

Caught in Vojvodina: The plight of ethnic Hungarians

by [Janos D. Pasztor](#) in the [May 19, 1999](#) issue

The Kosovo crisis has created an extremely precarious situation for ethnic Hungarians who live in Vojvodina, the northern portion of Serbia on the border of Hungary. And the danger comes from both NATO bombs and the hostility of Serb citizens who resent ethnic Hungarians because it is "their" NATO planes that are bombarding the Serb homeland. (Hungary is one of three Central European countries that has recently joined NATO.)

A few days ago I talked to a student who had just visited his home in the predominantly ethnic Hungarian city of Subotica in Vojvodina told me of sitting out an air attack that was aimed at a military establishment but ended up hitting nearby residential areas. At the same time, press reports tell of graffiti that have appeared in Vojvodina warning ethnic Hungarians to get out of Serbia before it is too late.

Some historical background: Through the First World War, Vojvodina was the southern part of the Kingdom of Hungary, which included Serbian and German minorities. After 1920, when Vojvodina was ceded to the Serbian Republic within the state of Yugoslavia—a state created at the Paris peace talks following World War I—Hungarians formed the largest minority in the Serbian-dominated region.

During the communist regime of Josip Broz Tito, himself a Croat, a delicate balance was achieved among the various nationalities in Yugoslavia. One of the ways Tito maintained that balance was to grant autonomy to regions within Serbia that incorporated sizable ethnic minorities—Kosovo in the south and Vojvodina in the north. In that context, the minority Hungarians in Vojvodina enjoyed rights and equal protection.

In 1989, however, Vojvodina and Kosovo were deprived of their autonomy by the government of Slobodan Milosevic. The loss of autonomy in both regions coincided with the outbreak of the war that brought devastation and suffering to Yugoslavia's former republics—most particularly Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since that time

the most fundamental human rights have been threatened. Refugees who have arrived from freshly independent republics—for example, Serbs who were swept from regions in Croatia—would seek to wrest away houses from ethnic Hungarians in Vojvodina who had built and maintained their homes, sometimes for decades. (Such "invasions" have, in fact, occurred periodically since 1920.) In spite of such difficulties about 300,000 ethnic Hungarians have remained in Vojvodina.

From talking to ethnic Hungarians and monitoring the media, I offer the following summary of Hungarian views:

- 1) The air strikes have not been able to destroy the military potential of the Yugoslav army. Units are well hidden. Some ethnic Hungarian towns in Vojvodina are surrounded by dug-in tanks.
- 2) Since Hungary itself only recently became a full member of the NATO alliance, the situation of ethnic Hungarians in Vojvodina is very delicate. At the least they feel threatened by reprisals. During the crises with Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, hostile Serbs presented Hungarians in the region with two alternatives: the cemetery or a one-way ticket to Hungary. Though people live in terrible fear and constant threat, most are resolved to stay in their homes and in the land of their ancestors. Some young ethnic Hungarian men have left the country—most of them illegally—in order to avoid the draft. But some soldiers of Hungarian ethnic descent have already lost their lives in the battles in Kosovo.
- 3) NATO's bombing of the largely ethnic Hungarian city of Subotica in Vojvodina, with the subsequent loss of Hungarian property, has seriously disoriented ethnic Hungarians. They feel betrayed. Tension has also developed between ethnic Hungarian leaders in Vojvodina and the Hungarian government. Many feel that the Hungarian government should help protect, not bomb, ethnic Hungarians across the border.

The government and people of Hungary, who have given food and shelter to thousands of refugees over the last ten years, are ready to help in the current crisis. We remain open for further refugees, and already provide haven for many Kosovars. Most Hungarians have supported NATO's actions, but the opinion seems to be growing that it's time to discontinue the air strikes.

The consensus is also growing in Hungary that NATO air strikes did not protect the Albanians of Kosovo, but accelerated the process of "ethnic cleansing" which has

seen Kosovars killed and forced to leave everything behind. That the ethnic cleansing was planned in advance by the Milosevic government is admitted, but Hungarians increasingly agree that without the air strikes the process would have been carried out at a much slower pace. Thus the goal of preventing the realization of such a policy has not been achieved, and will not be even if the bombardment continues. The Serbs have methods of partisan warfare and are able to withdraw into the mountains for a long time.

Many Hungarians do not believe that NATO's acknowledgment of failure in Kosovo would destroy the alliance's credibility; continued useless destruction, however, would. NATO has a very important role to play in the region, but I believe, as do many of my fellow citizens, that it must be aware of the limits of its power.