Vojvodina — The struggle for autonomy
Omnibus Law on Vojvodina — A specific legislative step towards decentralization in post-Milosevic Serbia

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1. Introduction
The political issues related to the northern province of the Republic of Serbia — Vojvodina — are only exceptionally on the front-pages of newspapers. In the shadow of the Croat, Bosnian and Kosovo conflicts, however, there is a more or less quiet but long-standing political struggle which is pending between Belgrade and Novi Sad on the issue of autonomy. Moreover, this struggle is also pending between the people and the politicians in Vojvodina itself. From 1945, when the autonomy of Vojvodina was established within the Republic of Serbia, there has been a constant struggle between political powers pushing for more autonomy and those fighting for centralization. After the 12-year long domination of the Milosevic policy of centralization in Vojvodina and Serbia (between 1988 and 2000) and after the October 2000 changes winds of change are blowing. As part of the current ruling ‘Democratic Opposition of Serbia’ pro-autonomy political organizations and regional and minority political parties advocating decentralized or even federal Serbia have gained more power and influence in Vojvodina and in Serbia in its entirety.

The qualitatively new political situation has created new challenges: How, and to what extent, can one reform the inherited centralized state system and administration? Should decentralization and autonomy be among the legislative and policy priorities, or should it be postponed to wait in line behind reforms in economics, the monetary and banking system, the media, the judiciary, the police etc.? Should an asymmetric or symmetric model of regionalism and decentralization be followed in Serbia?

These are only a few out of the many questions which arise with regard to the newly-established coalition Governments and Assemblies in both Vojvodina and Serbia. As a compromise (but also leading to divisions) between various interests in the ruling coalition, after a six-month long negotiation process between the Serbian and Vojvodina Executive, the Serbian National Assembly with a minimum majority enacted the ‘Law on the Definition of some Powers of the Autonomous Province’ , popularly called the ‘Omnibus Law on Vojvodina’, that within one legislative act, re-established the autonomous powers, competencies and functions of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in more than twenty areas of social life.

This article has no ambition to provide a complex overview of the political

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history of Vojvodina, neither to analyze the geostrategic and political relevance of the topic, nor to demonstrate the complexity of the political struggle in Serbia over the status of Vojvodina. This article primarily focuses on the background, content, importance and implementation of the ‘Omnibus Law on Vojvodina’. It tries to answer the question to what extent this controversial legislative act is able to accommodate the demands from Vojvodina for ‘substantial autonomy’ with the rather rigid centralized constitutional framework established by the Milosevic regime: 1990 Serbian Constitution? Furthermore, the article will analyze the political divisions between the major Serbian political parties that were created around the issue of Vojvodina and decentralization in general.

Notwithstanding this, before dealing with the above-mentioned questions for a better understanding of the issue at stake, it also seems to be necessary to provide the reader with at least some basic information on the province itself and the political events which have made the enactment of the ‘Omnibus Law on Vojvodina’ possible.

2. Some general information on Vojvodina
With a territory of 21,506 km² and a population of over two million, the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (APV) in the Republic of Serbia (RS), Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) is slightly larger than the two former Yugoslav republics, of Slovenia and Macedonia. APV has several historical, geographical, cultural, ethnic and economic characteristics making it substantially different from the remainder of the Republic of Serbia. Historically, this part of the country differs from the remainder of Serbia by the fact that it was never a part of any Serb state before the end of World War I, and it traditionally belongs to Central-Europe rather than to the Balkans. Furthermore, APV has an unique ethnic composition resulting primarily from the post-Ottoman resettlement of the territory by the Austrian Crown in the 17th and 18th centuries. Even today, after several waves of Serb colonization during the 20th century, and the expulsion of the numerous Jewish and German population from Vojvodina between 1944-1948, the ethnic map of Vojvodina is uniquely colourful. According to the latest published census in 1991, alongside 1,143,723 Serbs (58% of the population), there are 339,491 Hungarians (17%), 74,808 Croats, 63,545 Slovaks, 38,809 Romanians, 24,366 Gypsies, 17,652 Ruthenians and several thousand Macedonians, Germans and Ukrainians living in the Province.

Although it is to be expected that due to the massive influx of Serb refugees from Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo the ethnic picture has changed during the last eleven years, and the Serbs now constitute more then 60% of the Vojvodina population, there are still sub-regions which are mainly populated by ethnic

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