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EXTRAORDINARY ELECTIONS IN SERBIA –
NOTHING EXTRAORDINARY HAPPENED

Abstract: This analysis sets the political scene for the Serbian elections of April 24, 2016. It relates the efforts of the Hungarian national community of the 1990's to the fate of this northern province of the country. Besides presenting the circumstances and results of the elections, it also describes the challenges and tasks facing the new government in relation to the Hungarian community. The author identifies the long-lasting problems and controversies which have been resolved or partially resolved in Serbian-Hungarian relation. It also points to the issues that require further efforts to be settled.

The aim of my analysis is to examine the elections held in Serbia on 24 April 2016 in a wider context, and to present the political processes and aspirations which preceded the elections from the perspective of the Hungarian community living in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in Northern Serbia, starting in the 1990s. In addition to the presentation of the circumstances and results of the elections, I also examine the new government's planned tasks and reforms concerning the Hungarian national minority. The analysis also presents the results or partial results which were achieved due to the work of the local Hungarian community in the field of long-standing problems and questions, and the issues which require further efforts. In my analysis I also draw attention to the fact that regarding the internal political events which took place in the past 25 years in Serbia, it is not unusual that governments do not serve out their full terms. The strengthening of the democratic opposition, the assassination of the prime minister of the day, tensions in the government coalition concerning the independence of Kosovo,¹ the asymmetric structure of power, timely provincial and local elections or even the coincidence of the results of opinion polls can lead to the holding of early parliamentary elections in the country. Serbia is a young democracy which is more and more willing and able to face its past, but the political leaders of the time still have a lot to do in order to make the country an acceptable place for the majority of the population and a place which offers opportunities and hope.

1 In accordance with the 1244 resolution of the UN Security Council and the opinion of the International Court of Justice on Kosovo's declaration of independence.

Where did we come from?

After confrontations between its nations and economic difficulties led to the collapse of the onetime federal state of South Slavs, member states – including Serbia – went through different phases of development during the past 25 years. In addition to former member republics, even Kosovo – a former autonomous province which was an integral part of Serbia according to the 2006 Serbian Constitution – waved farewell to Belgrade,² and, holding the status of a potential candidate country for EU membership, intends to access the European Union. The current situation of the former republics which underwent different phases of development is similar to the positions they had in the former federal state. The more developed countries preserved their advantageous situation and are already member states of the European Union, while others are holding accession negotiations or are planning to do so. The “heaviest burden” since the collapse of the federal state is probably born by Serbia, where political parties established at the beginning of the 1990s could fulfil their real social role only after 5 October 2000. Being united in the so-called United Democratic Opposition, they overcame the power monopoly dominated by the Socialists and established an acting, real multi-party system. The newly established democratic power structure brought a new perspective considering the future of the country, but the fragmentation of the United Democratic Opposition and the assassination of the Serbian prime minister pushed back the initial dynamic reform endeavors. The gradual strengthening and rule of the center-left orientation Democratic Party (Demokratska stranka – DP), which was the dominant party of the regime change, did not produce the expected results. Serbia continued suffering from the heritage of war: social anomie, economic difficulties and dramatic emigration. It did not become either a better or a more livable place during the governance of the DP. The Democrats emptied the meaning of modernization and became involved in corruption scandals, thereby losing the support of the majority of their voters. Losing the confidence of their former supporters, today they are a party with little influence at national, provincial and local levels. This leaves room for Radicals and Socialists – well-known from the 1990s – to rule the country again. Ironically, some members of the nationalist Serbian Radical Party (Srpska radikalna stranka – SRS) – a party which once encouraged isolation and pro-Russian politics – established the center-right Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka – SNS) in 2008, taking advantage of the general public sentiments and recognizing the potential for future possibilities. The SNS – due to the available “room for maneuvers” in the political arena and the repeated mistakes of the Democrats – gained more and more popularity and supporters. Considering the power

2 On 17 February 2008, Kosovo declared to be independent from Serbia.

constellation, Serbia today is led by the Socialist and Radical political actors of the 1990s. Taking into account Serbia's demographic and economic circumstances, the current political guideline – in my opinion – is, on the one hand, a kind of “forced path” for Serbia, on the other hand, it is the result of the recognition of the fact that there is only one solution if the country wants to break out from isolation. When all neighboring states which were also members of the former Yugoslavia are open to international political and economic cooperation and are planning or pursuing modernization reforms and are approaching the EU, Serbia cannot act differently. If the current leaders chose any other way on a whim – the likelihood of which is rather low – the Serbian society would have to pay a high price which would be unacceptable for them.

The political milieu of the 1990s was characterized not only by the majority nation's efforts to form parties, but also witnessed the strengthening of the Hungarian national minority's fast situation awareness and rapid self-organization. The first advocacy organization of the Hungarian community in Serbia was the Democratic Community of Vojvodina Hungarians (Vajdasági Magyarok Demokratikus Közössége – VMDK), which was established in 1990 and is now mainly a “historical” reference point. At the time of its establishment, the VMDK outlined goals like the introduction of a multi-party system, transition to a market economy, and the defense of national minority rights laid down in international documents. It was the VMDK which first introduced the concept of minority self-government as an individual rights principle as well as the need for the objective examination of reprisals against innocent Hungarians in Vojvodina, which took place in the last months of World War II.³ Due to excessive personal ambitions and internal conflicts within the VMDK leading to the formation of different groups within the party, the Hungarian community in Vojvodina became politically fragmented. In 1994, a group of people who left the VMDK established the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (Vajdasági Magyar Szövetség – VMSZ); in 1997 another group of former VMDK-members founded the Democratic Party of Vojvodina Hungarians (Vajdasági Magyar Demokrata Párt – VMDP),⁴ and in 2012 – a third group established the Party of the Hungarian Unity. The Hungarian Civic Alliance (Magyar Polgári Szövetség – MPSZ) was founded in 2009 by a group of former VMSZ-members. In 2009 another new party was established named Hungarian Hope Movement (Magyar Remény Mozgalom – MRM) which was formed due to the extensive support of the VMDP's only representative in the provincial parliament. The most recent participant in Hungarian political life in Vojvodina is the Hungarian Movement (Magyar Mozgalom – MM), which was formed on 20 August 2015. The MM includes

3 János Vékás, “A Vajdasági Magyarok Demokratikus Közösségének létrejötte” [The foundation of the Democratic Community of Vojvodina Hungarians], *Regio – Kisebbségtudományi Szemle* 2/1 (1991), <http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00036/00005/pdf/12.pdf>, accessed 12 September, 2016.

