

A post-war visit to Novi Sad

Yugoslavia's second city, Novi Sad, was repeatedly bombed during NATO's 78 day-long air campaign. Its three bridges across the Danube were destroyed early in the war but the bombing of economic targets in and around the city continued throughout the conflict. Novi Sad is both the most ethnically diverse city in Central Europe and the Balkans and the capital of Serbia's northern province of Vojvodina with its significant Hungarian minority. Since 1996 the majority of its city council has been composed of opponents of President Milosevic's Socialist Party. Novi Sad's status as a multi-cultural city run by opponents of President Milosevic made NATO's repeated attacks incomprehensible to many of its citizens.

At the start of August, 1999, British Helsinki Human Rights Group representatives visited Novi Sad. Their aim was to assess the economic, political and medical effects of the NATO bombing of the city. They met with representatives of the Red Cross, political parties, the mayor of Novi Sad, and with the press and information minister of the city council. They also visited sites that had been damaged or destroyed by NATO bombing as well as meeting refugees from Kosovo and the director of Novi Sad's main hospital.

Introduction

The city of Novi Sad and the province of Vojvodina have had a chequered history. After the Habsburgs conquered the area from the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 17th century Emperor Leopold promised its Serbian subjects that their rights would not be curtailed under his rule. In order to urge them to rise against the Ottomans he promised the Serbs that they would be allowed to continue to elect their leaders, or voivods - hence the name Vojvodina. As part of the Hungarian Kingdom under the Habsburgs, the Slavic majority suffered discrimination, especially after 1867 when Hungarian self-rule effectively excluded non-Magyar rights. The area became part of the new Yugoslav Kingdom in 1918 after the collapse of the Habsburg empire at the end of the First World War. After German-Hungarian occupation in World War II, Tito made Vojvodina a showcase of minority rights, Communist-style. Like Kosovo, it gained autonomous status under the 1974 constitution and - again like Kosovo - lost it in 1989.

The province is often seen as a potential future flashpoint because of its multi-ethnic make-up. Vojvodina is now the most ethnically mixed area in the former Yugoslavia - as other areas have been 'ethnically cleansed' it has absorbed some 300,000 refugees from all over Yugoslavia. Many different nationalities inhabit the province such as Romanians, Slovaks and Croats. For example, the population of the small town of Beocin is said to contain 28 different nationalities.

Those who fear further ethnic strife point to the sizeable Hungarian minority in the province. It is often assumed that the Hungarians - like the Albanians of Kosovo - want autonomy or even secession from the remainder of Yugoslavia. However, such a simple comparison between Kosovo and Vojvodina is misleading. Hungarians make up only 16% of the total population of the province, whilst Serbs account for 60%. Most Hungarians live in the north; the Hungarian population of the capital Novi Sad only accounts for 8 %.

On the other hand, it seems that many in Vojvodina - not least the Serbs - regard themselves as temperamentally different from the Serbs in the rest of the country. This is often explained as a result of Habsburg rule. Aleksander Ivkovic, a member of the local council, told BHHRG observers: " I call myself a Vojvodinian".

In general, most people BHHRG observers spoke with showed a dislike for the government of Slobodan Milosevic while at the same time hating NATO for bombing their capital, Novi Sad. Only one person refused to talk to BHHRG, saying he was still too angry with NATO and the West. Most people were very hospitable and willing to express their views. Nobody could understand why NATO had hit Novi Sad so hard. After all, the city council has been firmly in the hands of opposition parties for the last few years. Most people said that the West should have treated Novi Sad as an ally, as it was opposed to Milosevic.

War damage and its repercussions.

Novi Sad was the first Yugoslav city to be targeted by NATO bombs - on 24 March, 1999. For almost every day of the 78-day campaign the city was hit. The last bomb fell on the last day of the war. NATO-targets included the three bridges over the Danube, the oil refinery at the edge of the city, the local Serbian TV station, a police training-school, as well as a school and tower blocks in a residential area of the town.

