconciliation should receive more attention in the future. Eventually, trust among people can create secure and stable living environment along with better economic and labor market opportunities.

Minority policy framework is likely to be challenged by demographic changes soon too. The main reasons are population aging and emigration to Hungary and Western Europe. Emigration got easier due to the policy of granting citizenship to ethnic Hungarians abroad by the Hungarian government, so it is plausible that the numbers are even lower today than in 2011 (appr. 40 thousand Hungarians already left country in the 2000s because of the unfavorable environment and for better opportunities abroad) and the upcoming 2021 census will show that.

Recommendations for Hungary and Serbia

- The recommendations focus on the strengthening of societal aspects (confidence-building among the people) of reconciliation.
- Both governments could put more resources into youth exchanges between the minority and majority groups. A permanent program might be founded for this purpose.
- Minority policy reform in Serbia should also strengthen intercultural elements that can also enhance people to people relations and improve integration.
- Stronger support and focus on the work of the Mixed Interstate Academic Commission could encourage approximation of historic narratives that could also facilitate better implementation of minority policies (for example: rehabilitation law)
- So far mainly dominant parties played the crucial role in defining minority policies. Broadening societal support for those solutions could enhance ownership of minority policy framework.

Lessons for Western Balkans

- The Serbian and Hungarian case suggests that the change of narrative concerning the "other side" is crucial for reconciliation. In other words, the first step in the reconciliation ought to be ending the practice of invoking historical tensions concerning the "other side" as an argument in domestic political struggles. This would assist in relaxing the current political atmosphere and boost communications between the two sides.
- This case also suggests that the integration of minorities into wider society should be supported through innovative minority policies in line with best European standards.
- Recognition of the other side's victims in past conflict is also important for reconciliation, as it enables a path towards adopting a single, joint narrative about the past, thus removing another common point of friction.
- Finally, there is no reconciliation process without the top down approach – namely, it is the politicians' responsibility to recognize where points of friction are, and whether they will be addressed

depends on their political will. However, in case of breakthroughs, politicians and leaders should also push for bottom-up approaches which would ensure that confidence and cooperation among communities in concern will develop on the ground as well, strengthening local ownership of minority policies.

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