4 The party considers itself the ideological and political heir of the VMDK.

former members and sympathizers of the VMSZ and a group of former representatives of the Hungarian National Council (2010-2014). The MM is a civil organization which also pursues political activity.

In the competition among the above-mentioned Hungarian parties, the VMSZ became the political force that became the largest and most influential actor within the Hungarian community of Vojvodina. The VMSZ was able to embrace the most important Hungarian issues of the past 25 years, incorporated them in its political program, and managed to represent them successfully. This success is also due to the fact the VMSZ has political representation at every level (national, provincial and local),⁵ while the activity of other Hungarian parties is limited to the regional level or to certain towns.

Elections on 24 April 2016

On 24 April 2016 early parliamentary elections and regular provincial and local elections – which are organized at the end of a four-year term – were held in Serbia. It is a characteristic feature of the Serbian electoral system that the date of the elections is set by different state officials at every separate level. According to paragraph 101 of the Serbian Constitution, the date of parliamentary elections is set by the President of the Republic of Serbia, the date of local elections is set by the house speaker of the Serbian Parliament,⁶ while the date of provincial elections is set by the head of the provincial parliament.⁷ It is a common practice that the parties discuss and agree on the date of the elections beforehand, taking into account economic and efficiency criteria.

At the session of the Serbian Progressive Party's Steering Committee on 17 January 2016, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić announced that he would initiate the holding of early parliamentary elections. The decision received unanimous support from the committee. The Prime Minister's proposal of 3 March 2016 to dissolve the Parliament and to hold

5 The party is also present on the international level. On the one hand, the VMSZ is represented by MEP Andor Deli, who participated on the Fidesz-KDNP list in the European Parliamentary Elections held on 25 May 2014, and since 2014 has been representing the Hungarian community in Vojvodina in the European Parliament. On the other hand, according to the decision of the Political Assembly of the European People's Party (EPP) made on 2 September 2015, the VMSZ – which was an observer earlier – became an associated member of the EPP. Through that, the VMSZ reached the highest possible level a party of a non-EU country can reach. As an associated member, the VMSZ can take part and vote in the congresses of the European People's Party (through a phone conference with VMSZ MP Elvira Kovács)

6 Law on local elections, article 8, paragraph 1 (34/2010), Retrieved from: www.paragraf.rs, accessed 17 October, 2016.

7 Statute of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Article 33, paragraph 1. http://www.puma.vojvodina.gov.rs/dokumenti/Engleski/pravni_akti/Statut_APV_en.pdf, accessed 17 October, 2016.

early parliamentary elections was accepted by the President. On 4 March 2016 the President of the Republic of Serbia set 24 April 2016 as the date for early parliamentary elections in Serbia.

Due to irregularities before and during the elections (the forgery of signatures necessary for putting up lists at every level of the elections, breaking the ballot box at a polling station, the lack of checking forms, and a higher number of ballots in the ballot box than the number of eligible voters), tempers flared before the official announcement of the results. After 99.82% of the votes were processed, a heated conversation took place between the far-right, pro-Russian and anti-EU head of the Dveri movement that ran at the elections in coalition with the Democratic Party of Serbia (Demokratska stranka Srbije – DSS) and the president of the Republic Electoral Commission (RIK).⁸ The reaction was understandable since the coalition of the DSS and the Dveri needed only a few more votes to reach the threshold to win seats in the Parliament. However, the “Balkan temperament” cannot be an excuse for the excessive reaction (the aggressive physical attack of one of the members of the Dveri against an analyst of the RIK). In accordance with the decision of the RIK made on 27 April, the election was repeated at 15 polling stations on 4 May because of the irregularities that took place on 24 April.⁹ After the repeated elections, the DSS–Dveri coalition passed the threshold and won 5.03% of the votes, therefore it received 13 seats in the Serbian Parliament. This was partly due to an opposition demonstration organized by the DP on 30 April in Belgrade where the leaders of opposition forces encouraged their sympathizers to support the coalition of the DSS–Dveri at the polling stations where the election was repeated.¹⁰

Republican level parliamentary elections

Since the introduction of the Serbian multi-party system in 1990, the election on 24 April 2016 was the eleventh regular parliamentary and the seventh early parliamentary election.¹¹ Currently, Serbia has 6,739,441 citizens with voting rights and 3,778,923 of them took part in the election. The voter turnout was 56.07%, thus, higher than in 2014 (53.2%). The number of invalid votes was 107,906 (2.86%).

8 “Az ünnepek után újra szavazhatnak több helyen” [New elections to happen at various locations after the holidays], *Pannon RTV*, 29 April, 2016, <http://pannonrtv.com/web2/?p=268249>, accessed 4 May, 2016.

9 “RIK: 15 szavazóhelyen megismétlik a választásokat, egy topolyain is” [RIK: New elections will be held in 15 districts, among them in one of Topolya], *Vajdaság Ma*, 28 April, 2016, www.vajma.info, accessed 4 May, 2016.

10 “Utcára vonult Belgrádban az ellenzék” [Opposition protest on the streets of Belgrade], *Pannon RTV*, 30 April, 2016, <http://pannonrtv.com/web2/?p=268670>, accessed 2 May, 2016.

11 1992, 1993, 2000, 2003, 2008, 2014, 2016 (the author’s listing).

