

Dragan ĐUKANOVIĆ¹
Jelica GORDANIĆ²

MINORITY RIGHTS IN THE DANUBE REGION

ABSTRACT

In this article the authors analyze the protection of minority rights in the Danube region. Of particular importance is the position of Hungarians in Slovakia, Serbia and Romania, the status of the Vlachs in Serbia and Bulgaria, and the position of ethnic Serbs in eastern parts of Croatia.

Analyzing the current situation of respect for minority rights, it can be concluded that some minor problems can have a significant impact on diplomatic relations, stability and security of the states of Central and Eastern Europe.

Key words: Danube region, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Croatia, ethnic groups, minorities

Introduction

Danube region, especially its central part, is a multi-ethnic area. During the history, it was an area of numerous conflicts, confronted empires (Habsburg and Ottoman); and the area where powerful international actors “played” diplomatic, military, and other geo-strategic games.

During the Second World War numerous actors of global and regional politics confronted on this area, realizing the importance of transit through Danube region.³

¹ Dragan Đukanović, Phd, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade. E-mail: dragandjuk@yahoo.com. The work was realized with in the project “Serbia in the contemporary international integration processes-foreign, international, economic, legal and security aspects” of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of Republic of Serbia, no. 01179023.

² Jelica Gordanić, MA, Intern, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade.

³ According to some historical sources, during the Second World War, Britain had a plan to bomb Djerdap with the aim of halting the progress of the German occupation forces. See: Goran Nikolić, *The role of the intelligence and security community in the foreign policy of Great Britain*, MSc thesis, Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade 2011, pp. 123–124.

Post-Cold War division of Europe contributed that this part of continent became divided between East and West. In this respect, an important role was played by the former Soviet Union in former Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. On the other hand, former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia managed to preserve its equidistance from both “capitalist” West and the “realsocialistic” East. From that reason, middle Danube was a very turbulent area and after the Cold war ends, in this area began construction of new political, economic and security ambient. Examining this area, it is a clue that all the countries are members of NATO and EU (except of Serbia). Security position is improved as well as the numerous forms of cooperation in the Danube region.

Development of the Danube strategy, as one of the major macroregional EU politics, brought a special approach to this region – with much more sensitivity and contribution to the complete realization of its numerous advantages.⁴ Cooperation in the areas of economics, tourism, transport and some other forms of cross border cooperation should improve security situation in this part of Europe and promote geostrategic interests of Danube for the EU.

Minorities in the Middle Danube – Advantage or Disadvantage?

It is a fact that inter-state relations in Danube region are improved. But, ethnical questions and positions of ethnical minorities in most of Danube region countries are a latent danger for the regional stability. Problems of the minorities are characteristic of the most of Danube countries.

Besides the fact that Hungary is EU and NATO member, the authorities want to redefine status of its own minority in neighbour countries (also EU members Slovakia and Romania). In public discourse is used the term “Carpathian basin” which includes areas of Romania, Slovakia and Serbia. One of the most important questions for Budapest authorities is a *status of Hungarians in Slovakia*. Hungarian minority is the biggest minority in Slovakia. According to 2011 census more than 485 thousands people (or 8.5% of complete Slovak population) come out as Hungarians.⁵

Official Budapest indicates on the problems related to the collective rights, territorial autonomy, unsolved problems and latent ethnic tensions in Slovakia. According to Slovak Constitution, sovereignty holders are Slovaks and the members of ethnical minorities.⁶ Rights of ethnical groups in Slovakia are also

⁴ EU documents about Danube strategy: http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/cooperate/danube/index_en.cfm; “EU Strategy for the Danube Region”, Internet, <http://www.danube-region.eu/pages/what-is-the-eusdr>, 17/09/2013. i Jelena Stojović, Sanja Knežević, Aleksandar Bogdanović, Ivan Knežević, *Guide through Danube strategy*, European moment in Serbia, Belgrade, 2012, pp. 7–57.

