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Multiculturalism and Acculturation in a Changing Multicultural Environment. Vojvodina and Bela Crkva

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The Vojvodina region is Europe in a nutshell – today, there are officially living 26 nations with their own languages, customs, traditions and an overall common cultural heritage in the autonomous Serbian province. The multicultural environment grew heavily during the 18th and 19th century due to wartime and colonialist politics. Bela Crkva as an example of a typical Vojvodian city shows, how a multicultural and multilingual society developed and sustained throughout the past 200 years.

Keywords*: Vojvodina, Bela Crkva, multinational/lingual society, acculturation*

1. Ethnicity and identity – an introduction

Ethnicity or acculturation – the inhabitants of the Vojvodina and her surrounding neighbour regions were confronted with that question several times throughout the past 200 years. In the 19th century, one could only define his identity within his nationality – although, nationalism was its very beginning. Ethnic identity describes a group with symbolic or through acting constituted character formed by individuals. Therefore, interaction is common and required for the creation of self-perspective, formation of the group and so on. It is a process of system of interactions (Lončar 2018, 204), hence not static and possible (but hard) to change the criteria of when someone is able to become a member of the group or to leave it (Perchinig 1988, 132). A awareness of perception of the self and others is often tied to a common language, common area of settlement or common history – in the Vojvodina we already face two of these characters, which are fluent and characters of a group but not for all. Especially the language is important in multicultural and multi-ethnical societies as the one described – since Serbian was and is used as communication device, but not for defining the ethnicity. If

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restrictedly described, it enables the society in its development; also, individual changes within the group are more difficult and can increase the number conflicts within the group as well as between groups living next to each other. The status of the ethnic group (being the majority or the minority, being stigmatized or glorified) as well as its position within the social power structures (Perchinig 1988, 135) should be considerated as well while researching an area or group. Local identity often equals with ethnicity, if we have monocultural, monolingual spaces, visible in Europe in the national state centres, but not at their peripheries or other (historical grown) regions like the Vojvodina. But, local identity needs local society, people who practise customs and traditions, speak a language and so on, otherwise it will extinct, transform into another hybrid identity or acculturate, which could lead to trauma-like experiences within the community and the loss of power in the state's structures (Reiterer 1988, 172-173).

Due to demographic or economic reasons, an ethnic group "naturally" increases and decreases[2], often wars or politics and their consequences are the main reasons. The modern nation state in its process of formation needed or better wanted ethnic homogeneous areas and therefore often tended to intern colonization. This means, that the hegemonial claims of one (main) national culture become the criteria of the nation state and therefore must sustain traditions, customs, folklore or popular belief to create the nation state. Mostly, the state uses education and the cultivation of national institutions/organizations to enhance to impose its will. Language therefore is one of the most effective devices. If kindergarten and schools teach in only one language, other used languages or dialects become inferior not only to their speakers but to society in general. Cultural traditions, which do not fit into the "national culture" are degraded as old-fashioned, cultural outsiders (hence people that speak a different language, have different beliefs, dress different etc.) are marginalized and expelled via scholar and academic socialization. Other languages, faiths or ethnic symbols are marked as subculture or folkloric and often used by populistic propaganda (Blaschke 1988, 328-329). Many decide to acculturate in fear of repressions and marginalization, a way that is not offered to members of every ethnic group (groups with very low social power/capital or without institutions/a "motherland" like the Roma and Sinti for example).

Strict borders define nation states; borderland regions like the Vojvodina do not fit. The region defines itself as multi in every kind of way more or less integrates all its inhabitants. Ethnicity could easily develop in periphery regions,

[2] Southeast Europe was and is an area of heavily demographic changes due to economic reasons. Reed for example Pollack, Martin. 2010. *Kaiser von Amerika. Die große Flucht aus Gallizien.* Zsolnay Verlag, Wien

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because every day experiences met confirmed ideologies. The ethnic consciousness was supported by small traditions, religion, popular knowledge, oral traditions, identification via language, localism and the easy identification of aliens (Blaschke 1988, 330)[3] which means that living traditions are just another expression of cultural pluralism instead of multiculturalism. Still, Vojvodina provided and provides a multicultural environment – how it came to be, with a special focus on the town of *Bela Crkva*, will be described below.

2. How Vojvodina's multicultural society came to be

The nowadays autonomous province of Serbia, Vojvodina is "sui generis a multinational and, even more importantly, a multicultural region," said Tomić in his contribution Vojvodina - a region between Middle Europe and the Balkans (2005:101). Visible in this region is that a co-existence of different ethnic, religious and linguistic groups on small territory is possible. The legacy of the colonization-policy forced by Maria Theresa and her successors from the 18th century onwards is still visible based on the micro- and macrostructure of the population's profile and in townscapes. Count Claudius Florimund de Mercy (1666-1734) shaped the image of the region more than others, both as a field marshal and as a commanding general in the Banat and later Governor of the Timisoara Banat. After about 200 years under Ottoman rule, after the treaties of Karlowitz (1699) and Passarowitz (1718) the area got under the rule of the Habsburgs and should remain within the monarchy until the end of the First World War. The Timisoara Banat, which included most of today Vojvodina, south-eastern parts of today Hungary and western Romania, lasted from 1718 to 1778 and was then subsumed in the kingdom of Hungary.