The Bridges

On April 1 NATO planes destroyed the Varadin bridge on the Danube followed 2 days later by the destruction of the Bridge of Liberty. Although Janvier Solana, the secretary-general of NATO, had declared at the start of the bombing campaign that NATO was not at war with the Yugoslav people, this claim quickly lost any credibility with the citizens of Novi Sad. The Bridge of Liberty, for instance, was bombed at 8 o'clock in the evening when traffic was heavy - the Varadin bridge had been bombed at 5 o'clock in the morning. Several people died in the attack while others were rescued by local fishermen. The first attack on the last remaining bridge - Zezelj's bridge - came on April 5th, but it took NATO 5 attacks over a 3 week period before the bridge was finally destroyed. Locally known as 'Samantha Fox' because of its two arches, Zezelj's bridge collapsed into the Danube on April 26th. One reason for destroying the bridges seems to have been to prevent the Yugoslav army (located in Vojvodina) from moving south to Kosovo. However, in the end, this never came about.

This view was shared by Bojan Pajtic, the spokesman of the Novi Sad Democratic Party. The Democratic Party and its national leader, Zoran Djindjic, are favoured by the West. Mr. Pajtic expressed disappointment and anger with NATO's decision to destroy the bridges, whereas he could have understood the destruction of two of them for military reasons. For the inhabitants of the city on the right bank of the Danube their destruction has meant the loss of water supply. Pipes attached to the bridges transported water to the Srem region of Novi Sad. The only drinking water available for the 34,000 inhabitants without running water is transported by the Red Cross in tanks.

Transport is another problem. Ferries cross the river regularly but many people use small boats operated by locals which charge 10 dinars a trip. For someone who has to cross the river twice a day to and from work, 20 dinars is a lot of money on a salary of 1000 dinars a month. Stevan Vrbaski, the mayor of Novi Sad, estimated that 30,000 to 50,000 people cross the Danube this way daily. With the start of the school and university year in the autumn this number is expected to increase. Moreover, bad weather and heavy winds can make the crossing hazardous - even too dangerous to risk. So far, the NATO states have refused to countenance reconstruction aid until President Milosevic is removed from office.

The Oil Refinery

One of Yugoslavia's two main oil refineries is located in Novi Sad (the other is in Pancevo). According to Aleksander Ivkovic, from the Department of Information of Novi Sad City Council, Vojvodina used to produce 1.2 million tonnes of crude oil annually, which, he claimed, covered local needs. Before the international embargo on Yugoslavia all crude oil was refined at these two plants. Of this, 20% was produced in Yugoslavia itself, the remainder was imported.

Despite strict security, BHHRG observers were allowed to visit the Naftagas refinery. Vladimir Dopaja, the deputy director, and Pavle Pavlovic, the development manager, escorted them around the site. According to Mr. Pavlovic, 80% of the refinery was built in the 1970s and 1980s with Western technology and assistance from the USA, the UK and Italy. He pointed out that American planes had been bombing a plant partly built by the American oil company, Texaco. More importantly, he maintained that NATO would have been well-informed about the site and known exactly what the consequences would be of bombing the refinery. For instance, the bombardments destroyed two of the three separators responsible for removing water from the oil. As a result of the destruction, oil flowed into the Danube causing ecological damage. Did NATO deliberately do this? At the time of the first attack on 5th April 74,000 tonnes of oil were still in the refinery, 10% of total capacity. Most of this either went up in flames after subsequent bombings or spilt into the Danube.

In total, the refinery was hit 255 times. Most of these attacks were entirely unnecessary, according to Mr Pavlovic. NATO planners should have known that the destruction of the power plant on the site would shut down the whole refinery for months. The power supply for the refinery was hit in the fifth attack on 18 April and completely destroyed. Since this achieved the stated military goal of preventing the refinery from working to the advantage of the Yugoslav army, all other attacks on the refinery were crimes against humanity because of the ecological consequences and the threat to the health of the citizens of Novi Sad and people living down river.