⁵ Beata Balogova, “Census: Fewer Hungarians, Catholics – and Slovaks”, *The Slovak Spectator*, 5 March 2012, Internet, http://spectator.sme.sk/articles/view/45558/2/census_fewer_hungarians_catholics_and_slovaks.html, 21/11/2013.

⁶ Preamble of Slovak Constitution. “Slovakia’s Constitution of 1992 with Amendments through 2001”, Internet, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Slovakia_2001.pdf, 22/11/2013.

protected with European Human Rights Convention, and some others legally obligated Council of Europe documents.

Party of the Hungarian Coalition is represented in Slovakian national parliament, and it was a part of governing structure in the period since 1998. to 2006. One of the most contentious issues related to the status of ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia is the issue of official use of their language. Slovak Constitution previsions Slovak language as the state language on the territory of the whole country. Concretization of this rule was the adoption of the “Language law” in 1995. It states that the official (Slovak) language shall prevail over all other languages.⁷ 2009 law changes limited the use of minority languages and expand the use of the Slovak language (for example, in areas where minorities makes less than 20 % of the population). Violation of this act are provides quite drastic fines.⁸

Important for Hungarian minority in Slovakia was signing of “Treaty on good neighborly relations and friendly cooperation between the Republic of Hungary and the Slovak Republic” in 1995.⁹ The treaty provides that “persons belonging to national minorities shall have the right, individually or in community with other members of their group, to freely express, maintain and develop their ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity and to maintain and develop their culture in all its aspects”.¹⁰

Several incidents motivated by ethnic hatred during the 2006 strained diplomatic relations between Hungary and Slovakia.¹¹ One of the measures for possible improvement was legislative proposal which might give Hungarian citizenship for the the Slovakian Hungarians. Slovak ultranacionalists were opposed to such a solution and “compromise” solution stipulates that each Slovak citizen lose Slovak citizenship if requests citizenship of another state.

Hungarians in Romania are the largest ethnic minority group. According to the Romanian census from 2011 more than 1.2 million people identified themselves as Hungarians (which is about 6.5% of the total Romanian population).¹² Most of Romanian Hungarians live in areas which were parts of Hungary before Trianon

⁷ The whole Slovakian Language law. “Act of the national council of the Slovak Republic of 15 November 1995 on the State Language of the Slovak Republic”, No. 270/1995 Coll. Internet, http://www.pitt.edu/~votruba/ssttopics/slovaklawsonlanguage/Slovak_Law_on_the_State_Language_1995.pdf, 21/11/2013.

⁸ György Schöpflin, “The Slovak language law is discriminatory and restrictive”, *EuObserver*, 10. 07. 2009, Internet, <http://euobserver.com/opinion/28440>, 21/11/2013.

⁹ The treaty was signed at the insistence of the U.S. and European countries as a precondition for membership in NATO and the EU.

¹⁰ “Treaty on Good-neighbourly Relations and Friendly Co-operation between the Republic of Hungary and the Slovak Republic”, 1995, Article 11, Internet, http://www.kbdesign.sk/cla/projects/slovak_hungarian_treaty/related/treaty_sk_hu.htm, 20/09/2013.

¹¹ Hungarian human rights foundation, “New Slovak Government Embraces Ultra-Nationalists, Excludes Hungarian Coalition Party”, 09.07.2006. Internet, http://www.hhrf.org/hhrf/index_en.php?oldal=182, 21/11/2013.

¹² More detail see at – http://www.recensamanromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/rezultate-definitive-rpl_2011.pdf, 21/11/2013.

agreement. In this area, now known as Transylvania, Hungarians make up about 18% of the population. One of the recent events surrounding the Hungarian minority in Romania is a series of protests held in October 2013. The main objective of the protest walk was “getting territorial autonomy which might help Hungarian minorities to maintain ethnic identity and economic development.”¹³ For the Romanian political leadership, giving any autonomy to the Hungarians was rated as unacceptable. This issue had caused much debate in Hungary, which is expected parliamentary elections next year and where this issue is high on the agenda of local ruling elites. The current Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (Orbán Viktor) wants to ensure that the voices of ethnic Hungarians residing abroad have the right to vote in parliamentary elections next year and thereby strengthen the position of his party – Hungarian Civic Union.