In Serbia, the election of the members of the Parliament takes place in one round. The whole territory of the country is considered one electoral district. Every party (or party alliance) can put together only one closed list in which one in every three candidates (one person among the first three candidates, one person in the second three candidates etc.) should belong to the gender which is less represented on the list.¹² During the distribution of the mandates, the D'Hondt method is used, and parties have to pass the 5% threshold in order to win seats. In order to be able to present a list, parties have to collect at least 10,000 valid signatures. Comparing Serbia's political system with that of other countries in the region, we can see that unlike Slovenia,¹³ Croatia, Kosovo and Romania,¹⁴ Serbia does not apply "the institution of guaranteed seats" for the representatives of national minorities in the national assembly. Nevertheless, the Serbian electoral system is still more favorable than practices applied in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Ukraine, where no forms of preferential access to the Parliament is guaranteed for the representatives of national minorities.¹⁵ In Serbia – similarly to the model used in Poland – people belonging to national minorities do not have to reach the 5% threshold to win seats in the national assembly.¹⁶ Instead, the so-called natural threshold is used which has been applied since 2004. According to this method, in order to calculate the number of votes necessary to win a minority seat, the total number of received votes has to be divided by the number of distributable seats.

On 24 April 2016, 3,270 candidates on 20 lists (parties or party alliances) were competing for 250 seats in the Parliament, and the results were in line with the forecasts of preliminary opinion polls.¹⁷ From the lists, 12 parties (or party alliances) won seats in the Parliament, which made possible the formation of a National Assembly that represents social divisions more precisely than before (in 2014 only seven formations out of the 19 lists received seats). Although the first two places were won again by the list of the Serbian Progressive Party, which gained 131 seats, and that of the Socialist Party of Serbia

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- 12 Law on the election of MPs, article 40, paragraph 1. (18/2004). Retrieved from: www.paragraf.rs; accessed 18 October, 2016.
- 13 Róbert Győri Szabó, "A szlovéniai magyar és olasz kisebbség autonómiája, politikai képviselete" [Autonomy and political representation of the Hungarian and Italian minorities in Slovenia], in *Nemzetfogalmak és etnopolitikai modellek Kelet-Közép-Európában*, ed. Szarka László et al. (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 2007), 311.
- 14 Zsuzsanna Csapó, "A kisebbségek parlamenti képviseletének kérdése az „Új Alkotmány” küszöbén" [The issue of parliamentary representation of minorities at the beginning of the "New Constitution"], *Kül-Világ. A nemzetközi kapcsolatok folyóirata*, 8/1–2, (2011), 88, 92.
- 15 *Ibid.* 95.
- 16 Law on the election of MPs, article 81, paragraph 2. (18/2004). Retrieved from: www.paragraf.rs, accessed 5 May, 2016.
- 17 "Közvélemény-kutatás: Az SNS támogatása töretlen" [Polls: SNS has steady support], *Vajdaság Ma*, 11 April, 2016, <http://www.vajma.info/cikk/szerbia/23518/Kozvelemeny-kutatas-Az-SNS-tamogatottsagatoretlen.html>, accessed 7 May, 2016.

(Socijalistička partija Srbije – SPS), which acquired 29 seats, both parties performed worse than in 2014. In 2014 the SNS won 158 seats, while the SPS received 44 seats.

The Serbian Radical Party (SRS) managed to return to the Parliament with 22 seats. The head of the SRS, Vojislav Šešelj voluntarily surrendered in 2003, but in 2014 – with regard to his bad health condition – he was set free temporarily by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).¹⁸ In its verdict issued on 16 March 2016,¹⁹ the ICTY cleared Vojislav Šešelj of all the charges raised against him earlier.²⁰ Saša Radulović, the former minister for economy of Prime Minister Ivica Dačić (2012–2014) – who resigned after four months in office because his reform ideas had failed – took part in the 2014 elections with his own party list named Saša Radulović – Enough is Enough. That year his party did not manage to pass the threshold, but in 2016 he won 16 seats. The Democratic Party (DP) that represents the political legacy of former party founder and Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić had been a dominant party at national, provincial and local levels until the 2012 elections, but in recent years its popularity has decreased due to internal conflicts within the party (several party splits), and corruption scandals, thus, it won only 16 seats (in 2014 it had 19 MPs). The Dveri and the DSS participated in the 2014 elections separately, but, since neither of them could reach the threshold (3.58% and 4.24% respectively), they joined forces in 2016 and obtained 13 seats.²¹ A new returner in the Serbian Parliament is the Liberal Democratic Party which received 13 seats together with the Social Democratic Party (the former New Democratic Party of Boris Tadić) and the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (Liga socijaldemokrata Vojvodine – LSV).

Five minority lists also managed to win representation in the Serbian Parliament. The largest Hungarian party in Vojvodina, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ) has 4 MPs, the Bosniak Democratic Union of Sandžak and the Sandžak Democratic Action Party each have 2 MPs, the Green Party has 1 MP and the Party for Democratic Action also has 1 MP.

18 International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (international tribunal examining war crimes committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia)

19 “A hágai törvényszék minden vádpont alól felmentette Vojislav Šešeljt” [Vojislav Seselj acquitted of all charges by ICTY], *Vajdaság Ma*, 31 March, 2016, <http://www.vajma.info/cikk/szerbia/23473/A-hagai-torvenyszek-minden-vadpont-alol-felmentette-Vojislav-Seseljt.html>, accessed 28 April, 2016

20 “Lemondott Saša Radulović gazdasági miniszter,” [Minister of Economics Saša Radulović stepped down] *Vajdaság Ma*, 25 January, 2014, <http://www.vajma.info/cikk/szerbia/19931/Lemondott-Sasa-Radulovic-gazdasagi-miniszter.html>, accessed 25 January, 2014.

