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Serbia Chronicle 2 – Ethnic tensions in Serbia

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Belgrade, May 2013

Ethnic tensions have been the main security concern in the Western Balkan region for the past couple of decades. During the 1990s, these tensions were at the forefront of both the war in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo, which in the end claimed countless lives and the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. Since then, peacekeeping initiatives, numerous conventions, development strategies, EU integration, democratic reform, and many other initiatives, have all had the aim to stabilize the region and to prevent new ethnic clashes. Overall it can be said that these initiatives have been successful. For instance, just recently, on the 19th of April 2013, Kosovo and Serbia signed a historic agreement regarding the territorial and political sovereignty of Kosovo. Although the subject itself is a source of controversy and dispute, the latest agreement was made without large-scale ethnic conflicts or direct violent altercations.¹ While this shows some progress in terms of dealing with ethnically charged disputes, ethnic tensions in the region are not solved. Ethnically based violence, ethnic tensions and threats of violence during symbolic events, upsurges of fascist groups and hooliganism, hate speech, and more, are just some example of how ethnic tensions are manifested.

Vojvodina (Temerin) – disputes between Serbs and Hungarian minorities

“Temerin: cursed Serbs, called Hitler. Due to the fight in Temerin, seven suspects were arrested for inciting religious and racial hatred”. – Novosti (23.10.2012)²

“Fights in Temerin, media reports that they are ethnically charged”. – Vesti online (28.01.2013)³

“Another incident in Temerin. In Temerin, close to Novi Sad, another incident has occurred, which certain media reports suggest has an interethnic character”. – Blic (10.02.2013)⁴

Ethnically charged tensions between Serbs and Hungarian minorities in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina are perhaps less known internationally, however, headlines as seen above are numerous. An incident whereby two young men with Hungarian backgrounds were beaten up on their way home by six Serbian boys and sustained severe injuries or an incident where a group of ethnic Hungarians, part of the movements Pokret 64, entered a cafe and insulted Serbian visitors by yelling ‘Sieg Heil’ and pushing them around, are just some examples of how these conflicts are recently manifested in Temerin.



Temerin, *Grobari* - *Grobari* are the organized supporters of the Serbian football club Partizan and often involved in football hooliganism

¹ This is in contrast to previous attempts to resolve the issue of Kosovo, where for instance in 2008, both the American and Croatian Embassies were lit of fire during protest in Belgrade.

² Novosti (23.10.2012): <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/aktuelno.291.html:402704-Temerin-Psovali-Srbe-zvali-Hittera>

³ Vesti online (28.01.2013): <http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Hronika/287944/Tuce-u-Temerinu-mediji-tvrde-da-je-na-nacionalnoj-osnovi>

⁴ Blic (10.02.2013): <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Hronika/367004/Jos-jedan-incident-u-Temerinu>



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Ethnic tensions in the municipality of Temerin are not new. With a Hungarian national minority of about 30%, the municipality has been marked by periodic waves of ethnic conflicts. These include display of graffiti and posters propelling ethnic hatred, desecration and destruction of property (private, religious, graves, monuments), and both psychological and physical violence.⁵ Furthermore, in the midst of these conflicts, are also fascist organizations such as *Obraz* and *Pokret 64* which create further instability.⁶ Therefore, not surprisingly, a recent survey among 300 Temerin residents shows that Hungarian nationals feel insecure – 38% state that the position of ethnic Hungarians are threatened in the municipality and 52% say that interethnic relations are difficult and tense.⁷ Although tensions in Temerin do not necessarily reflect broad nation-wide attitudes and necessary steps are made to assure that the human rights of the Hungarian minority in Serbia are respected, these examples show that ethnic insecurities regarding personal and community safety are still a concern.

South Serbia – controversy concerning Monument



“The Liberation Army of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja threatens with armed conflict because of the Monument” – Nadlanu (26.12.2012)⁸

“If Serbians take down the Monument in Presevo, Albanians threaten to take down ours!” – Vesti online (04.01.2013)⁹

“Albanians: Legal Monument in Presevo, a new war on the horizon” – 24 sata (17.01.2013)¹⁰

In south Serbia, the municipalities Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja, are considered especially vulnerable to interethnic tensions. Since the Konculj peace agreement was signed in 2001, which was a means to end the armed conflict between Serbian security forces and the Albanian Liberation Army of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja (UCPMB), both international and domestic efforts have been made to sustain stability in the region. One of the main bodies aimed at insuring this is the Coordination Body for the Municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja which was established with the purpose to develop a region that is safe in terms of politics, security and economy, as well as respect of human rights. However, when a Monument dedicated to the fallen soldiers of UCPMB was raised in the center of Presevo in mid-November of last year, fear of possible new violent outbreaks and ethnic tensions grew fast.