On the other hand, status of *Hungarians in Serbia* is quite satisfactory in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. In this part of Serbia haven't been serious inter-ethnic incidents, and members of the Hungarian minority have secured all rights in accordance within international law and national legislation.¹⁴ At the same time, during the 2013, official Belgrade and Budapest improved their relations, which resulted with condemnation of the crimes committed against Hungarians in the first years after the liberation of the former Yugoslavia.¹⁵ Hungarians in Serbia participate in government in a number of local governments, as well as the level of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

Serbian minority in Croatia Danube region have problems related to their rights. A large number of Serbs who live in Baranja, as well as in Eastern Slavonia and western parts of Srem (Vukovar County) have significant problems of achieving fundamental minority rights. This is confirmed by the numerous incidents in Vukovar, Osijek and some other cities during the 2013 where are distracted use of the Cyrillic alphabet as well as the use of Serbian language at the local level. Number of incidents was related with removing of boards from public institutions and names of places that contained bilingual (Croatian and Serbian) letters. These incidents happened despite the fact that “The Constitutional Law on National Minorities in the Republic of Croatia” (2002) envisages use of minority languages in certain parts of country.¹⁶ It should be noted that these incidents create a feeling of insecurity among the members of

¹³ “Ethnic Hungarians march for autonomy in Romania”, *Deutsche Welle*, Berlin, 27 October 2013, Internet, <http://www.dw.de/ethnic-hungarians-march-for-autonomy-in-romania/a-17186467>, 21/11/2013.

¹⁴ “Report on Serbia progress for 2013” SWD (2013) 412 final, Brussels, 16 October 2013, pp. 55-56. Internet, http://seio.gov.rs/upload/documents/eu_dokumenta/godisnji_izvestaji_ek_o_napretku_izvestaj_ek_2013.pdf, 21/11/2013.

¹⁵ “Declaration of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia condemns acts against the civilian population in Vojvodina Hungarian committed from 1944 to 1945. The National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, 21 June 2013, Internet, http://www.parlament.gov.rs/upload/archive/files/cir/pdf/ostala_akta/2013/RS28-13.pdf, 10/19/2013.

¹⁶ “The Constitutional Law on National Minorities”, Official Gazette, Zagreb, no. 115/02, 47/10 and 93/11.

Serbian community and contribute for development of new ethnic radicalism in the region of Danube basin. Zagreb authorities, it seems, despite numerous attempts have not been fully able to deal with the extremist behaviors in the eastern parts of Croatia.

Minorities in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina enjoy all collective rights, and this region is an example of true multi-ethnicity in which successfully promotes European values of interculturalism.¹⁷ That is very important for the reports of the European Union on Serbia's progress and European integrations. According to these assessments, number of inter-ethnic incidents in the provinces reduced, but danger of radical and ultra-nationalist groups exists.¹⁸

Vlach issue in the eastern Serbia had an influence on Serbian integrations in EU. Authorities in Bucharest conditioned candidate status for EU membership for Serbia in 2012 by that issue.¹⁹ At the same time, Bucharest highlights that the number of members of the Vlach community in eastern Serbia is visibly reduced, from 40,000 in 2002 to 35,000 in 2011. Although Serbia, according to the latest European Commission report on progress, significantly improved the status of Vlachs with creation of educational opportunities in Vlach or Romanian language,²⁰ as well as the creation of radio and television programs in the Romanian language, there are other segments of Memoranda on the protection of the Romanian minority in Serbia that are not implemented. Specifically, this agreement was signed before granting EU candidate status for Republic of Serbia on 1 March 2012.²¹

One of the major problems highlighted by the official Bucharest is the action of the Romanian Orthodox Church in these areas, and which is strongly opposed by the Serbian Orthodox Church. Freedom expression negation by authorities in Bucharest and unambiguous attempt to all members of the Vlach community in Serbia become incorporate in Romanian National Corpus, often against their will, may affect on relations between Romania and Serbia.

