

SUBOTICA—HAVEN OF MULTICULTURAL COEXISTENCE

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1. Foreword

Founders of the United Nations strongly believed that the second half of the 20th century would be the era of individual human rights. They held that ethnic conflicts and minority issues would disappear automatically with the protection of the universal human rights of each individual, irrespective of race, religion or ethnicity. Notwithstanding the genuine importance of universal, individual human rights, they seem to have been wrong.¹ Even in democratic states with outstanding human rights records like Belgium, France, Canada or the United Kingdom, ethnicity has become a decisive mobilizing power, reaching far beyond class interests and ideology.² In the late 1980s and early 1990s shifts in theory and international law are noticeable as well,³ accepting the view that true equality of individuals of different languages, cultures, ethnicities and religions is not possible without group differentiation, and the guarantee of group specific rights. Multiethnic states need to accommodate ethnic differences and ensure effective participation of minorities in decision-making, primarily in questions concerning their differences.⁴

What is the role of local self-government in a multiethnic state? Is it possible for policy on the local level to be substantially different from that of the national government? Can local government in a minority-dominated settlement counterbalance a discriminative central policy? These are some of the main questions of the following presentation and analysis of the policy of the Subotica local government in Serbia. This text is not intended to be a complete analysis of the six year's experience of the opposition local government

¹ This inaccurate approach, which neglected the protection of specific identity, has been recognized even in Capotorti's UN study. See Capotorti, Francesco, "Study on the Rights of Persons Belonging to Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities," UN Sales No. E.78. XIV. 1, *Preface*, iii.

² Glazer, Nathan (1982) "From Class-Based to Ethnic-Based Politics," in Daniel J. Elazar (ed.) *Governing Peoples and Territories*. The Jerusalem Institute for Federal Studies, Jerusalem. pp. 47-50.

³ Plenty of international documents and conventions have been adopted since 1990 aimed to protect the rights of national minorities. Among the most important are: The UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992), CSCE/OSCE Copenhagen Document (1990), Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1994).

⁴ UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992) UN General Assembly Resolution 47/135, 2. 3.

in Subotica, which was mainly dominated by Hungarian ethnic political parties. The focus of this analysis is on the policy of municipal government in regards to the financing of culture and the appointment and employment of minorities. These topics are of major interest because they are genuinely important in a multiethnic society and because they are closely related to the pivotal problem of how to differentiate and not to discriminate.

The first part of this paper provides a detailed background on the specific socioeconomic, demographic and legal situation of Subotica and of the ethnic groups living there. Thereafter, a short description of the problems to be addressed and policy objectives are presented, followed by an analysis of the implementation of these policies. The main conclusions will be presented in the final part of the paper.

2. Background Conditions

2.1. *A Short Overview of Historic, Socioeconomic and Political Conditions*

The town of Subotica (in Hungarian, Szabadka) is located a few kilometers from the border of Hungary. It is the second largest town in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (Republic of Serbia, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) with more than 100,000 inhabitants. The first written documents about the settlement date back to the late 14th century. The town, together with the entire territory of the present Vojvodina, had been a part of the Hungarian Kingdom or Austrian Monarchy until the Trianon Peace Treaty of 1920.⁵ After the Turkish occupation the region was left almost entirely deserted, but resettlements in the 18th and 19th centuries initiated the present diverse ethnic composition of the city and its surroundings. Although the ethnic proportions substantially changed during the last two centuries, the presence of the three main ethnic communities is still evident. Hungarians, Croats (Bunjevci) and Serbs have been living side by side in the town for centuries. During this time, cohabitation has not been free of problems. The history of Vojvodina (for Hungarians Délvidék) is a history of the struggle among three dominant ethnic groups: Serbs (South Slavs), Hungarians and Germans. Sad chapters of this struggle were marked by bloody conflicts, including the Rákóczi freedom struggle in the 17th century, the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–49 and the Novi Sad massacre of 1942. National leaders and policymakers have continuously tried to eliminate the multiethnicity of the region and establish the domination of one ethnic community over others. Multiethnicity was treated as an obstacle to nation-building.

After World War II a policy of minority protection and national equality was declared in communist Yugoslavia. The rights of national minorities in Vojvodina were widely guaranteed and respected in postwar Vojvodina until Milosevic's seizure of power in 1988.

Since 1990 Subotica and the region as a whole have been characterized by the following important factors: establishment of the multiparty political system, strong centralization, the shadow of the Serb-Croat-Muslim ethnic wars in the vicinity, extreme nationalism, economic crises and a declining standard of living, the massive influx of Serbian refugees

⁵ Except for the period of the Ottoman occupation which lasted two centuries until 1697.

from war-torn areas into the region, as well as the emigration of non-Serbs (Hungarians and Croats) from Vojvodina.

2.2. *The Ethnic Composition of Subotica and the Main Characteristics of its Ethnic Groups*

According to the latest 1991 census, the ethnic composition of the municipality of Subotica was the following: 64,277 or 42.6% Hungarians; 33,808 or 22.4% Croats and Bunjevacs;⁶ 25,090 or 17% Serbs and Montenegrins; 22,746 or 15% Yugoslavs.⁷ These three strong national groups dominate Subotica: Hungarians, Bunjevac-Croats and Serbs. It is noteworthy that Subotica is the demographic, cultural and political center of both the Croatian (Bunjevac) and the Hungarian ethnic community in Vojvodina and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Around one-third of all Croats and one-fifth of all Hungarians in Yugoslavia live in Subotica. In the last decades the total number of inhabitants changed only slightly, while the ethnic composition of the town changed slightly more. The number and percentage of Serbs, Montenegrins and Yugoslavs has grown, whereas the number and percentage of Croats (Bunjevacs) and Hungarians has diminished to a degree. After 1991 more than 10,000 ethnic Serb refugees from Croatia and Bosnia settled in Subotica and several thousand Hungarians and Croats left the town, mainly because of the political and economic situation in Yugoslavia.