21 Under circumstances presented above.

Party	Number of seats, 2014	Number of seats, 2016	% of votes, 2016	Number of votes, 2016
Serbian Progressive Party	158	131	48.25	1,823,147
Socialist Party of Serbia	44	29	10.95	413,770
Serbian Radical Party	-	22	8.1	306,052
Saša Radulović – Enough is Enough	-	16	6.02	227,626
Democratic Party	19	16	6.02	227,589
Dveri –Democratic Party of Serbia	-	13	5.04	190,530
Social Democratic Party – Social Democratic League of Vojvodina – Liberal Democratic Party	18	13	5.02	189,564
Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ)	6	4	1.52	56,620
Bosniak Democratic Union of Sandžak	-	2	0.86	32,526
Sandžak Democratic Action Party	3	2	0.80	30,092
Green Party	-	1	0.63	23,890
Party of Democratic Action	2	1	0.43	16,262
Total	250	250	93.64	3,537,668

Table 1: The comparison of the results of the 2014 and 2016 Serbian Parliamentary elections²²

It is a new phenomenon in the Parliament that the SNS will also have an opposition on the right, since two nationalist, anti-EU and pro-Russian coalitions won seats: the SRS and the DSS-Dveri will have 35 MPs altogether. This implies that although they will not be able to stop Serbia’s further modernization, economic stabilization and its accession to the EU, they will make every effort to actively criticize and slow down this process.

22 In the table the traditional names of parties are used instead of the list names which are indicated on the website of the RIK (footnote 14). Parties which did not win seats and the number and percentage of votes they received are not indicated in the table.

Similarly to previous years' elections, out of the Hungarian communities' six parties and one civil society organization (which also nourishes political ambitions) only one party, the VMSZ run at the parliamentary elections with a Hungarian list. The MM and the VMDK – in accordance with their cooperation agreement concluded on 11 March 2016 – intended to take part at every level of the elections in a joint coalition.²³ However, the parliamentary list entitled “Hungarian Movement – For Changes! – VMDK”, which was also supported by the Democratic Community of Croatians, was rejected by the RIK on suspicion of document forgery (1,611 invalid signatures). Therefore, the MM – VMDK coalition did not run at the parliamentary elections. In 2012 the VMDK participated on the mixed minority list named All Together, and in 2014 the party was included on the list of the New Democratic Party led by former President of Serbia Boris Tadić.

On 12 March 2016, the VMSZ submitted its election list named “Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians – Pásztor István” in Belgrade. The motto of the party was “VMSZ – The Stable Point”. Unlike in 2012 and 2014, in 2016 the VMSZ participated in the election in coalition with the VM DP and the Party of Hungarian Unity (Magyar Egység Párt – MEP). The VM DP did not take part in parliamentary elections in 2012 and 2014, while the MEP in 2014 participated on the List of National Communities led by Emir Ešlić but was not successful.²⁴ On the basis of the cooperation agreement between the parties, the VMSZ included the ideas of the VM DP and the MEP in its election program. The program included issues related to economic development, sustainable agriculture and environmental protection, constitutional amendment, the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, the Europe of the regions and cross-border cooperation, national minority rights, a social support system and health care, historic reconciliation (justice and compensation), private and property safety, and the migration crises.²⁵ According to the agreement, the two smaller parties supported the list of the VMSZ in the parliamentary election, but at the provincial and local levels, the candidates of the VM DP and MEP also participated on the list. The parliamentary list and the provincial list had the same designation.

With respect to the results the VMSZ reached in the parliamentary elections, it can be declared that it continues to be the most popular party of the Hungarian community

23 “A Magyar Mozgalom és a VMDK választási együttműködési megállapodást kötött” [Cooperation agreement between the Hungarian Movement and the VMDK] *Vajdaság Ma*, 11 March, 2016, <http://www.vajma.info/cikk/vajdasag/19818/A-Magyar-Mozgalom-es-a-VMDK-valasztasi-egyuttmukodesi-megallapodast-kotott.html>, accessed 11 March, 2016.

24 “Koalíciós megállapodást kötött a VMSZ, a VM DP és a MEP” [Coalition agreement of VMSZ, VM DP, and MEP] *Magyar Szó*, 8 March, 2016 https://www.magjarszo.rs/hu/2991/kozelet_politika/142491/Koal%C3%ADci%C3%B3s-meg%C3%A1llapod%C3%A1st-k%C3%B6t%C3%B6tt-a-VMSZ-a-VM-DP-%C3%A9s-a-MEP.htm, accessed 8 March, 2016.

25 The election Program of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, the Hungarian Democratic Party of Vojvodina and the Party of Hungarian Unity for 2016-2020.

in Vojvodina. With its four MPs (Bálint Pásztor, Elvira Kovács, Árpád Fremond, Zoltán Pék), the VMSZ managed to preserve its ability to defend interests despite the internal conflicts within the party, the emigration of almost 10,000-15,000 Hungarian voters from Vojvodina, the extraordinary strengthening of the Serbian Progressive Party, and the fact that this time – due to the higher number of parties winning seats – minority parties needed more votes in order to pass the threshold. In the 2014 elections, the VMSZ won six seats and had five state secretaries (tourism, agriculture, infrastructure, social affairs and health care) in a more favorable political milieu (historic reconciliation, property restitution, Hungarian citizenship, the closeness of Hungarian elections). After the elections, the VMSZ and the SNS signed a similar coalition agreement to the one of 2014, consisting of 11 points.²⁶ Due to this coalition agreement the program of the VMSZ became part of the government program.

The Hungarian Civic Association, – which participated in the 2012 elections on the list of the All Together party, the joint list of national minorities,²⁷ and in 2014 on the List of National Communities, – in 2016 did not participate in the national parliamentary elections. The Hungarian Hope Movement, which also joined the List of National Communities in 2014, suspended its activity for an indefinite period in September 2014.²⁸

Government formation at the republican level

The Serbian Parliament held its inaugural session on 3 June 2016. Similarly to the past two years, Maja Gojković became the speaker of the national assembly. Between 2004 and 2008 she was a member of the SRS and the mayor of Novi Sad, the only female mayor in the history of the town so far. The new government was formed on 11 August, led again by the chairman of the Serbian Progressive Party, Aleksandar Vučić. In its exposé presented on 9 August, Vučić summarized the government's priorities in 10 points. According to these points, the key goals of the Serbian government will continue to include EU integration