Despite the fact that censuses in Bulgaria show a drastic decrease of the Vlach ethnic community, Bucharest raises the question of this group status in Bulgaria. The Vlachs are mostly settled in the Bulgarian parts of the Danube basin in the vicinity of Pleven and Vidin. 2001 in Bulgaria there lived more of 10,000 Vlachs, but according to the census held two years ago, there were only 3,684 of them. Similar issues regarding the statuses of Aromanians and Vlachs Romania sets for and Macedonia and Albania. (See Annex 1).

¹⁷ Although not related to this area, as one of the few examples of minority rights respect and a well-functioning system of minority protection should mention the case of Oland Islands with Swedish majority in Finland.

¹⁸ "Report on Serbia progress for 2013", "Report on Serbia progress for 2013".

¹⁹ For more details see: Lončar R., „Rumunska ofanziva na Vlahe”, Internet: www.vesti-online.com/vesti/srbija/346575/rumunska-ofanziva-na-vlahe, 22. 11. 2013.

²⁰ "Report on Serbia progress for 2013", op. cit., str. 55.

²¹ See: "Removed last barrier for the candidacy," RTV Vojvodina, Novi Sad, 1 March 2012, Internet http://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/evropa/otklonjena-poslednja-prepreka-za-kandidaturu_303448.html, 11/21/2013.

Annex. 1: The presence of Romanian, Vlach, Aromanians, Istro-romanian and Megleno-Romanians in Southeast Europe



Source: "Vlachs", Wikipedia, Internet, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map-balkans-vlachs.png>, 21/11/2013.

In ethnic composition of Bulgaria, the Turks are the largest ethnic minority. According to the 2011 census in Bulgaria were over 580 thousand inhabitants of Turkish ethnicity which is 8% of the total population.²² Unlike the Pomaks, Bulgarian Turks are adequately represented in the Bulgarian parliament. Thus, in 2005 were 28 of them compared to the 240 members of parliament, which is even higher than the percentage of their total share of Bulgarian population.²³ Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), de facto ethnic Turkish party, is partner in the current Bulgarian government. The position of the Turks in Bulgaria was particularly difficult eighties, during the regime of Todor Zhivkov (Тодор Живков), which caused violent Bulgarianisation in 1984 and mass exodus of Turks from Bulgaria in 1989.²⁴

²² "World directory of minorities, Turks in Bulgaria", Internet, <http://www.faqs.org/minorities/Eastern-Europe/Turks-of-Bulgaria.html>, 21/11/2013.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Radičević N, "Forgotten great migrations of Turks", *Politika*, Belgrade, 23 September 2009, Internet, <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Svet/Zaboravljena-velika-seoba-Turaka.lt.html>, 22/11/2013.

After various limitations, publishing newspapers in Turkish language in Bulgarian revived. But, the use of Turkish language in the Bulgarian electronic media, especially the national broadcasters is not satisfactory yet.²⁵ Also, in the last few years in Bulgaria happens a few attacks on mosques and other Islamic buildings.²⁶

Special issues in Bulgaria are Pomaks (Bulgarian Muslims) – who are the religious minority.²⁷ Therefore, they are Slavic Bulgarians who speak Bulgarian as their mother tongue, but their religion and traditions are Islamic. It is estimated that there are more than 150,000 of them in the Rhodope mountain areas in southern and south-western Bulgaria. In the mid seventies there was a growing tendency of Pomaks forced assimilations.²⁸ Currently, Pomaks are not represented in Bulgarian parliament and their political participation is only on local level. Despite the occasional anti-Muslim tendencies of ultra right-wing groups, Bulgarian government shows a high degree of religious tolerance. Critics on Bulgarian authorities are about none accepting Pomaks “as a special group, (which is based on the preservation of Slavic ethnic homogeneity of the Bulgarians)”.²⁹

Status of Roma people in the Middle Danube region, particularly in Slovakia and Hungary, is very unfavorable. It is difficult to integrate Romas in the spheres of social life, and there were many attacks on them. Roma people live in terrible life conditions and very low living standard.³⁰ Social, health and other forms of insurance are not fully available to the Romas, as well as a possibility of getting a job in public service.