The largest ethnic group in Subotica is Hungarian. The Hungarians' mother tongue is naturally Hungarian, but in ethnically heterogeneous suburban settlements such as Čantavir (Csantavér), Šupljak (Suplyák), Bački Vinogradi (Bácsszőlős), Hajdukovo (Hajdújárás), all Hungarians, except the elderly, speak Serbian (Serbo-Croatian) as well. The overwhelming majority of Hungarians are Roman Catholics although several hundred are Protestant. In Subotica, 69% of the Hungarians live in the town itself and 31% inhabit the surrounding agricultural villages. Hungarians in Subotica are mainly descendants of landless peasants or poor smallholders. After the border changes in 1920 an overwhelming percentage of the nobility and middle class moved to Hungary, but this was counterbalanced in the postwar period when thousands of Hungarians settled in the city from the poor and rural Banat region of Vojvodina and were employed mainly as industrial workers in factories. Due to this immigration, the total number and percentage of

⁶ The ethnic and cultural origin of the Bunjevac is a subject of debate, but it is more or less certain that their linguistic, cultural and religious traditions and affiliations make them a part of the Croatian ethnic corpus. There is no cultural, religious or linguistic difference at all between those inhabitants of Subotica, who declare themselves as "Croats," and those who declare themselves as "Bunjevacs." All those who declare themselves as "Croats" claim that they are "Bunjevac-Croats." Between 1981 and 1991 the number of those in Subotica who declared themselves Bunjevacs multiplied, while the number of Croats substantially diminished. Observers claim that the reason for these changes is to be found in hostilities between Serbs and Croats in Croatia that emerged in 1990–1991. By hiding their origin, Croats in Subotica, and Yugoslavia, wished to avoid possible retaliations of the Serbian militant nationalists and paramilitary forces.

⁷ Yugoslavs do not exist as an ethnic group. Those who declared themselves as Yugoslavs were mainly individuals from ethnically mixed marriages.

Hungarians remained more or less constant, despite the ongoing assimilation (mainly through mixed marriages) and extremely low birth rate.

According to the 1991 census, the Bunjevac-Croatian population of Subotica numbered approximately 35,000 or 22% of the total population. Bunjevac-Croats have lived in the vicinity of Subotica since the late 17th century. They are traditionally concentrated around Subotica but also live in a strip bordering Serbia and Hungary on both sides, stretching from Sombor and Baja to Subotica. 34% of Bunjevac-Croats live in surrounding villages and 66% in the town itself. They are traditionally landowners and are substantially wealthier than the Hungarians. Bunjevacs predominantly speak Serbian using the special “Ikavski” dialect characteristic of the Dalmatian Croats. However, a large proportion of them, mainly the elderly, speak Hungarian as well. Bunjevac-Croats are traditionally Roman Catholics. For the most part, Croatian is used in the Catholic Church. Sadly, because they have no education and media in their mother tongue, they are gradually losing their language and dialect. The birth rate of Bunjevacs is also very low and, together with mixed marriages, has resulted in a decline in their overall number.

The breakup of Yugoslavia and the Serb-Croat conflicts in the 1990s resulted in the substantial drop in the overall social and political standing of Bunjevac-Croats in Subotica, as many Croats were ousted from high positions in state administration, education and state-owned industry. Under these circumstances, part of the Bunjevac population denied its Croatian heritage. Largely motivated by fear of anti-Croat public opinion, they claimed that Bunjevacs were a separate ethnic group. Since 1990 many Croats have left Subotica, mostly settling in Croatia.

Although Serbs have lived in Subotica for centuries, the majority of them settled in Subotica and the region only after World War II. Montenegrins as well inhabited Subotica for the first time after 1945. Finally, the last wave of Serbs settled in Subotica between 1991 and 1998, escaping from Croatia and Bosnia as refugees. Serbs in Subotica speak Serbian, and except for the original, elderly population they do not speak Hungarian. Unlike the Hungarians and Croats, the Serbs and Montenegrins practice Orthodox Christianity. Because they are not natives of Subotica and they do not work in agriculture, the vast majority of Serbs (approximately 75%) and Montenegrins (approximately 85%) reside in the town and only a small proportion live in villages. The Serb population is proportionally overrepresented in the state administration, police, courts, etc.

Yugoslavs should be mentioned, although not in great detail. As it has already been noted, this population of 22,000 has no common ethnically based cultural characteristics; therefore it would be wrong to perceive of them as an ethnic group. They are mainly children of ethnically mixed marriages, usually attend Serbian schools, for the most part speak Serbian and adhere to Serbian culture.

2.3. Minority Rights—The Legal Framework

The standards of minority protection have substantially diminished after Milosevic's takeover. Furthermore, these changes have resulted in an overall centralization of social life. Education, mother-tongue education of national minorities, official use of languages,

electronic media, all interior matters, etc., have become the exclusive domain of the federal authorities. Autonomous provinces and municipal local governments lost almost all of their previous influence in these areas.⁸ It would be difficult to present the whole magnitude of centralization in Serbia, but some characteristic examples follow. The Law on the Property of the Republic of Serbia divested local municipalities of their property rights and nationalized their lands.⁹ For instance, the Subotica town hall and all communal facilities became the property of the Serbian State. The municipalities have only some authority over utilities, but these are dependent on central approval as well. Fortunately, the federal administration, in practice, is not able to fully supervise this enormous amount of property, and therefore the actual powers of the municipalities are more encompassing than the legal ones.

Another characteristic example of enormous centralization is primary and secondary education. The exclusive right to establish primary and secondary schools including minority education is vested in the federal government. Moreover, school boards and principals are exclusively appointed and school curricula are dictated by the central government.

In short, when extreme nationalism dominated the policy of the Belgrade government, centralization resulted in a set back for minorities in all areas.