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- 26 EU integration, the situation of Vojvodina, regional and infrastructure developments, large investments, health care, social protection, agriculture, the participation of national minorities in the public sphere, minority rights, law enforcement and justice, Hungarian-Serbian historic reconciliation (property restitution, rehabilitation), cooperation with churches and local governments (the legal status of local communities)
- 27 Eszter Herner-Kovács, "Szerbiai választások 2012. Az új szerb politikai erőtér és az elmúlt egy év tanulságai, különös tekintettel a magyar érdekképviselet alakulására" [Elections in Serbia in 2012: The new Serbian political landscape and the developments of the last year from the Hungarian minority's perspective], *Magyar Kisebbség* 18, no. 2 (2013): 92–113: 93.
- 28 "Az MRM felfüggeszti politikai tevékenységét" [MRM to suspend its political activity], *Magyar Remény Mozgalom*, 26 September 2014, <http://www.mrm.rs/memorandumok/1141-az-mrm-felfueggeszti-a-politikai-tevekenyseget-20140925>, accessed 26 September, 2014.

and issues related to it, macroeconomic stability, the improvement of the efficiency of the work environment and public administration, regional development, infrastructure development, education reform, health care, human rights (minority rights and migration constitute separate chapters), demography, climate change, and fighting against crime and corruption. The new government will have four deputy prime ministers, sixteen ministers, and three ministers without portfolio.

Considering Serbia's future domestic and foreign policy, it is an important sign that the new prime minister's first official visit led to Moscow – a traditional pro-Serbian center – where he met Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation.²⁹ At the same time, he cancelled his planned visits to Brussels and the United States of America. During the meeting in Moscow, the Russian president expressed hope that there will be forces again in the new Serbian government which consider the preservation and further development of excellent Russian-Serbian relations as crucial.³⁰ With regard to this fact, it is not surprising that the SPS which is known for having good relations with Russia became part of the Serbian government again, despite the fact that relations between the two parties are not excellent (because of disagreements in the field of economic reforms. Moreover, the SNS had the necessary majority to form a government, therefore, it was not necessary to enter into coalition with the SPS. On the basis of statements made after the elections, the VMSZ seemed to be the only certain coalition partner for the Serbian Progressive Party.³¹ However, considering that the current Serbian constitution (which was adopted in a hurry in 2006) has to be amended during Serbia's accession to the EU,³² and as a two-thirds majority is necessary for the amendment, the invitation of other coalition partners was not

29 According to negotiating chapter 31 entitled Foreign, security and defence policy and the 26 point of the Negotiation Framework, Serbia has to accord its policy with third countries and its standpoints represented in international organizations with the EU's foreign policy and standpoints. So far, Serbia's efforts have not been moving in this direction. An obvious sign of this was that Serbia did not join the sanctions the EU issued against Russia in 2014 and despite the bad EU-Russia relations, continued its intensive, strong cooperation with Russia. This is partly understandable if we think of Russia's pro-Belgrade attitude in the issue of Kosovo and the balance of trade between the two countries. According to the official standpoint of the European Commission (EC), the EU will not be expanded with new member states until 2020. Therefore, Serbia will have enough time in the next years to meet the requirements of EU accession. According to the EC's 2015 annual report, Serbia met the requirements of accession in the field of foreign policy in 63% (in comparison, Montenegro – which is also an applicant country – did 100% in this field according to the EC's annual report).

30 "Putyin: Oroszország számít a Szerbiával való kapcsolata további fejlődésére" [Putin: Russia expects further development in the relationship with Serbia], *Vajdaság Ma*, 26 May 2016. <http://www.vajma.info/cikk/szerbia/23650/Putyin-Oroszország-számít-a-Szerbiával-való-kapcsolata-további-fejlodesere.html>, accessed 27 May, 2016.

31 "Vučić: A VMSZ az egyetlen biztos koalíciós partner" [Vučić: VMSZ is the only certain coalition partner], *Vajdaság Ma*, 27 April 2016. április. <http://www.vajma.info/cikk/szerbia/23575/Vucic-A-VMSZ-az-egyeten-biztos-koaliciois-partner.html>, accessed 27 April, 2016.

32 "Pásztor István: Szerbia nem rendezhető az alkotmány módosítása nélkül" [István Pásztor: Serbia cannot be fixed without the constitution's amendment], *Vajdaság Ma*, 13 February, 2014. <http://www.vajma.info/cikk/szerbia/20025/Pasztor-Istvan-Szerbia-nem-rendezhető-az-alkotmány-modositasa-nelkul.html>, accessed 13 February, 2014.

a surprise. With regard to earlier observations, repeated cooperation between the SPS and a wider coalition with the aim to establish a stronger consensus and to counteract far-right political parties also seemed possible. Planned reforms and measures that need wide social support and might decrease the government's popularity, as well as the risk factors for certain decisions, contributed to the formation of a shared multi-party government.

Similarly to 2014 and 2016, the VMSZ intends to be present in the government at the level of state secretaries, in fields which are particularly important for the Hungarian community. Taking this purpose into account, the VMSZ nominated Ferenc Vickó for the position of state secretary for health, Annamária Vicsek for state secretary of education, Imre Kern for state secretary for infrastructure, and Atilla Juhász for state secretary for agriculture. The VMSZ lacked one additional mandate to be able to form a faction, but eventually managed to obtain it through the candidate of another national minority party, the Party of Democratic Action (Fatmir Hasani), which represents the Albanian community in Serbia. Considering the fact that the VMSZ is cooperating with another national minority party, the formation and representation of joint positions is likely to be successful.

The subjects of the coalition agreement signed by the VMSZ and the SNS on 14 August 2016 in Belgrade and the one signed on 27 April 2014 are completely identical and cover all fields of social life. A change compared to the previous coalition agreement adopted two years ago is that the elements of certain fields (agriculture, historic reconciliation, regional development) which have been partly realized are not included in the new document, while issues which require further efforts to be settled became more detailed (regional and infrastructure developments, large investments, national minorities' participation in the public sphere, health care).³³

Provincial level elections

In the Vojvodina provincial election held on 24 April 2016, 1,729,201 people had the right to vote and could vote for one of the fifteen lists. The voter turnout was 55.41%. At the last elections, in 2012, turnout was 58.17%.