Conclusion

Inadequately solved minority problems in the region of Middle Danube could cause some serious problems. Therefore, it is unacceptable to link minority problems and demands for territorial autonomy. These kinds of initiatives could affect the stability of Romania (having in mind aspirations of Transylvanian

²⁵ “World Directory of Minorities, Turks”, Internet, <http://www.minorityrights.org/?lid=2430&tmpl=printpage>, 22/11/2013.

²⁶ Radičević N, “Forgotten great migrations of Turks”, *Politika*, Belgrade, 23. september 2009, Internet, <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Svet/Zaboravljena-velika-seoba-Turaka.lt.html>, 22/11/2013.

²⁷ More about Pomaks see at – “Pomaks of Bulgaria”, Internet, <http://www.faqs.org/minorities/Eastern-Europe/Pomaks-of-Bulgaria.html>, 22/11/ 2013.

²⁸ Bulgarian authorities pressured the Pomaks to change their names and select new ones from the list of official” Bulgarian names. Pomaks were required give their old IDs and receive new ones, with new Bulgarian name.

²⁹ “World directory of Minorities and Indigenous People, Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks)”, Internet, <http://www.minorityrights.org/2431/bulgaria/bulgarianspeaking-muslims-pomaks.html>, 22/11/2013.

³⁰ These are the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), the European Social Charter (part of the protection of minorities in the socio-economic area) – 1961, Konencija Framework for the Protection of National Minorities (1995) and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992).

Hungarians leaders on providing special status of this part of the country). Similar situation is in Slovakia and Serbia about with sporadic announcements for the formation of Hungarian autonomy.

Second, serious threats for stability in this part of Europe are new nationalist movements aimed for the minorities. It is essential European Union's insistence on all problems solution within state institutions, and also fully implementation of Council of Europe regulations on minority rights. This could be relief for the existing latent ethnic tensions in the Middle Danube region.

Danube basin states should solve all the issues about minorities on bilateral basis, which implies conclusion of separate agreements and contracts that can improve their position. In this sense, it should establish stronger institutional mechanisms and evaluation modes for monitoring range of such agreements.

Literature

- "Act of the National Council of the Slovak Republic of 15 November 1995 on the State Language of the Slovak Republic", No. 270/1995 Coll. Internet http://www.pitt.edu/~votruba/ssttopics/slovaklawsonlanguage/Slovak_Law_on_the_State_Language_1995.pdf.
- "Attacks against Roma in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic", European Roma Rights Center, Budapest, 15 July 2012, Internet, <http://www.errc.org/article/attacks-against-roma-in-hungary-the-czech-republic-and-the-slovak-republic/3042>, 15/11/2013.
- Balogova B., "Census: Fewer Hungarians, Catholics – and Slovaks", *The Slovak Spectator*, 5 March 2012, Internet, http://spectator.sme.sk/articles/view/45558/2/census_fewer_hungarians_catholics_and_slovaks.html, 21/11/2013.
- "Deklaracija Narodne skupštine Republike Srbije o osudi akata protiv civilnog mađarskog stanovništva u Vojvodini počinjenih 1944–1945. godine", Narodna skupština Republike Srbije, Beograd, 21. jun 2013, Internet, http://www.parlament.gov.rs/upload/archive/files/cir/pdf/ostala_akta/2013/RS28-13.pdf, 19/10/2013.
- "Ethnic Hungarians march for autonomy in Romania", *Deutsche Welle*, Berlin, 27 October 2013, Internet, <http://www.dw.de/ethnic-hungarians-march-for-autonomy-in-romania/a-17186467>, 21/11/2013.
- "EU Strategy for the Danube Region", Internet, <http://www.danube-region.eu/pages/what-is-the-eusdr>, 17/09/2013.
- Hungarian human rights foundation, "New Slovak Government Embraces Ultra-Nationalists, Excludes Hungarian Coalition Party", 09.07.2006. Internet, http://www.hhrf.org/hhrf/index_en.php?oldal=182, 21/11/2013.
- http://www.recensamantromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/rezultate-definitive-rpl_2011.pdf, 21/11/2013.
- "Izveštaj o napretku Srbije za 2013", SWD (2013) 412 konačni, Brisel, 16. oktobar 2013, str. 55–56. Internet, <http://seio.gov.rs/upload/documents/>