The constitutions of both Yugoslavia and Serbia guarantee an extensive range of rights for national minorities: the right to mother-tongue education,¹⁰ the right to official use of the mother tongue in areas inhabited by national minorities,¹¹ the right to preserve national identity,¹² the right to media in one's own language,¹³ the right to the use of national symbols, the right to sustain contacts with co-nationals outside borders,¹⁴ etc. All these constitutional rights conform to the provisions and standards of international documents for the protection of minorities according to the UN, OSCE and Council of Europe, although they depend very much on different republican and federal statutes that regulate court and administrative procedures, education and media. In fact, these statutes enable certain constitutional provisions. Moreover, the Constitutional Courts of Serbia and Yugoslavia are absolutely silent and passive on sensitive minority and human rights issues.

The Law on the Official Use of Languages and Alphabet,¹⁵ which replaced the previous regional law, has retained the official use of national minority languages, but has also

⁸ Várady, Tibor (1997) "Minorities, Majorities, Law and Ethnicity: Reflections of the Yugoslav Case," *Human Rights Quarterly*, No. 19. pp. 20-27.

⁹ Zakon o sredstvima u svojini republike (Statute on State Property) (1995) Article 2.1, *Službeni glasnik RS* (Official gazette of the Republic of Serbia) (1995) No. 53.

¹⁰ Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Article 32, *Službeni glasnik RS* (Official gazette of the Republic of Serbia) (1990) No. 1, Constitution of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Article 46 *Službeni list SRJ* (Official gazette of FRY) (1994) No. 1.

¹¹ Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Article 8; Constitution of the FRY, Article 15.

¹² Constitution of the FRY, Article 11.

¹³ Constitution of the FRY, Article 46.

¹⁴ Constitution of the FRY, Article 48.

¹⁵ Zakon o službenoj upotrebi jezika i pisma (Statute on the Official Use of the Language and Alphabet), *Službeni glasnik RS* (Official gazette of the Republic of Serbia) (1991) No. 45.

restricted it in some areas. This law prescribes the official use of the Serbian language and Cyrillic script in the entire territory of the Republic, but it allows municipalities to decide whether to introduce the official use of minority languages in their respective territory. Most of the municipalities in Vojvodina recognize some minority language as official. The law grants the following major rights to minorities: the right to bilingual judicial or administrative procedure, the right to use one's own language with the help of court interpreters in legal procedures, the right to ask for bilingual official documents (school certificates, identity cards, birth certificates) and the right to bilingual street signs, commercial signs and other public inscriptions. However, in judicial and administrative procedure this law is a step backward in comparison with the previous statute.¹⁶ The main problem exists in the enforcement and in the implementation of the now valid law, which is entirely under the jurisdiction of the central government. Moreover, ministerial regulations are often contrary to the law or state authorities simply ignore the provisions which guarantee the rights of minorities. In these cases, court protection is often unavailable or ineffective, and therefore these provisions remain useless.

The right to mother-tongue education in elementary and secondary schools has been available to national minorities in Vojvodina since 1945, but since 1955 separate minority schools have been closed and merged with Serbian schools. Hence, classes in Serbian and minority languages were held together in the same schools. University-level education in one's own language was also guaranteed in some faculties and departments during the 1970s and 1980s.

According to the present statute, education in elementary and secondary schools can be held in a minority language if fifteen pupils of the same generation request it.¹⁷ Therefore, around 80% of Hungarian pupils in elementary schools and 70% in secondary schools learn in their own language. The main problem lies with the Croatian minority—legally a “minority” only after the collapse of Tito's Yugoslavia—and the separation of the common Serbo-Croatian language.¹⁸ Because the government refuses to organize separate classes or differentiated curricula for Croats, they are practically forced to attend Serbian schools, to learn the Serbian language and Cyrillic script and to study Serbian literature, history and traditions.

Public schools are the exclusive domain of the central government, as is the preparation of syllabi in minority classes. Unfortunately, these minority syllabi do not reflect the history, tradition and culture of minorities, favoring Serbian language and culture instead. Such an approach directly promotes assimilation at the expense of the preservation of minority identity.

¹⁶ The previous provincial statute made it possible to have procedures in all instances entirely in the minority language (not bilingual), and it did not prescribe the primacy of the Serbian language in the case of parties having different initiatives.

¹⁷ *Zakon o osnovnoj školi* (Statute on Primary Schools) and *Zakon o srednjim školama* (Statute on Secondary Schools): see Article 5 of both Statutes, *Službeni glasnik RS* (Official gazette of the Republic of Serbia) (1992) No. 50.

¹⁸ The Croatian and Serbian Academies of Science decided in 1991, independently of each other, on the separation of their very similar languages.

Media for national minorities in their mother tongue also has a rich tradition in Vojvodina. Before 1990 there were numerous state-financed newspapers, periodicals, radio stations and TV channels broadcasting in minority languages. After the change in the regime the number of state-financed minority media diminished, yet some private newspapers and periodicals emerged. The Law on Radio and Television and the Statute of the Vojvodina Province provide that in Vojvodina information in Hungarian, Slovakian, Romanian, Ruthenian and other minority languages shall be guaranteed.¹⁹ Serbian State Radio and Television, through its affiliate Studio Novi Sad, broadcasts programs in five languages (Serbian, Hungarian, Slovakian, Romanian, Ruthenian and, more recently, Romany). Similar to educational policies regarding Croats, there is no provision for Croatian media. The only secular periodical printed in Croatian is *Žig*, an independent private paper without any state subsidies.