Nevertheless, more attacks followed, notably on 2nd May and 8th June, which were described by Mr Dobaja as indiscriminate carpet-bombing. Indeed, a map of the site highlighting the raids showed evidence of 4 heavy bombing runs, 2 each day. These had not been precision bombardments, yet they were very destructive. As Mr Pavlovic pointed out, the second of these attacks came when talks between NATO and Yugoslavia about troop withdrawal were well under way - the G8 countries had already agreed on a UN resolution to end the Kosovo war.

As a result of the bombings some 50% of the refinery has been destroyed. Attempts are under way to piece together parts which are still intact and restart the refinery with far lower capacity. It is estimated that it will cost 1 billion US dollars to fully repair the facility.

The Elementary School

BHHRG observers also visited the elementary school and adjacent blocks of flats which were damaged when a bomb exploded in the street separating the buildings. At first sight, it was hard to see what military target could have been present in this residential area. Some local people thought that a nearby small power distribution station might have been the intended target. If so, the bomb went astray. In any case, NATO seems to have been trying to take out the power supply for civilian use as it had done all over Yugoslavia. Another theory is that mobile air-defences had been present on that spot until two days before the attack. If this is true, NATO - although targeting a military vehicle - would have seen no problem in taking the risk of causing heavy 'collateral damage'. But if this was the case, it must be concluded that NATO did not check whether the vehicle was still there when it launched the strike.

Health Care

The destruction of the bridges crippled the city's health-care system. Professor Djordje Janjic, the director of the main clinical centre, said that certain departments of the hospital are in the south of the city while others are located in the north. The clinical centre in the south has 1500 beds, while some 700 beds are located across the river. The main cardiology unit, for example, is situated in the south. Anyone who suffers a heart attack in the north of Novi Sad now cannot be transported speedily enough for treatment. To address the problem a small cardiology department has been set up in the clinical centre in the north. Orthopaedic surgery is located in the north. Each day a surgeon travels to the other part of town to help out, but the departments in the south lack the necessary equipment.

Although restrictions on the import of medical supplies are now weaker than in 1992, stocks are dwindling, mainly as a result of a lack of hard currency to import supplies. In fact, even dinars are in short supply. The pharmaceutical industry in Yugoslavia cannot produce enough medicine because it cannot afford the raw materials. But the bombing by NATO of the ICN pharmaceutical plant has reduced the capacity for producing medicines, even if the funds for raw materials were available. Professor Janjic predicted that a lack of general anaesthetics would soon become the biggest problem. (This type of acute shortage has been noted elsewhere by BHHRG observers in Yugoslavia, for example, in Kosovska Mitrovica.)

During the bombing the electricity supply to the hospital was unreliable. The functioning of sensitive equipment was constantly threatened by power failures or unexpected bursts of current. On the other hand, during the war the hospital had only 200 patients whereas the normal occupation rate is 80%. Heating could become a problem as the buildings are part of the city's heating network which relied on fuel from the local oil refinery. Since the supply of oil is low and under embargo Professor Janjic expects problems when the winter cold sets in.

Increased black market activity

The destruction of the refinery and the embargo have caused an increase in black market activity. Every citizen is rationed to 20 litres of petrol a month which costs the equivalent of half a German mark at the petrol station. On the street, however, a litre of petrol costs 2 DM. It is relatively easy for people in the Vojvodina to cross the border into Hungary to buy petrol and sell it in Yugoslavia. But BHHRG observers were also told that cars registered in Montenegro entered Novi Sad in increasing numbers. Although smuggling has been common over the past few years, the destruction caused by the war and the embargo have increased the opportunities for black marketeers. Montenegrin black marketeers are closely entwined with the government in Podgorica so their presence in Vojvodina may have a political as well as economic/criminal impact.

Political repercussions

Novi Sad's city council consists of 70 members. In the November 1996 local elections opposition parties won a total of 55 seats. Unlike other cities, Novi Sad did not have to wait for the Lex Speciale for the election results to be implemented. Of these, 55 members of the council 20 belong to the Serbian Renewal Movement of Vuk Draskovic - as does the mayor of the city - and 18 are members of the Democratic Party of Zoran Djindjic. The Socialist Party only gained 6 seats, one of which was lost when a member died. The Serbian Radical Party of Vojislav Seselj won 9 seats but lost one member for the same reason. Two representatives also defected to other parties.