The Monument was seen as a provocation against Serbia, as the UCPMB is considered a terrorist organization by the Government of Serbia. “Look at the illogicality and irrationality. We are in a situation in southern Serbia where we do not have Kosovo national minorities, but ethnic Albanians who are raising the Albanian flag and not the Kosovo flag. This

⁵ Ilić, V. and Keveždi, M. (2012), *Temerin – sadašnjost ili budućnost Vojvodine (Temerin – present of future Vojvodina)*, Centar za razvoj civilnog društva, Zrenjanin. Marković, A. (2013), *Socijalni aspekti etničkih sukoba u Temerinu (Social aspects of ethnic conflicts in Temerin)*, *Sociology* 1, 69 - 90.

⁶ *Obraz* is a Serbian Orthodox neo-fascist, neo-nazi organization that was officially banned by the Constitutional Court of Serbia in 2012. *Pokret 64* is a right-wing nationalist, extremist movement aimed at uniting all Hungarians outside of Hungary.

⁷ Ilić, V. and Keveždi, M. (2012)

⁸ Nadlanu (26.12.2012): <http://www.nadlanu.com/pocetna/info/politika/Oslobodilacka-vojska-Preseva-Bujanovca-i-Medvedje-preti-Dacicu-oruzanim-sukobom-zbog-spomenika.a-162378.291.html>

⁹ Vesti online (04.01.2013): <http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/282274/Ako-Srbija-srusi-spomenik-u-Presevu-Albanci-prete-da-ce-rusiti-nase>

¹⁰ 24 sata (17.01.2013): <http://www.24sata.rs/vesti/aktuelno/vest/albanci-legalizovan-spomenik-u-presevu-na-pomolu-novi-rat/71928.phtml>

means that the Albanian nation wants two states in the Balkans”, the Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dacic said.¹¹ The reaction of the Government was fast, they demanded the removal of the ‘unlawful’ monument by Presevo authorities, and when no such action was taken, the monument was forcefully removed in early January. The response of those in favor of the Monument were numerous: violent threats and threats of war, demands that the Monument dedicated to Serbian police forces in Lucanin be removed, support from Albania and Kosovo was asked and organized demonstrations in Presevo. In the end, the controversy did not lead to violent altercations, but it did signify deeply rooted tensions regarding national histories and future fears.

Research using the Bogardus social distance scale to examine ethnic distance in south Serbia shows that ethnic distance is widespread and predominantly rooted in prejudices. According to the data, Serbians are most ethnically distanced from the Albanian minority in the region, while results based on the subgroup of youth in the region indicate an even higher degree of distance than in the general population. For instance, in 47% of cases young Serbians have something against living in the same nation as Albanians, while as high as 87% would have something against marrying or their children marrying, someone of Albanian nationality.

Vukovic, D., Klacar, B. and Mojsilovic, M. (2011), *Youth in South Serbia*. UNICEF.

Southwest Serbia – Football hooliganism

“Grobari chanting “Mosques are burning” on the streets of Novi Pazar” – Sandzak Haber (04.05.2013)¹²

“We attached grobare because of the song ‘Mosques are burning’” – Kurir (06.05.2013)¹³

Although conflict between Bosnian Muslims and Serbs in the Sandzak region are not common, exhibitions of hate speech and security concerns of ethnic clashes are often present during special events such as for example football matches. For instance, when a football game was organized between “Partizan” from Belgrade and FK Novi Pazar in Novi Pazar, 300 supporters from Belgrade were transported to Novi Pazar in the company of 15 high level security vehicles. Despite higher security, the match had to be stopped several times due to conflicts between supporters. As *Grobari* (Partizan supporter) were singing “I don’t know what’s happening, the mosques are being lit of fire” (“Bože ne znam šta mi je, pale mi se džamije”), which was understood as direct ethnically charged provocation, Novi Pazar supporters threw a home-made bomb in response. Luckily, the bomb did not explode. This incident illustrates that while the ethnic tensions in the southwest region of Serbia are relatively dim, certain events can fuel conflict.