3. Problems to Address

3.1. *Financing Culture*

As previously mentioned, Milosevic's seizure of power resulted in extreme centralization, and Serbian central authorities began to implement the policy of ethnic discrimination based on the concept of Greater Serbia. The main opposition parties (the radical nationalist Serbian Radical Party, the moderate nationalist Serbian Renewal Movement and the self-alleged Liberal Democratic Party) supported Serbian nationalism, though in different ways. In this political climate some national minorities in Vojvodina also organized their own ethnic-based political parties. The Democratic Community of Hungarians in Vojvodina (DCHV) was the first, along with the Democratic Alliance of Croats in Vojvodina (DACV), and both took part in multiparty elections. In the first multiparty local elections in May 1992, Hungarian and Croatian parties won the vast majority of seats in the Municipal Assembly of Subotica, as well as electing the mayor and the local government (executive board).²⁰ The coalition of the DCHV and DACV survived the extraordinary elections in December 1992 as well.²¹ Although the political power-sharing changed a bit after the third and latest municipal election in November 1996, the key actors in the local

¹⁹ Article 15 of the Statute of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, *Službeni list APV* (Official gazette of APV) (1991) No. 17, and Article 20 of the Law on Radio and Television, *Službeni glasnik RS* (Official gazette of the Republic of Serbia) (1991) No. 48.

²⁰ The Democratic Community of Hungarians in Vojvodina (DCHV) received most of the votes and took 28 seats in the 67 member Local Municipal Assembly, the Socialist Party of Serbia took 18 seats, the Democratic Alliance of Croats in Vojvodina won 6 seats., the Local Civic Party took 5 seats and the pro-socialist Bunjevac-Šokac Party took 3 seats.

²¹ Results of the second local elections in Subotica (December 1992) strengthened the position of the ruling local coalition. The DCHV received the absolute majority (34 seats) and the DACV took 5 additional seats. The extremist Serbian Radical Party managed to take 3 seats, while the Socialist Party of Serbia and the Civic Party lost some seats. The ruling coalition of two minority parties remained the same as well as the mayor, the head of the executive board and the town clerk.

community preserved their positions and the main Hungarian minority party remained the strongest player.²²

The Subotica local government differed from the central government in at least two ways. First, until 1997 Subotica was the only large town in Serbia that was not ruled by the Socialist coalition. Second, this local community was led by the political parties of national minorities, while the central government was creating and endorsing Serbian nationalist policies across the region. Due to these specific circumstances, the local government in Subotica has had to cope with problems reaching far beyond community sewer systems, water supply, car parking facilities and similar typical local problems. With Serbian centralization gradually expanding since 1989, cultural funds for the Vojvodina region were dismantled, and the sophisticated system of institutions, media and cultural organizations representing national minorities remained without the necessary resources for their activities. In this climate of extreme nationalism, central authorities first cut off or substantially reduced the subsidies for minority culture. Hence, the mere existence of these institutions became endangered, directly threatening the preservation of culture and identity as well. Municipal governments became aware of the perils of this situation and started to implement policies designed to preserve these institutions and to establish and develop new ones. However, the problem was not only the preservation but also the reconstruction of this already existing system of institutions. These associations, institutions, organizations and events were all developed during the communist era, and the personnel and programs were passed on. Politicians of minority communities claimed that these old

²² The third and most recent local elections in 1996 provided for substantial changes on the local political scene. In 1993 there was a breakup in the leadership of the single Hungarian political party DCHV, motivated mainly by personal competition and exclusiveness among the leaders of the party. Leading politicians (mayors, etc.) from towns where Hungarians formed the local government found themselves in the minority in the leadership of the DCHV (at that time Mr. András Ágoston was the president) and they formed the Vojvodina Alliance of Hungarians (VAH). The majority of deputies in the Subotica Assembly joined the new party. In the November 1996 local elections DCHV refused to cooperate with VAH, which resulted in the heavy electoral absence of disappointed Hungarian voters and in the fragmentation of votes. Surprisingly, the new VAH drained the votes from the DCHV and won 28 seats, while DCHV won only 2 seats. The DACV (Croatian party) also faced heavy defeat, and won only 3 seats in the new town assembly. Croatian votes went to independent Croatian candidates and to the Civic Alliance of Subotica, a local party that theoretically stands for values of tolerance and multiethnic coexistence, but is in practice heavily influenced by the ruling Socialists. The Civic Alliance took 7 seats. The Socialist coalition won 20 seats in Subotica. Independent candidates, the Bunjevac-Sokac Party and the Peasant Party won altogether 7 seats.

The VAH, the DACV and the CAS complained about election fraud by the Socialists, but complaints were rejected by the Supreme Court of Serbia. After prolonged negotiations, VAH politicians remained in power, but they were forced to grant some concessions to the Socialists.

In rough terms, Hungarian national parties are backed mainly by ethnic Hungarians, the Croatian national party and the Civic Alliance for Subotica mainly by Bunjevac-Croats, and the Socialists mainly by Serbs and Yugoslavs. This estimation is founded on the comparison of the ethnic composition of voting districts and electoral results. It is also remarkable that the big Serbian opposition parties (the Serbian Renewal Movement, the Democratic Party and the Democratic Party of Serbia) could not win seats at all in the local assembly.

institutions did not always protect the interests of minorities, rather they served the Communist Party and its ideology. Therefore the local municipality, primarily through its policy of financing, wanted to reconstruct and update the inherited structure of cultural associations. Another problem that needed to be addressed was the financing of minority culture outside Subotica's borders. The majority of Hungarians and Croats live outside Subotica, many of them outside of municipalities governed by the Hungarian party.²³ Therefore, Subotica, as the largest and most powerful minority-ruled town, had to find a way to finance minority culture beyond its borders.

The implementation of this policy was not without risks. If the local government pursued a one-sided Hungarian and Croatian policy in order to balance the one-sided policy of central Serbian authorities, it might be dissolved by the central government or provoke Serbian extremists to boost ethnic tensions in Subotica between Serbs, Hungarians and Croats. Therefore the local government and political parties had to find a way to preserve minority identity, culture and institutions and, at the same time, avoid the dissolution of local government, the promotion of interethnic violence and the accusations of one-sided nationalist policy.