33 "A Vajdasági Magyar Szövetség és a Szerb Haladó Párt által 2016. augusztus 14-én megkötött koalíciós szerződés" [Coalition agreement between the VMSZ and the SNS], *VMSZ.org.rs*, <http://www.vmsz.org.rs/hirek/tortenesek/koalicios-szerzodes-0>, accessed 15 August, 2016.

According to a decision of the provincial House of Representatives made on 6 January 2014,³⁴ the 120 members of the provincial parliament – similarly to parliamentary elections – are elected through a party list system instead of the earlier mixed electoral system. The initiative of the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV) was not supported by the other two provincial government parties, the VMSZ and the DP, but due to the support of the other parties the initiative was realized with 62 votes in favor. Similarly to parliamentary elections at the republican level, the threshold in the provincial parliament was 5%, but minority parties received seats on the basis of the natural threshold. In order to be able to run a list, parties had to collect at least 6,000 valid signatures. In the case of minority party lists this number was 3,000.

In the provincial elections held in a mixed electoral system on 6 May 2012, the DP won almost 21% of the votes, obtaining 58 seats, and formed a government in coalition with the VMSZ (7 seats) and the LSV (10 seats). Among the Hungarian parties in Vojvodina, the MRM also launched a separate provincial list, while the VMDK and the MPSZ participated on the All Together minority list. However, only the VMSZ managed to win mandates.³⁵

Since the composition of the national and provincial governments formed in 2012 was different, relations between the two levels were characterized by continuous tension in the past four years. Tension was also present within the provincial government, because since 2014 the VMSZ has been cooperating with the Serbian Progressive Party. The tension was further increased by two decisions of the Constitutional Court made on 10 July 2012 and 5 December 2013, respectively. One of the two decisions declared that 22 provisions of the law on scope of the authority of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina were completely or partially unconstitutional, while the second one declared the same about 48 provisions of the Statute of the Province.

The Autonomous Province of Vojvodina has a long history. Its issues have been on the agenda since the beginning of the 1848 freedom fight, expressed in the form of different purposes and intentions. In 1848, it provided a platform for the realization of Serbian efforts for self-government. After 1918, it served as a field for the realization of economic, legal and cultural autonomy endeavors of the non-Serbian population. The 1974 federal constitution of Yugoslavia expanded significantly the autonomy of the two provinces:

34 “Új választási rendszer a Vajdaságban, minimális többséggel törölték el a vegyes rendszert” [New electoral system in Vojvodina], *Vajdaság Ma*, 6 June 2014. <http://www.vajma.info/cikk/vajdasag/17270/Uj-valasztasi-rendszer-Vajdasagban--minimalis-tobbseggel-toroltek-el-a-vegyes-rendszert.html>, accessed 6 July, 2016.

35 For the results of the 2012 provincial and local elections, see the study indicated in footnote 27.

Vojvodina and Kosovo (the latter gained independence subsequently),³⁶ raising them to an almost equal position with the republic of the federal state. Constitutional amendments urged by Milošević at the beginning of the 1990s were realized in the spirit of recentralization, as a result of which the independence of the provinces was almost completely eliminated. A step forward in this field took place only in February 2002, when the 2002 law on the scope of authority of certain autonomous provinces (the so-called Omnibus law) was adopted. Due to this law, the province regained power in several fields of public administration it had been deprived of in the 1990s. However, these changes did not bring real power for the province, since its political, economic and financial independence was not realized.³⁷

Returning to the issue of conflicts between the Belgrade and Novi Sad governments, it can be claimed that in addition to the Constitutional Court's decisions, cooperation between the republican and provincial parliaments was also hampered by demonstrations organized by the Serbian Progressive Party to weaken provincial power. As a result of these conflicts, no progress took place in the issues that are important for the province and for the Hungarian community (which constitutes 13.53% of the province's population) living there, such as the financing of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, or the law on spheres of action. Furthermore, instead of fulfilling the requirement set by the Constitution to provide the Province with 7% of the budget of Serbia, the central government allocated only a part of this sum to Vojvodina.³⁸ As the result of the elections held in April 2016, these conflicts were resolved: the SNS won the elections with 63 seats (in 2012 this number was only 22), and the DP's positions weakened significantly, obtaining only 10 seats (instead of the 58 in 2012), and thus its influence in the province diminished. Further parties that entered the provincial parliament include the SPS which gained 12 seats (in 2012 it had 13), the SRS which received 10 seats (in 2012 it had 5), the LSV with 9 seats (in 2012 this number was 10), the VMSZ with 6 seats (in 2012 it had 7), the "Saša Radulović – Enough is Enough" winning 7 seats (in 2012 this party did not exist), the "Hungarian

36 Among the 28 members states of the EU, Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Slovakia and Romania still refuse to recognize the independence of Kosovo.

37 In accordance with the provisions of the 2006 Constitutions, in 2009 the Statute of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina – the highest-level law of the province – and the law defining the spheres of action of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina were adopted. On 22 May 2014, the completed statute became part of the Serbian legal system. The document represents a centralizing approach, at the same time, it declares that national minorities – including the members of the Hungarian community – are equal citizens with Serbs. The adoption of a new law on the scope of competence is the task of the newly formed provincial and republican parliament. Concerning the autonomy of the province and local governments, it can be considered a step forward that according to a law on public property adopted in 2011, properties which were nationalized in 1995 must be restituted.

38 According to point 4 of article 184 of the Serbian Constitution, the budget of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina constitutes at least 7% of the budget of the Republic of Serbia, under the condition that 3/7 of the 7% must be allocated to the financing of large-scale projects/works.

Movement for Autonomy – Dr. Tamás Korhecz – VMDK – Csonka Áron” with 2 seats (in 2012 it did not exist), and the Green Party with 1 seat (in 2012 it did not exist).