Yet, despite the overwhelming opposition majority, the bickering among party leaders at national level is also reflected in local politics. Only one demonstration took place- on 2 July - attracting some 18,000 people. Yet, the initiative for this demonstration came from the League of Social-Democrats of the Vojvodina (one of the parties in the city's coalition) and not from the main opposition parties. A spokesman for the Democratic Party hoped that a demonstration planned for 19 August in Belgrade would mark a change in the political landscape. But fighting among opposition politicians since then has seriously diminished this prospect. (In fact internal rivalries have, in the meantime, become more pronounced).

Disagreements over the building of a new bridge

It is clear that the issue of building at least one temporary bridge over the Danube is being used for political purposes. The government, for instance, promised to build a pontoon bridge by the end of August. However, the mayor of Novi Sad, was scathing about the plan. According to him the water level and the speed of the current had increased to such an extent that local engineers deemed Belgrade's plans unfeasible. Yet, an English language booklet 'Bridges of Novi Sad' published after the bombing with the help of the City Council showed pictures of pontoon bridges constructed shortly after the defeat of the Ottomans in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. It seems unlikely that engineers some 300 years later could not have coped with a slight increase in the water-level.

Other reasons may explain why the city is unwilling to build a bridge over the Danube. The mayor said that a 'friendly neighbouring country' had offered to give Novi Sad a bridge as a present. This would be an old, temporary bridge which had long been replaced in the country of origin but which now lay idle. According to mayor Vrbaski, the Yugoslav ambassador to the country concerned had vetoed the plan on the grounds that such a gift would constitute commercial aid which is not allowed under the embargo. But the mayor maintains that a temporary bridge could be classified as humanitarian aid.

Representatives from the city's administration were adamant that Novi Sad could not negotiate with the Milosevic government. If, for instance, the Danube Commission (on which Yugoslavia is represented) agreed to clear the river the city would refuse to cooperate. Two of the three bridges are city property - therefore the city council can prevent their repair. Clearly, the Council - which

demanding Milosevic's resignation on 6th July - uses the bridges as a political tool against Belgrade, thus hindering the resumption of normal traffic on the river.

The attitude of Hungarian politicians to autonomy

Hungarian politics in the Vojvodina is characterised by splits, personal rivalries, and differences of opinion over responses towards Belgrade. In 1990, when multi-party politics got underway in Yugoslavia, Andras Agostin formed the Democratic Party of Vojvodina, to represent Hungarians. In 1994 most leaders of this party defected to the new Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians which performed better in regional elections in 1996 than the Democratic Party. The latter party has now split into three groupings: the Christian Democratic Party of Ferenc Papp, the Democratic Party of Vojvodina Hungarians of Andras Agostin and the Democratic Party of Vojvodina of Sandor Pal. In 1997, Jozsef Borocz formed the Hungarian Civic Movement. The Alliance is now the biggest party, capturing 60% of the Hungarian vote in the 1997 republican elections.

Despite the existence of 6 different Hungarian political groups some parties have cooperated. The Alliance, the Democratic Party of Vojvodina Hungarians, and the Civic Movement formed the National Council of Vojvodina's Hungarians on 20th August. Alliance leader, Jozsef Kasza (who is also mayor of Subotica) was elected head of this body which contains members of federal, republican, and regional bodies. According to Hungarian radio this council will act as a 'mini-parliament' of Hungarians living in Yugoslavia.

This co-operation has not come about easily. On 11th June Jozsef Kasza and Andras Agostin met in Budapest with Hungarian Foreign Minister Janos Martonyi to discuss the formation of such a body. According to Ferenc Papp, leader of the Christian Democratic Party of Hungarians in the Vojvodina, fundamental differences of opinion prevented an agreement.