Violence against Roma

“Roma boy attacked in GSP (public transport)” – B92 (27.05.2011)¹⁴

“Got beaten up because he is Roma” – Kurir (27.06.2011)¹⁵

“Teenager killed because he is Roma” – Blic (09.04.2013)¹⁶

¹¹ Glas Javnosti (08.01.2013): <http://www.glas-javnosti.rs/clanak/politika/glas-javnosti-08-01-2013/dacic-spomenu-u-presevu-ide-milom-ili-silom>

¹² Sandzak Harber (04.05.2013): http://sandzakhaber.net/sport/grobari-skandirali-pale-mi-se-dzamiije-na-ulicama-novog-pazara-video?fb_source=pubv1#

¹³ Kurir (06.05.2013): <http://www.kurir-info.rs/pazarci-napali-smo-qrobare-zbog-pesme-pale-mi-se-dzamiije-clanak-775921>

¹⁴ B92 (27.05.2011): http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2011&mm=05&dd=27&nav_category=16&nav_id=515006

¹⁵ Kurir (27.06.2011): <http://www.kurir-info.rs/dobio-batine-zato-sto-je-rom-clanak-77791>

¹⁶ Blic (09.04.2013): <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Hronika/376498/Svedocenje-Tinejdzera-ubijen-zato-je-Rom>



When Dusan Jovanovic (13) was beaten to death in the center of Belgrade by a couple of boys part of a 'skinheads' movement in 1997, he became a symbol of ethnic violence against Roma in Serbia. But although a plaque was set up 10 years after his death in his remembrance and as a reminder of the devastating nature of violence, violence against Roma is still presiding.

Hate speech and violence against Roma based on their ethnic background is an ongoing problem in Serbia. In 2012 the European Roma Rights Center submitted a report to the European Commission citing numerous human right violations including a list anti-Roma graffiti and anti-Roma attacks in the previous year.¹⁷ Subsequently, in March 2013, the Minority Rights Center issued a statement claiming that violence against the Roma population in Serbia is rising. In the statement, the Center refers to several ethnically charged attacks on the Roma population that took place in two week span: a 17 year old Roma boy that was found dead under suspicious circumstances in Becej, a Roma settlement was attacked in Bor, and the Monument dedicated to Saban Bajramovic (known as the King of Roma music) in Nis was desecrated. The statement further adds that inadequate responses and lack of punishment in these types of cases contribute to their repetition and cause fear among Roma for their personal safety.¹⁸

Future and responses to ethnic conflicts

All these examples point to the fact that although ethnic conflicts are not on the scale they were before, many ethnic minorities feel that their physical and community security is under threat and ethnic tensions are still present in Serbia. Today, these tensions are described as so called 'incidents', often instigated by right-wing extremist groups such as *SNP Naši 1389*, *Obraza*, and *Nacionalni stroj* (as has been seen in the examples above), but physical or direct confrontation between ethnic groups is just *one* realm in which ethnic relations are negotiated. Institutional, political, economic, and cultural relations between ethnic groups are equally relevant to understanding ethnic tensions.

Many researchers have tried to delineate the causes of the post-Cold War surge in ethnic conflicts and the main factors influencing ethnic tensions. Although the two dominant theoretical approaches to ethnicity are primordialism (ethnic identities as derived from human nature) and constructivists approaches (ethnicity as a social phenomenon that is constructed), the latter has gained the most scientific debates in recent years. Here, causes of ethnic conflicts are studied by examining broader social factors. For instance, instrumentalist approaches stress how ethnicity is a means to serve political ends (especially those of social elites), some scholars argue that ethnicity has to be viewed in light of competition over resources and rights, while modernization theories stress how industrialization and urbanization lead to detraditionalization and homogenization and thereby diminishing ethnic identifications.¹⁹ The intention here is not to make

¹⁷ SERBIA: EU Enlargement Programme 2012 ERRC report: <http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/ecprogress-serbia-2012.pdf>

¹⁸ B92 (28.03.2013): http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2013&mm=03&dd=28&nav_category=12&nav_id=699459

¹⁹ Jesse, N.G. and Williams, K.P. (2010), *Ethnic Conflict: A Systematic Approach to Cases of Conflicts*, CQ Press.

theoretical claims, but it is important to emphasize the need of taking holistic approaches to the understanding of the above described ethnic tensions. As such, responses based on human security, rather than state or ethnically centered, can have grounding in the region.