

## **Vojvodina Opposition Plans Cautious Campaign**

**Author:** [IWPR](#)

Vojvodina's opposition parties are hungry for change, but also afraid of demanding too much.

The opposition will put up a joint platform in Vojvodina to fight local

elections in September, despite last minute disagreements between local and Belgrade politicians.

Disagreements arose when "authentic" Vojvodina-based parties requested 51 per cent of the opposition election list across the province's municipalities. Their Belgrade counterparts initially held out for a bigger share of the list, but finally accepted the division.

The local opposition alliance - made up of the League of Social Democrats and

Reformists, the Party of Vojvodina Hungarians and Croats, the Movement for

Vojvodina and other small parties - has pledged to guarantee the freedom of the media and to defend Vojvodina's land and other resources from exploitation by Belgrade.

There is widespread resentment in Vojvodina over Belgrade's policy towards the province.

Locals complain that agricultural products are exported by companies in Belgrade; railway lines

are being closed down; pension payments to private farmers are almost two years in arrears; and Vojvodina is always the first place to be cut off when gas supplies from Russia

fluctuate.

However, like the regime, Belgrade opposition parties

tend to see any desire for autonomy as moves towards separatism. Their suspicions are behind more immediate disagreements, such as the

recent spat over candidates' lists.

Until the late 1980s Vojvodina enjoyed autonomous status within Serbia.

The province had its own representatives in all federal institutions and

enjoyed considerable independence from Belgrade. When in 1989 Slobodan

Milosevic removed Vojvodina's autonomy - along with that of Kosovo - all

regional institutions from the health and education system to commerce,

banks and insurance companies came under his control.

From then on Vojvodina, whose output was second only to Slovenia in the

former Yugoslavia, was systematically exploited. At the beginning of the

1990s, a young politician, Nenad Canak, founded the League of Social Democrats

of Vojvodina, which seeks republican status for Vojvodina - an aspiration

which goes far beyond simply restoring autonomy.

The League of Social

Democrats has gained increasing support over the past two years, as

growing centralisation has affected more and more people across the

province.

Some members of the "authentic" opposition believe that the regime has

manipulated the ethnic make-up of Vojvodina in order to stem demands for

the renewal of autonomy. Certainly in the regional capital, Novi Sad,

Serbian refugees from Croatia and Bosnia, many of whom are loyal to Milosevic, now form almost a quarter of the 300,000 population.

Independent surveys show that minorities -

which at the beginning of the 1990s made up almost a third of the

province's population of two million, have also fallen. Leaders of Hungarian and Croat political parties estimate that over 100,000 people from those communities have now have emigrated.

However, surveys and polls show that around 60 per cent of people in Vojvodina are now dissatisfied with the status of the region, so the "authentic" parties are hoping to vastly improve their performance from the 10 per cent of votes they polled in 1996 campaigning under the slogan, "Stop the Robbery".

Their new campaign has not been announced, but they will not be calling for the "Vojvodina Republic" advocated by Canak's League of Social Democrats. Not only would it cause a rift with the Belgrade opposition parties, but everyone in Vojvodina is aware that the

regime is in the mood for conflict. Milosevic has a particular talent for creating and exploiting crises, and no one wants to risk a catastrophe sparked off by political or national clashes in Vojvodina.

Indeed, the current mood of the opposition might be described as hungry for change, but also afraid of demanding too much. As Gojko Miskovic, a long-time opposition activist from Sombor explains, "We will not push the Vojvodina Republic issue during the campaign, because it is too delicate. We will leave that for another day, after a good election result - because sooner or later it will have to come onto the agenda."

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