- eu_dokumenta/godisnji_izvestaji_ek_o_napretku/izvestaj_ek_2013.pdf, 21/11/2013.
- Lončar R., “Rumunska ofanziva na Vlahe”, Internet, <http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/346575/Rumunska-ofanziva-na-Vlahe>, 22/11/2013.
 - Nikolić, G., *Uloga obaveštajno-bezbednosne zajednice u spoljnoj politici Velike Britanije*, magistrarska teza, Fakultet političkih nauka Univerziteta u Beogradu, 2011.
 - “Otklonjena poslednja prepreka za kandidaturu”, *RTV Vojvodine*, Novi Sad, 1. mart 2012, Internet, http://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/evropa/otklonjena-poslednja-prepreka-za-kandidaturu_303448.html, 21/11/2013.
 - “Pomaks of Bulgaria”, Internet, <http://www.faqs.org/minorities/Eastern-Europe/Pomaks-of-Bulgaria.html>, 22/11/2013.
 - Radičević N., “Zaboravljena ‚velika seoba‘ Turaka”, *Politika*, Beograd, 23. septembar 2009, Internet, <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Svet/Zaboravljena-velika-seoba-Turaka.lt.html>, 22/11/2013.
 - “Romanians in Bulgaria”, *Wikipedia*, Internet, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanians_in_Bulgaria, 21/11/2013.
 - “Slovakia’s Constitution of 1992 with Amendments through 2001”, Internet, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Slovakia_2001.pdf, 22/11/2013.
 - Schöpflin György, “The Slovak language law is diskriminatory and restrictive”, 10.07.2009, Internet, <http://euobserver.com/opinion/28440>, 21/11/2013.
 - Stojović J., Knežević S., Bogdanović A., Knežević I., *Vodič kroz Dunavsku strategiju*, Evropski pokret u Srbiji, Beograd, 2012.
 - “Treatyon Good-neighbourly Relations and Friendly Co-operationbetween the Republic of Hungary and the Slovak Republic”, Internet,http://www.kbdesign.sk/cla/projects/slovak_hungarian_treaty/related/treaty_sk_hu.htm, 21/11/2013.
 - “Ustavni zakon o pravima nacionalnih manjina”, *Narodne novine*, Zagreb, br. 115/02, 47/10 i 93/11.
 - “World directory of Minorities and Indigenous People, Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks)”, Internet, <http://www.minorityrights.org/2431/bulgaria/bulgarianspeaking-muslims-pomaks.html>, 22/11/2013.
 - “World directory of minorities, Hungarians of Romania”, Internet, <http://www.faqs.org/minorities/Eastern-Europe/Hungarians-of-Romania.html>, 21/11/2013.
 - “World Directory of Minorities, Turks”, Internet, <http://www.minorityrights.org/?lid=2430&tmpl=printpage>, 22/11/2013.
 - “World directory of minorities, Turks in Bulgaria”, Internet, <http://www.faqs.org/minorities/Eastern-Europe/Turks-of-Bulgaria.html>, 21/11/2013.