3.2. *Appointment and Employment Policy*

In multiethnic states the issue of equal representation of different communities in different areas of social life, government and the economy presents a sensitive problem. Moreover, if different ethnic communities have a strong sense of separate national identity and if, furthermore, they are politically organized, these issues need extra attention. In such states there is the danger that simple majority rule may result in constant discrimination of national minorities and their interests, flaming interethnic conflicts.²⁴

Until the beginning of the Milosevic era, the Communist Party in Vojvodina proclaimed and implemented the policy of so-called "national keys." The essence of national keys was that appointment policy in multiethnic regions had to reflect the ethnic composition of the respective region, from the municipality all the way up to the provincial government. For example, if in town X the proportion of Slovaks was 40%, two of five directors of state-owned companies had to be ethnic Slovaks. This policy was widely implemented in municipal and provincial governments, the economy, the judiciary, public education, police, state administration and primarily in the case of top officials—directors, heads of department, school directors, etc. The main aim of this policy was to ensure the "real equality" of different ethnic groups and to guarantee effective participation of national minorities in public life. Unfortunately, this policy was not free from serious defects. First, it was never completely implemented; second, merely belonging to a certain ethnic group was sometimes more important than an individual's merit, which made this policy directly counterproductive. In practice, it was the equality of an "ethnic communist elite." The

²³ These municipalities are Mali Idjos (Kishegyes) Kanjiza (Kanizsa), Senta (Zenta), Becej (Becse), Ada, Backa Topola (Topolya).

²⁴ Lijphart, Arend (1984) *Democracies—Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries*, Yale University Press, New Haven. pp. 22-23.

members of this party elite were never democratic representatives of their respective communities; therefore their proportional representation never resulted in effective equality for different ethnic groups.

When Milosevic's nationalist faction of the Communist Party took power, these arguments were widely used to officially abandon the policy of ethnic keys. Using slogans such as "The best people in top positions," the Serbian government and the Socialist party began the silent ethnic cleansing in all areas of social life. Starting in 1990, Croats, Hungarians and other non-Serbs in Vojvodina were massively dismissed from top positions in the state administration, the judiciary, the police, state-owned companies, schools, etc., and replaced by Serbs, who were often less qualified functionaries and members of Milosevic's Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS).

This policy of "velvet ethnic cleansing" quickly reached Subotica. The number of ethnic Croatian and Hungarian high-ranking officials swiftly diminished in all spheres. According to the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, the number of Hungarian and Croatian directors in public schools and state-owned companies was greatly reduced. In 1997, of the fourteen major state-owned companies and banks in Subotica, only one was chaired by an ethnic Hungarian; and out of twenty-three primary schools, only four had Hungarian directors and two had Croatian directors.²⁵ In such an atmosphere, local municipal government had to find a way to remedy this problem, albeit with limited resources and tools.

4. Objectives and Strategies

4.1. *Financing Culture*

The main objectives of the local government policy in financing culture were to preserve and develop the existing network of cultural societies, associations, institutions, media and local events, as well as to find ways and means to support Hungarian and Croatian culture in Vojvodina. The architects of this policy—members of the political parties and the local authorities—were aware that the resources of municipalities governed by minority parties are the only public funds which might be spent on that which is worthy and beneficial to the community. All other public resources were distributed centrally (even if they were spent on minority culture) without the approval or influence of those concerned—national minorities and their legitimate representatives. Minority institutions, founded and financed by Belgrade, such as minority TV and radio broadcast by Serbian Radio and Television (RTS) and state schools, etc., were and are political tools of the regime.

Nevertheless, local government implemented a wide variety of actions and measures. They include:

1. The preservation of existing and the establishment of new cultural institutions, founded and financed by the municipality, such as the city library, national theater, Theater Kosztolányi Dezső, Radio Subotica, city museum, children's theater and an

²⁵ *Report on Human Rights in Serbia for 1997* (1998) Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Belgrade, January. pp. 102-104.

art gallery. For these purposes, local government spent approximately ten million dinar (one million USD) annually.²⁶ Creators of the local policy were not only financing but also partially directing the cultural policy of these institutions, mainly through financial and employment policy. In this way, those who were willing to subscribe to the policy of multiculturalism and protection of minority cultures were preferred. It deserves to be emphasized that no political or ethnic purges took place in these institutions, although moderate political loyalty was required.

2. The local government's most important long-term objective was to reconstruct, strengthen and heavily subsidize three main national cultural centers in the city: the Hungarian Népkör, the Croatian Bunjevačko Kolo and the Serbian Sveti Sava. The oldest among these ethnic cultural centers, the Népkör, was established in 1872. The primary goal of financing was to ensure the long-term viability and independence of these ethnic cultural centers. In order to reach this goal, the local government financed their complete reconstruction and during the period from 1994 to 1998 all national cultural centers received large modern premises, with more space and facilities. In four budgetary years approximately one million USD was spent on these enterprises. The scope of these actions is even more impressive if we take into account that all this happened during the worst economic crisis since World War II. The aim of these undertakings was not solely to ensure new facilities for ethnic cultural societies but to qualitatively enhance their activity as well. In some cases personnel changes were initiated and the local government would occasionally suggest new plans and programs. However, it is important to stress that investments were not rewards for loyalty or tools for blackmail. Indeed, this was much more a process of adjustment and coordination between the municipality and cultural societies. Besides these large investments, local government financed the activity of each of these organizations with 50,000 dinar yearly (approximately 5,000 USD). This amount, together with their own incomes,²⁷ covered their maintenance costs.
3. Another important activity of the municipal government was the financing of other cultural associations and events in Subotica and Vojvodina. Small cultural and folklore associations received altogether approximately 400,000 dinar (40,000 USD) annually from the local budget. The City Orchestra, Folk Tambura Orchestra and the Pro Musica City Singing Ensemble received 4,000–8,000 USD per year. Without this support, the survival of these traditional groups would be almost impossible. Since 1992, important popular cultural events were established and maintained with the help of the local municipality. The International Film Festival near Lake Palic the multicultural summer theater festival in Palic and the traditional Croatian harvest festival Duzijanca—holiday of the new bread—all received 10,000–20,000 USD every year from the local budget. Besides these important, widely known multicultural

²⁶ The financial figures are from the 1998 Budget of the Municipality, *Službeni list opštine Subotica* (Official gazette of Subotica) (1998) No. 1. The proportion of money spent for culture in the period from 1993 to 1997 is similar.