The Alliance is closer to the government in Belgrade than other regional parties like the Democratic Party, the Civic Movement or the Christian Democratic Party. According to Mr. Papp, the latter parties wished to have elections for a Hungarian Council whereas the Alliance proposed forming a council from all elected Hungarian representatives. Mr. Papp objected that these Hungarian representatives had been elected in fraudulent polls and had not been elected solely by Hungarians. Moreover, most representatives on those state bodies are members of the Alliance. The Christian Democratic Party - unsurprisingly - does not participate in the new council.

Although Jozsef Kasza cooperates with the Belgrade government (Istvan Ispanovic is the Alliance's vice-president of the Serbian parliament) and opposed the NATO bombing, his party has now moved to demand autonomy for Vojvodina. In consultation with Budapest a rather nebulous concept has been developed: three-tier autonomy. The Democratic Party of Agostin also supports this. According to Attila Juhasz, mayor of Senta and vice-president of the Alliance, this concept of autonomy was seized upon to give Budapest the chance to represent Vojvodina Hungarians 'in Europe'. Mr. Juhasz said that the present government in Budapest trusted Agostin more than Kasza but is also aware of the fact that the Alliance is by far the bigger party.

Three-tier autonomy seems to involve territorial autonomy and control of education, culture and the media. The other element - favoured by the Christian Democratic party and Mr. Agostin - is personal autonomy. This would give Hungarians the right to education exclusively in Hungarian and allow funding for Hungarian newspapers other than the already existing *Magyar Szo*.

Mr. Papp seemed to suggest that personal autonomy should also allow for the redrawing of the boundaries of electoral districts. He complained that he is the only Hungarian representative on the Novi Sad city council. Under proper proportional representation there should be 7. He accused the Belgrade authorities of gerrymandering to prevent Hungarian politicians from being elected.

Spokesmen for the Hungarian government in Budapest have hinted that "personal autonomy" would also privilege ethnic Hungarians in Yugoslavia, Romania and Slovakia vis-à-vis their non-Magyar fellow citizens. For instance, Budapest hopes that such "autonomous" Hungarians could enjoy visa-free travel to Hungary itself but also within the EU/European Economic Area when Hungary itself enters the EU. This could create antagonisms between Hungarians and others in Vojvodina. To add to

these individual privileges, autonomy would give the northern region of Vojvodina (where most Hungarians live) a special status. Following Council of Europe models of regionalisation this region would have the right to establish relations abroad, for instance with counties in Hungary and Romania.

Despite co-operation with Budapest it is clear that there are many differences between the Hungarian parties. The Alliance wants to maintain good relations with Belgrade and favours territorial autonomy for the province over autonomy for Hungarians. It objects to the idea of a separate region in the north. The Democratic Party prefers 'personal autonomy' and a special status for the north of Vojvodina. It wants to establish rights exclusively for Hungarians concerning education, culture and the media. In the light of these differences and of the relatively small number of Hungarians in the province as a whole, it is unlikely that a 'Kosovo-scenario' will affect Vojvodina. On the other hand, interference from outside could increase political tensions.

Hungarian plans and demands for autonomy are not helping to unify the fractured opposition in Serbia. For instance, the leader of the League of Social Democrats in the Vojvodina, Nenad Canak, has made clear that he opposes Hungarian autonomy, whether of the territorial or of the personal variety.

Refugees

It is hard to assess the exact number of refugees from Kosovo in Novi Sad - Mr. Sturm of the UNHCR estimated the number at c.1,500. The total number of refugees from Kosovo in Vojvodina is estimated at 9,500, most of whom live with host families. One of the problems is that most of these people are, officially, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and cannot register as refugees. Since Kosovo is still part of Yugoslavia many of the IDPs would have to return to their place of origin to 'de-register' before they can get permanent residence elsewhere. Yet, it is obvious that few will be willing or daring enough to do so given the fear of KLA violence in Kosovo. 46 people in Novi Sad were officially recognised as refugees, mainly people from the Krajina region in Croatia who were resettled in Kosovo after August, 1995.