Party	Number of seats, 2012	Number of seats, 2016	% of votes, 2016	Number of votes, 2016
Serbian Progressive Party	22	63	44.48	428,452
Socialist Party of Serbia	13	12	8.86	85,311
Serbian Radical Party	5	10	7.66	73,742
Democratic Party	58	10	7.24	69,740
Democratic Party of Serbia	4	-	-	-
U-Turn	1	-	-	-
Social Democratic League of Vojvodina	10	9	6.43	61,979
Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ)	7	6	4.88	47,034
Saša Radulović – Enough is enough	-	7	5.54	53,317
Hungarian Movement	-	2	1.71	16,452
Green Party	-	1	1.14	10,970
Total	120	120	87.94	846,997

Table 2: Comparison of the results of the 2012 and 2016 provincial elections³⁹

39 In this table the traditional names of parties are used instead of the names of the party list as they are indicated on the website of the RIK. Parties which did not win seats and the number and percentage of votes they received are not indicated in the table. Retrieved from: <http://pik.skupstinavojvodine.gov.rs.>, accessed 15 May, 2016.

Government formation at the provincial level

The provincial parliament held its inaugural meeting on 2 June 2016. The head of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ), István Pásztor was elected as president, winning 91 supporting votes. He was elected president for the second time, which is unprecedented in the history of the provincial parliament. Similarly to the parliamentary elections at the national level, the provincial government was formed by the Serbian Progressive Party which won the majority of seats. Igor Mirović,⁴⁰ member of the SNS's board became the head of the provincial government. The provincial government has twelve ministries, and its members are recruited from the SNS (63 representatives), the SPS (12 representatives), and the VMSZ (6 representatives). The parties which form the government at the provincial level possess 81 seats in the 120-member provincial parliament, thus, they have a two-thirds majority.

The priority fields of the provincial government include the encouragement of investments, the creation of new workplaces, the strengthening of relations between national minorities and a more effective use of cross-border EU subsidies. With these fields, the main purpose is the further development of infrastructure at national and provincial levels, as well as the attraction of investors to the region.

In order to implement these aims, the Vojvodina Development Agency was established, following the model of the Serbian Development Agency. Another key goal is to further enhance these efforts by downsizing the political-bureaucracy model and establishing the business model.⁴¹ In the case of large projects, the leaders of the provincial government plan to introduce a joint financing system at national, provincial and local level through the restructuring of the current financing system. The idea seems possible since it also enjoys political support at the national level.

40 He started his political career very early. He was extremely young when he became president of the Novi Sad committee of the Serbian Radical Party. Between 1992 and 1994, he was one of the vice-presidents of the Novi Sad body of representatives. Between 1992 and 1996 he was an MP at the republican parliament, and between 1996 and 2000 he was a representative of the provincial parliament. In 1998-2000 he was deputy minister for finance, and in 2008 – after quitting the Serbian Radical Party – became a founding member of the Serbian Progressive Party. Between 2008 and 2012, he was the deputy speaker of the provincial parliament. In 2008, he ran for the mayor's post in Novi Sad, but did not manage to win. Between September 2013 and March 2014, he was the minister responsible for regional development and local governments in Ivica Dačić's government.

41 "Mirović: A befektetések és a munkahelyteremtés az új vajdasági kormány prioritásai" [Mirović: Investments and creating jobs are the priorities of the Vojvodina government], *Vajdaság Ma*, 13 July, 2016 <http://www.vajma.info/cikk/vajdasag/20351/Mirovic-A-befektetesek-es-a-munkahelyteremtes-az-uj-vajdasagi-kormany-prioritasai.html>, accessed 13 July, 2016.

Where are we headed?

The absolute winner of the elections held on 24 April 2016 is the Serbian Progressive Party: it managed to win in 150 towns instead of the previous 55, and it also won in Kosovo.⁴² In the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, it won in 41 out of 45 towns, while in the previous years it had won only in 3-4 towns. Due to its populist realpolitik pursued in the past three years, the Serbian Progressive Party became more popular than the DP was in its golden age (between 2008 and 2012). In the 2016-2020 term, the SNS and its allies will be suitably authorized to lay the basis for a Serbia which can give appropriate answers to the political, economic and social challenges and problems of the 21st century. In order to realize these aims, it will be necessary to implement reforms in all fields of social life, to continue the Economic Governance,⁴³ to further develop regional cooperation and good neighborly relations,⁴⁴ to keep the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue alive and make it more dynamic, to speed up Serbia's EU accession negotiations and gradually adjust the country's foreign policy to the EU.⁴⁵ However, the speeding up of Serbia's EU integration and its accession to the European Union – which are the main priorities of the government – might not be easy tasks. Croatia, which has been a member state of the EU since 1 July 2013, was not willing to support Serbia's accession to the EU, only under very strict conditions. Croatia was also against the opening of certain negotiation chapters examining the realization of the rule of law in Serbia, namely, chapter 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights) and number 24 (Justice, freedom and security), and agreed to support their opening only after strong international pressure. Although accession negotiations with Serbia started

42 There are 165 townships altogether (45 townships are situated in the territory of Vojvodina, and 120 in Central Serbia).

43 In the case of countries of the Western Balkans which want to access the EU, the European Union pays particular attention to compliance with economic criteria. One of the main pillars of this is Economic Governance. In accordance with this, from 2015 countries which would like to become EU member states, have to set up a National Economic Reform (NGR) program, following the model of the European Semester which is operating in member states. The NGR consists of two parts: it outlines the medium-term frames of macroeconomic and budgetary politics and decides on the structural reforms necessary to promote competitiveness and development. See: Guidance for National Economic Reform Programme, European Commission, October 2014.

44 On the basis of point 16 of the general EU standpoint on accession negotiations which Serbia adopted at the session of the General Affairs Council on 17 December 2013, and point 23 of the Negotiating Framework which forms part of it (Basic principles regulating negotiations).