²⁷ Membership fees, ticket sales, rents for their own facilities (restaurants), etc.

events, local government managed to finance several mainly Hungarian cultural societies outside Subotica. The travelling rural theater Tanyaszínház, Népkör in the town of Kula, TAKT and VIFO (Vojvodina Youth Forum) are only some of them. “Financial magic” is often needed to adjust these sums to the local budget. They were financed overwhelmingly from the budget reserve resources (approximately 30,000 USD per year).

4. The financing of minority political and cultural media and the publication of periodicals was another major objective of local cultural policy. The Hungarian cultural periodical *Üzenet*, the newly established Hungarian pedagogical periodical *Új Kép*, the Hungarian political weekly *Szabad Hét Nap*, the Croatian political periodical *Žig*, the Serbian-language local newspaper *Subotičke Novine* and the literary periodical *Rukovet* are main beneficiaries of subsidies. Financial aid to these papers vary from 1,000–20,000 USD per year. For new publications, approximately 30,000 USD has been planned and spent yearly.

Funding for the Serbian, pro-socialist weekly *Dani* was cut because of its nationalist, anti-minority editorial policy, which was not perceived as promoting peaceful coexistence in Subotica. On the other hand, the Hungarian language daily *Magyar Szó* was subsidized with 8,000 USD, despite the fact that it is state owned. This move was justified because *Magyar Szó* is a respected, editorially independent, opposition paper, of which thousands of copies are sold daily, and its existence is of crucial existence to the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina.

4.2. *Appointment and Employment Policy*

Because local government is in a position to influence the appointment and employment policies in the town administration and public companies, one of its main objectives in Subotica since 1992 has been to preserve ethnic proportions in these institutions. Most important among these institutions are the following: local government functionaries (president and members of the local executive board, mayor, deputy mayors, secretary, etc.), municipal administration and public companies and institutions established by the town (the town library, national theater, etc.). In regards to this, Town Secretary Gabriella Ágoston notes:

We somehow had to counterbalance the ongoing “ethnic purges” in the state sector; therefore, we often hired those gifted and educated employees who were ousted or neglected in the state sector due to their ethnic or political affiliations. Preservation of ethnic proportions is an important objective for us, but we never hired without regard to merits. Professional skills were always required.²⁸

Because of local government’s stance toward ethnic proportions in regards to the election and appointment of high local functionaries, the mayor of Subotica since 1992

²⁸ Interview with the author, November 2, 1998, Subotica.

is Hungarian (József Kasza, representative of the winning Hungarian party), while the two deputy mayors are Serb and Bunjevac-Croat respectively. In the case of the executive board, the ruling coalition has tried to include Serb members as well. It was mainly a political message of the local ruling Hungarian-Croat coalition to the Serbian population and parties, highlighting the multiethnic character and policy of the local government.

The policy of national keys is also implemented in the case of public companies and institutions established by the town. From the existing nineteen public utility companies (water supply and sewer, central heating, sports facilities, etc.) and cultural institutions (town library, museum, theater, etc.) eight are led by Hungarians, five by Bunjevac-Croats and six by Serbs and Montenegrins. These proportions are similar to those of the overall town population. Regarding party loyalty, Gabriella Ágoston states: “The primary loyalties required are professional loyalty and skill. Of course, in the case of cultural institutions, the local coalition has allowed the appointment of those directors who were devoted to the idea of multiculturalism and who work for the benefit of Hungarian and Croatian culture.”²⁹

The town administration reflects the greatest use of national keys, where employment policy is directly controlled by the town secretary. The heads and staff of different departments were employed and appointed not only to reflect the ethnic proportions of the town, but also on the basis of their language skills; those employees who communicate with citizens had to speak both Serbian and Hungarian fluently. However, there was an already existing structure of employees in 1992 (which was not far removed from the ethnic proportions of the town); therefore the policy was implemented mainly through the hiring of new employees (this does not take into account retirement and spontaneous fluctuations of the labor force). The parties intended to send a double message with this policy. First, they wished to create and then adhere to an alternative policy—different from the ethnic chauvinism and exclusiveness indicative of the political climate of former Yugoslavia—by maintaining proportional ethnic representation and multiculturalism on the local level. Second, they wished to implement their own, albeit moderate “ethnic” policy by appointing officials open to cooperation and sympathetic to their ideology and by defending the interests of their co-nationals. There is obviously a slight overrepresentation of Croats and Hungarians, predominantly among newly employed youth (especially considering the real ethnic composition of the town in 1998).

5. Implementation and Development

5.1. *Financing Culture*

Local government in Subotica has often been criticized for its policy of cultural financing, both from inside and outside. After the split in the DCHV, the majority of deputies at all levels (in the federal, republican and local assemblies) opted for the new Hungarian party, the Vojvodina Alliance of Hungarians (VAH). In Subotica, the remaining fraction of the

²⁹ Interview with the author, November 2, 1998, Subotica.

DCHV began to heavily criticize the local policy of VAH. In 1996 DCHV deputies criticized the investments in Népkör. Notwithstanding corruption allegations, they have generally questioned the necessity of this investment and argued for communal investments. An outside spectator might find it strange that Hungarian party deputies, former comrades, have been the first to criticize this investment (aimed to preserve Hungarian identity and culture) and not Serbian nationalists. Corruption claims were never proved and the ruling coalition managed to finish the reconstruction of Népkör.