According to the UNHCR, the authorities in Novi Sad register the refugees. Although this does not count as permanent residence, registered IDPs can apply for aid from the Red Cross and for a ration card with the UNHCR. On the other hand, the UNHCR maintained that the official policy is to encourage people to return to Kosovo. For instance, without permanent residence children cannot enrol in schools. Only emergency healthcare seems to be available to those who have not registered.

This does not mean that Vojvodina has few refugees. According to Vera Lompar of the Red Cross some 300,000 refugees now reside in the Vojvodina. Most of these people came from Croatia and Bosnia. Whenever the Red Cross in Belgrade receives aid for these refugees it is distributed through the Vojvodina Red Cross to the branches in 45 municipalities. The amounts are small. Only those over 65, the handicapped and very ill and families with babies under one year are entitled to aid. Therefore, the Red Cross can only help 40-50,000 people, although some 200,000 have asked for assistance.

The Haskalija

A group of refugees call themselves the Haskalija. They claim that they originated in Sicily and came to the Balkans in the 11th century. They maintain that they are Albanian-speaking Muslims but ethnically different from other Kosovo Albanians. For this reason they were driven out of Kosovo, along with Serbs and Gypsies.

The leader of this group, Mr. Toplica, claims there are 500,000 Haskalija in total, of whom 200,000 lived in Kosovo. Although it is a group unknown to most in Yugoslavia (Mr. Isakov of the Socialist Party, for instance, said he thought of them as Gypsies), the Yugoslav authorities apparently recognised them as a separate group in February of this year (1999).

According to the UNHCR, Mr. Toplica claims there are 5000 Haskalija IDPs in Novi Sad, but Mr Toplica himself put the figure at 10,000. They were living in squalid conditions outside Novi Sad. There did not seem to be that many of them and it is uncertain whether all the claims made by the group are entirely reliable.

None of the refugees could remember when they left Kosovo. Some would say 'two month ago' only to be corrected by Mr Toplica. Others claimed they left when KFOR troops entered the province. There was little consistency in their stories. Yet, they **all** said that Albanians unknown to them had forced them to leave their houses. The Haskalija concluded, from their accents, that they came from Albania, rather than Kosovo.

Mr. Toplica himself came to Novi Sad in 1975. Last year he attended what he called the 'Human Rights University for Integration and Tolerance' which is funded by George Soros. Apart from seeking humanitarian aid for the people he claims to represent, Mr Toplica wants the Haskalija to be recognised as a separate minority. He hopes this will open up funding for a radio and television station and a newspaper for the Haskalija.

Conclusion

NATO's assertion that its war against Yugoslavia was not a war against civilians is not accepted by the inhabitants of Novi Sad. Although relatively few civilians were killed in the bombardments, the destruction of the city's infrastructure affects all its inhabitants posing long-term threats to public health and economic well-being.

The destruction of the bridges left a part of the city without drinking water. The medical system in the city has been disrupted. Crossing the Danube is expensive and potentially dangerous.

The destruction of the oil refinery and the embargo have left many people unemployed and caused fuel shortages. When winter sets in this could make it impossible to provide sufficient heating for the city. It has also opened greater opportunities for black marketeers to move into the city and set up mafia structures.

Although Novi Sad is an opposition-held town, the bombing has made many people who dislike the government of Milosevic distrustful of the pro-NATO led opposition. The opposition seems eager to exploit the city's difficulties for political reasons.

Plans for greater autonomy for the province and/or for the Hungarian minority could lead to further instability in Yugoslavia. Yet, the Hungarian political parties are divided over this question and it is unlikely that they will pose a direct threat to the government in Belgrade in the near future. The pressure for radical and potentially destabilising changes seems to come from outside Vojvodina.

Although not many IDPs from Kosovo have entered the province, the presence of a large number of refugees from earlier wars puts a heavy burden on Vojvodina. The economic crisis exacerbated by this war will make it even harder for host families and the humanitarian agencies to cater for such people.