During this period of intense colonization, settlers from all over the Holy Roman Empire arrived as well as Armenians, Bulgarians, French, Jews[4], Magyars, Polish, Roma, Romanians, Rusines (or Ruthenes, by today's understanding Ukrainian), Slovak and Czech people (Босић 1985, 14). Vojvodina, which has been deprived of population by previous wars and sovereignty changes, was raised multi-ethnic and should retain this character until today. However, this also resulted in fears of the long-established (Serbian / Romanian and Orthodox)

[3] We can also observe this on the basis of topographical names like Češko selo, or by multilingual topograpohical signs in the whole Vojvodina area.

[4] I myself do not consider Jews or members of any religious community as independent ethnicity, but as inhabitant of the country he/she is living in with f.i. Jewish belief. Because "Jew" in literature is used as ethnical marker, it will be used in that way in the article, remark of author.

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population, who now feared Germanization and Catholicism (Jankulov 1961, 10). The composition of the population did not change significantly until the First World War, around the time of the Russian Revolution (1917) also Russians settled in Vojvodina. The Jewish population was almost completely wiped out by the Holocaust, of formerly 20,200 people of Jewish faith in Banat and Vojvodina (1941), which shaped both cityscape and social life, only 2,900 survived the Nazi genocide (Oschließ 2004). Since the end of the Second World War, the German population has been marginal (both voluntary and forcibly forced "return" and displacement / killing). Since the socialist Yugoslavia led a decidedly minority-friendly policy (at least according to the constitution), which has been continued since the emergence of the Republic of Serbia, the multi-ethnic character of this region has been preserved until today. Because of its natural resources and topography, the region was well suited for agriculture, and in the 20th century, it was called the "Yugoslavian granary" (cf. Deiss[3] 2003, 12; Conrad 1952, 34; Winkler 2015, 182; Sundhaussen 2012, 172). However, not only economically, but also politically, the region took a supremacy, so the literacy rate was, for example, at the time of the Second World War compared to the southern areas very high (Portmann 2011, 562).

Due to the consequences of the World wars, as well as other areas in south-eastern Europe the Vojvodina was partially depopulated, new colonization waves took place starting from the 1950ies, which lasted until the 70ies. Serbs have now been increasingly settled in the region (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro etc.). Especially in the 1980ies, Vojvodina had increasingly to fight for her autonomy (Radosavljević, Đorđević 2016, 455-486) although, according to the Constitution of the SFR Yugoslavia, Vojvodina, like Kosovo and Metohija belonged to the Federative Republic of Serbia, she had the status of an autonomous province and was de facto independent, with "Territorial and sovereign social-political autonomy" (Constitution of SFRJ 1963). Under the reign of Slobodan Milošević[5], constitutional changes de facto abolished autonomy (Brunnbauer 2011, 646) in 1989, like a postlude to a policy of constructing ethnic conflicts and minority problems (N.N. 32/1988), which he had pursued for years before and aimed at a united "Greater Serbia". It was not until the 2000s that Vojvodina was able to regain the previous autonomy status. In 2004, Vojvodina got a new flag and

[5] Slobodan Milošević (1941-2006) was a communist, Yugoslav-socialist and later Serbian politician. His political career took him over the party chairmanship of the Union of Communists of Serbia (1986-1989) as founder and long-time chairman (1990-2006) of the Serbian Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) to the Presidency of the Socialist Republic of Serbia (1987-1991) and later Republic of Serbia (1991-1997) also to the post of President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1997-2000). He was the first head of state to be indicted by the War Crimes Tribunal during his term in office and died in custody in The Hague (headquarters of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia) before the trial was closed (Brunnbauer 2011, 646; van Meurs 2011, 762).

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included in the constitution (Службени лист Аутономне Покрајине Војводине, 02.03.2004). Due to Serbia's bad economic status, there are always ideas in Vojvodina to split off from Serbia, but also politicians who (among other things for that very reason) campaign for the abolition of autonomy (Karabeg 2013). Despite all these historical processes, Vojvodina, as well as its constitution under Article 7 (multilingualism, multiculturalism, multistructuralism and the free exercise of faith) was and stays a place were "multilingualism, multiculturalism and the free exercise of faith [is] of special importance" and national minorities and communities are best supported in their respective areas (Statut Autonomne Pokrajine Vojvodine).