On the other hand, SPS deputies in the local assembly often criticized the financing policy, claiming that it favors Hungarians and Croats. This kind of financial policy was mainly possible due to the fact that the primary targets of Serbian chauvinism were not Hungarians during the last ten years. Serbian nationalism has been directed primarily toward Albanians, Muslims and Croats. One may plausibly claim that the central government of Serbia tacitly approved this local policy for pragmatic reasons. First, it does not damage the totalitarian power of the SPS central government and their visions of Serbian "national interests." Second, it serves as proof of democracy, minority protection and vertical power-sharing in Serbia. The dissolution of the democratically elected local self-government in Subotica might lead to serious international condemnation and pressure. It is also important to note that Serbia's only gateway to Europe is Hungary.

In the November 1996 elections, VAH won on a very narrow margin; more precisely, its ally DACV suffered electoral defeat. After long, behind the scenes negotiations, key local leaders (the mayor, the head of the executive council and the secretary) remained in their posts, and policy has remained the same with small concessions.

5.2. *Appointment and Employment Policy*

The implementation of the previously discussed policy was not overly problematic. The overwhelming majority of the local population supported it; moreover, neither the SPS nor other Serbian political parties loudly criticized it. It needs to be emphasized that SPS policy was never declaratory anti-minority, but this party has preferred, in practice, to implement the policy of Serbian ethnic domination in state administration. Only once, in April 1997, SPS deputy and faction leader Dusko Stipanovic raised this question in the local assembly, claiming discrimination of Serbs in local administration. However, after a detailed report, the Socialist faction had to admit that ethnic proportions in the town administration were essentially respected.

6. Results and Achievements

6.1. *Financing Culture*

The results of financing culture are often belated and obscure. It is difficult to define the exclusive achievements of this policy and to guess what might have happened had they not been implemented. According to Zoltán Siflis:

Our main results are the preservation of our cultural and folklore organizations and an 8.5% growth of such societies and ensembles in the previous years. Another important achievement is ... that after ten years we have reestablished the separate Hungarian and Serbian theater companies, and the spiritual and material reconstruction of the ruined theater has begun. We have built, or rebuilt, the homes of the major national cultural centers in the last four years. It is also important to note that the local government has become the major sponsor of several Hungarian events far away from Subotica, which might have all disappeared without our assistance.³⁰

It is not easy to list Hungarian, Croatian or even Serbian associations, organizations, newspapers or events which may have disappeared without the financial assistance of the local government, but it is certain that many of them would have faced grave difficulties. Although this strong and substantial involvement of local government in cultural affairs cannot completely counterbalance the hostile nationalist environment and state power, it could and can serve as a protecting shield. Local authorities have been the only authorities (albeit with very limited powers) in which Hungarians, Croats and other non-Serbs have trusted. Each and every cultural institution, publication or cultural event that disappears might make minority groups more vulnerable and desperate, possibly motivating their emigration or assimilation in the final outcome.

Primarily because local government's policy has never been ethnically exclusive or aggressive, it has managed to preserve the spirit of interethnic tolerance and tranquility in the town. The mobilizing sentiment has been one of equal rights for all, including respect for Hungarian and Croatian communities. The demand for rights and respect has never been limited to the Hungarian and Croatian communities and this inclusiveness has had its positive effects, helping to preserve the general climate of multicultural tolerance.

It is not an exaggeration to claim that the budget of Subotica is among the main resources of civil society among Hungarians and Croats. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent each year for cultural purposes. This amount is much higher than the assistance from the Illyés Közalapítvány (main Hungarian foundation supporting Hungarian culture abroad) or subsidies from the budget of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

Nevertheless, this policy is not without faults. First, the parties behind the local government, previously DCHV and DACV, and later VAH, have never prepared detailed plans and programs on the issue of financial policy. The lack of long-term written strategies and priority lists with cost-benefit analysis, have certainly made all the analyzed efforts less effective. It does happen occasionally that those who cry loudest or have better connections get more, while other more important requests remain under-sponsored. Another problem is the lack of control mechanisms. How and for what purposes was money spent? What were the benefits for the targeted ethnic community? Only the mayor or some members of the Executive Board have monitored these effects. To an extent this is inevitable, due partly to communist influence, but clearly defined programs with detailed, outlined priorities and less improvisation are inevitable in the future. It is also noteworthy that DCHV and later VAH-led local governments in other municipalities (Ada, Mali Idjos,

³⁰ Interview with the author, October 21, 1998, Subotica. Mr. Zoltán Siflis is the Secretary for Cultural Affairs in the local government.

Backa Topola, Becej, Kanjiza, Senta) have done substantially less to finance culture than Subotica. As Zoltán Siflis said: “We are from the same political party, but we were not able to establish even basic coordination and cooperation. We can implement our policy by defining priorities and coordinating and concentrating our efforts. This was not done even in Subotica, not to mention the other six Hungarian led municipalities.”³¹

6.2. *Appointment and Employment Policy*

The fundamental result of the local government’s employment and appointment policy is the following: the ratio of representation among Hungarians, Croats and Serbs has remained the same as before, at least in local government, administration, utility companies and cultural institutions. This is a remarkable outcome in the face of extreme Serbian nationalism, under which minorities have had to confront discrimination in all state-influenced sectors of social life.

The table below shows the total number and ethnic composition of the Subotica town administration for the period 1993 to 1998.³²

Table 1. Total Number and Ethnic Composition of the Subotica Town Administration, 1993–1998.