45 According to a statement by David McAllister – a German-born rapporteur on Serbia of the European People's Party – made at the conference of the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans on foreign and security policy strategies held in Belgrade on 24 July, 2016, Serbia will accord its foreign and security policy with that of the EU when the appropriate time comes. In contrast to this, Serbia was called on again in the EP's 2014 and 2015 annual reports (point 11 and point 7, respectively) to accord its foreign and security policy with that of the EU as soon as possible.

officially on 21 January 2014, the opening of the first chapters (32 – financial supervision, 35 – Kosovo) took place only on 14 December 2015 as a result of a successful dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. The opening of further chapters in the first half of 2016 was supported by Croatia only on one condition: if Serbia annuls the law which operates on the basis of the Court of Justice in the Hague and makes it possible that people who committed war crime against Serbs during the Yugoslav War not on the territory of Serbia but in some other country (in Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina) might be brought to justice in Serbia. A further reason why Croatia was trying to block the opening of certain negotiation chapters was that Serbia has not yet adopted strategies and action plans dealing with war crimes and did not settle the parliamentary representation of the Croatian community living in Serbia. At last – due to intense international pressure – Croatia allowed the opening of the 23 and 24 negotiating chapters on July 4 2016 at the Western Balkan Leaders' Summit held in Paris. The opening of the chapters took place on 18 July 2016 at the third EU-Serbia intergovernmental conference.

This attitude of Croatia is not surprising at all if we know the history of its EU integration process. In 2008, Slovenia – who had already become a member of the EU by the time of Croatia's accession negotiations – hindered the opening and closing of certain negotiating chapters which were part of Croatia's EU accession process because of border disputes with Croatia (first of all, because of the dispute over the Gulf of Piran).⁴⁶ This phenomenon is extremely interesting with respect to the fact that in 2004, during the time of Slovenia's accession, the EU did not make Slovenia's accession conditional upon the settling of border disputes. At the same time, it is important to mention that Slovenia's accession was not smooth either. On the basis of an agreement concluded by Italy and Yugoslavia in 1983, Italy obliged Slovenia to compensate those Italians who escaped from the territory of Slovenia after 1945, and the EU supported this demand as a condition for Slovenia's accession.⁴⁷

Going back to the Serbian elections, it can be declared that the VMSZ's constructive participation first in opposition (2012-2014) and later in government (2014-2016) proved to be a good decision which contributed considerably to the improvement of Serbian-Hungarian relations. Due to the VMSZ's and its president's contributions, the process of

46 Edit Lőrinczné Bence, “*Az Európai Unió bővítése elmélete és gyakorlata a horvát csatlakozás tükrében*” [Theory and practice of EU enlargement in the light of the Croatian accession] (PhD dissertation, Széchenyi István Egyetem, Regionális-és Gazdaságtudományi Doktori Iskola, Győr, 2009), 208–209.

47 Győri Szabó, “A szlovéniai magyar és olasz kisebbség autonómiája,” 321.

historic reconciliation has begun and has brought several tangible results.⁴⁸ On 3 March 2016 the Serbian government adopted the Minority Action Plan as part of the 23rd negotiation chapter entitled Justice and fundamental rights, and several law amendments and measures have also been adopted aiming at the realization of the proportional employment of national minorities in Serbia. It can be considered a serious achievement that according to the decision of the Council of the European Union, during its accession process Serbia had to develop a separate minority action plan by the end of 2015, in addition to the general action plan connected with the 23rd chapter. For the completion of the minority action plan, the Serbian Government set up a working group in spring 2015 that included every concerned government body and – in accordance with the inclusive methods urged by the EU – the representatives of national minorities. The completed Minority Action Plan consists of 11 chapters focusing on the most important issues affecting national minorities and suggests possible solutions (Personnel and status questions, The prohibition of discrimination, Education and information, Freedom of religion, Oral and written language use, Education, Possibilities of democratic participation, suitable employment of the members of national minorities in the public sphere and public companies, national councils of national minorities, economic situation of the members of national minorities and international cooperation).

The VMSZ and the Hungarian National Council (Magyar Nemzeti Tanács – MNT) are both satisfied with the structure of the Minority Action Plan since it dedicates separate chapters to the issues that are important for national minorities. From a Hungarian point of view, it is an extremely important result that during the development of the Minority Action Plan, Serbia was obliged to take into account the proposals of the Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe (ET) which are laid down in the committee's Third Opinion on Serbia. Therefore, the mechanisms of the Council of Europe concerning the protection of national minorities are relevant from the perspective of Serbia's EU accession process. The completion of the Minority Action Plan can be considered a success, especially in the light of the provisions of the 1993 Copenhagen criteria and the Treaty of Lisbon on national minorities.

Due to the VMSZ' ability to enforce interests and the openness of the Serbian state, the legal basis of Hungarians' permanence and prosperity in their homeland was established (Law on the rights and freedoms of national minorities, Law on national councils), and as

48 In addition to the fact that the two presidents paid tribute together to the victims in Csúrog/Čurugon on 26 June 2013, other legal acts also took place. A declaration was adopted by the National Assembly on 21 June 2013 which condemns actions committed against the Hungarian civilian population in Vojvodina in 1944–45. Furthermore, on 30 October 2014, the 1945 resolution which declared the collective guilt of Hungarians in three Hungarian towns in Vojvodina (Csúrog, Zsablya and Mozsor) was annulled by the Serbian Government.

a result of the Hungarian Government's decision made on 18 November 2015, the main conditions for economic prosperity were also laid down: at the end of 2015 a HUF 50 billion regional and economic development program was launched to help the Hungarian community in Vojvodina.

Despite the political milieu of the past 15 years which favored the enforcement of minority rights, the Hungarian community in Vojvodina has been fighting with the problems of poverty and social exclusion as a result of Serbia's economic collapse that took place in the 1990's South Slavic War. The aim of the regional and economic development program in Vojvodina is to improve this situation. The lack of programs aimed at the promotion of Vojvodina's catching-up process is the idea that "*there is no need to launch programs and measures to help social groups or regions which cannot be reached by economic development.*"⁴⁹ The tendencies of the past years have overwritten this idea and there appeared a strong need to adopt measures aimed at settling economic problems. With respect to the results the VMSZ reached in the elections, it is obvious that the party and its president will continue to play an important role in the development of Hungarian-Serbian strategic cooperation which has gained strength in recent years.

49 Emma Clarence, "Társadalmi struktúrák és társadalmi szolgáltatások" [Social structures and social services], in *Regionális átalakulási folyamatok a Nyugat-Balkán országában*, ed. Gyula Horváth and Zoltán Hajdú (Pécs: MTA Regionális Kutatások Központja, 2010): 333.