	1993	%	1996	%	1998	%
Hungarians	88	42	101	43	113	44
Bunjevac-Croats	58	28	63	27	70	27
Serbs	29	14	33	14	37	14
Yugoslavs	27	13	30	13	33	13
Others	6	3	5	3	6	2
TOTAL	208	100	231	100	259	100

From the table above it can be concluded that while the number of employees in the town administration grew more than 20%, the ethnic proportions have remained almost the same. These proportions reflect the ethnic composition of Subotica according to the 1991 census; however, it should be noted that the ethnic composition has changed since then. According to some estimates, the number of Serbs living in Subotica has grown by 10,000, while the number of Croats and Hungarians diminished by at least 6,000–8,000. Hence, the preservation of the 1991 proportions has mainly served the interests of the local Hungarian and Croatian community, balancing discrimination faced in employment and appointment policy in the state sector.

The lack of indicators should be noted when analyzing the impact of this policy and practice on the local population and central decision-making. According to some opinion

³¹ Ibid.

³² All data are provided by the local administration. National affiliation is determined by personal declaration of every individual employee.

polls, mutual interethnic tolerance has remained very high in Subotica, despite the extreme interethnic clashes in the former Yugoslavia.³³ The employment and appointment policy of the local government may have helped to maintain this level of interethnic tolerance on the state level.

It is very probable that local government and the institutions affiliated with it have become small but necessary “havens” for the Croatian and Hungarian communities in Subotica and the region. Through practice, local ruling parties tried to halt the process of large-scale social and political discrimination of Hungarians and Croats. It should be stressed that local government has remained the stronghold of multiculturalism in the hostile environment of Serbian nationalism, and this has undoubtedly reduced the emigration of Croats and Hungarians in the past few years.

In the long-run, these achievements will be sustainable only if the key political actors who have ruled the local political scene in recent years remain in power. But the changes in the ethnic composition of the electoral body in the past years is under question. If the SPS or the Serbian Radical Party gain power, the delicate balance of multiculturalism will foreseeably be threatened, to which the existing examples of other multiethnic municipalities in Vojvodina ruled by these parties attest.

The ruling local coalition never implemented an exclusive ethnic policy. Despite serious grievances of their own community, suffered at the national level, they implemented a nonexclusive multiethnic policy rather than a biased one. By doing so they escaped direct confrontation with Serbian nationalists and promoted multiculturalism in Subotica rather than ethnic separation and confrontation.

7. Conclusions

Two conclusions can be drawn concerning local government policy in Subotica; the first concerning the rights and protection of national minorities and the second concerning the accommodation of different cultures and traditions in a multicultural society.

If the policies addressing the financing of culture and the appointment of local government are analyzed from the perspective of minority rights and protection of Croats and Hungarians in Vojvodina, it can be concluded that they were original and successful. Despite the hostile environment, enormous centralization and the reduction of legal standards of minority rights, local government was able to partially counterbalance these tendencies and to protect the interests of Hungarians and Croats living in the town and its vicinity. Through financing, local government has managed to preserve the existing network of cultural associations, periodicals and events. Moreover, it was able to completely rebuild the main Croatian and Hungarian cultural centers, and in doing so ensured durable social facilities that will remain even in the face of political change in Subotica.

The local government of Subotica thus partially served as a “minority self-government,” ensuring effective participation of minorities in decision-making processes concerning their cultural identity. This was made possible because the majority of Hungarians living

³³ Toribos, *Politicko i javno mjenje Subotice* (Political and public opinion of Subotica) (1998) *Newsletter*, May 9. p. 4.

in Subotica voted continuously for national parties and their programs. The appointment and employment policy of the local government ensured fair representation of minorities in public life, which has partially counterbalanced the discrimination they faced in the state and public sector. If basic minimal democratic rules are respected by the central government, politically organized and locally concentrated minority ethnic groups are able to create conditions in which they can preserve their identity and ensure their voice and representation in public life. The example of Subotica serves as proof of how important the local government can be, despite the limited powers and anti-minority policy of the central government. The financing of culture and appointment policy have influenced the incomes of thousands of individuals, mainly belonging to the educated middle classes. This redistribution of public resources encouraged the preservation and survival of Hungarian and Croatian intellectuals in Subotica, bearing in mind that their emigration was most prominent in the early 1990s.

The finance and appointment policies of local government in Subotica have never been nationalistic and have always been implemented with due respect to the multiethnic character of the town. Motivated by both a genuine recognition of the value of multiculturalism and a pragmatic fear of the escalation of interethnic conflicts, local government has tried to respect the fact that a large portion (around 40%) of the town's population is made up of Serbian, Yugoslav and Montenegrin ethnic groups. The governing Hungarian party has included the Croatian party even when the party had an absolute majority in the local assembly. In addition, one deputy mayor and one member of the executive board has always been an ethnic Serb. The major sponsored events were truly multiethnic in character, reflecting diversity and not Hungarian and Croatian culture alone. Local politicians have tried to avoid majority decision-making, exclusion of Serbian representatives on the local level. They have tried to avoid what the Belgrade government has been doing at the state level continuously since 1989: neglecting the voice of minorities by hiding behind democracy and majority decision-making principles.

The importance of true multiethnic and multicultural policy is always crucial in cases when a large portion of the population belongs to "non-titular" nations. In Serbia, although cultural and linguistic diversity has often been theoretically recognized as a value, in practice it has been used by the regime to cause conflicts, discrimination and domination. As soon as policymakers recognize—motivated either by pragmatic reasons or true conviction—that diversity is a durable value to be preserved and not an inconvenience in the nation-building process, multiethnic societies can become as stable as any homogenous nation-state. Policymakers in Subotica have made efforts in this direction. Furthermore, they have proven that political division along ethnic lines does not necessarily result in a policy of domination and exclusion, but can produce balances and mutual respect as well. However, the financing of culture and the employment policy of local government in Subotica is not perfect and far from a panacea for multiethnic communities. It is rather a result of specific circumstances and pragmatic political decisions.