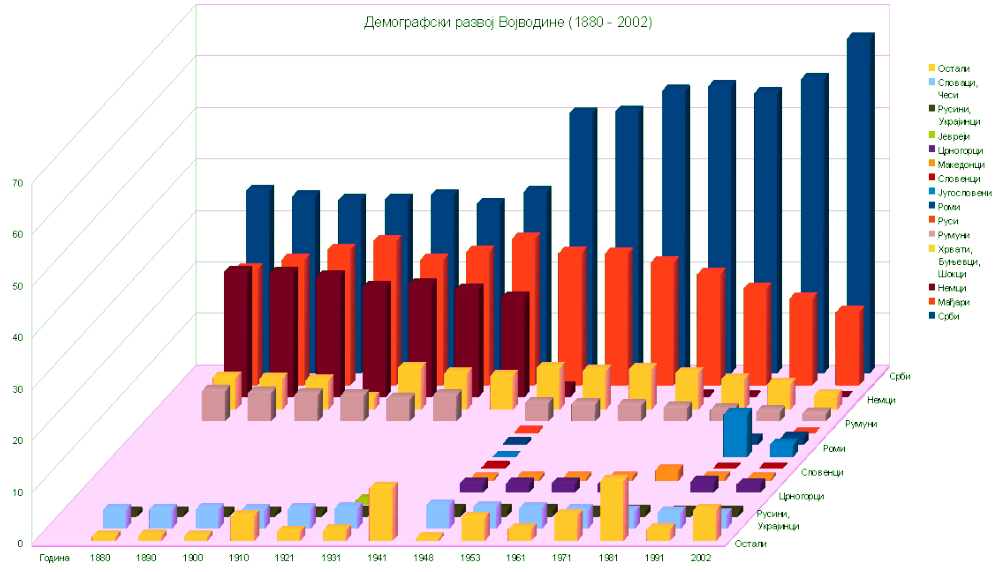

Figure 1. Demographic development in Vojvodina, 1880-2002
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Demografija_Vojvodine.png

As already mentioned, the population of Vojvodina consists of almost 30 ethnic minorities. Historically grown villages and towns are by no means "heterogeneous" in the sense of a predominant group, but mostly mixed. As illustrated in Figure 1, the Serbian population has been steadily increasing since the 1950s, while other groups are decreasing. The group of those who define themselves as Hungarians is the highest in number after the Serbs, which makes some authors speak of a heterogeneous population in Vojvodina, even if it is multi-ethnic, since two ethnic groups (Serbs and Hungarians) dominate (Belić 2014, 4).

Therefore, we can speak of a cultural pluralism if describing the Vojvodina and the cities/villages within, which will be shown on behalf of Bela Crkva. Living

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with the "Other" in peace and tolerating difference creates a stable state of segregation, forced also by official school curricula and the use of language. Was it common to be bi- or multilingual during the time of the Habsburg Monarchy, the aftermath of WW I and the time of WW II changed that. After WW II, during the SFRJ era, it was common to speak at least two languages (mother tongue and the language of the environs), although the SFRJ fell apart, this is still practiced.

3. Bela Crkva

The town *Bela Crkva* was one picked by de Mercy for German settlers and lays near to the Romanian boarder. Already mentioned in 1335 as Alba Ecclesia, it was officially recorded as *Weisskirchen* in 1717. The Catholic Church, dedicated to St. Leonhard, was built on the ruins of the former church. *Bela Crkva* remained a town with relatively consistent population (Jankulov, 11). As mentioned, former population of Serbs and Romanians mostly feared Germanization and Catholization. Since only roman-catholic colonialists were good colonialists, Protestants, whom it was allowed to settle because they were imagined as good colonists, too, had to convert. Similarly was the situation in the 1760-ies. The Austrian sovereign Maria Theresa (1717-1780) accelerated the colonization of the Banat, for which were still intended only roman-catholic settlers (Jankulov, 27). Freedom of worship, guaranteed to the settlers by Joseph II. (1741-1790) in 1782 (linked to his Patent of Toleration which guaranteed religious freedom to non-Catholic Christians, also meaning that they could exercise their faith in churches [Jankulov, 36]) made it easier to recruit new settlers. Thanks to Joseph II. Edict of Tolerance in 1782, Jews had more rights to trade, but were still restricted in settling and marriage. They are mentioned in *Bela Crkva* for the end of the 18th century (Jankulov, 67) and even had their synagogue (built in 1835/36 and finally torn down in 1949/1950). The different places of worship are still present and mostly in use in modern *Bela Crkva*. By the middle of the 19th century, the following religious groups were represented in *Bela Crkva*: Roman-Catholics, Protestants, Serbian-Orthodox, Romanian-Orthodox, Jews, and Evangelical-reformed. During the twenties of the 20th century, due to the Russian Civilian war, refugees from nowadays Belarus and the Ukraine arrived in the town an eventually built their church in 1930/31 (Weißkirchner Ortsgemeinschaft 1980, 317, 326-331).

Although we see that *Bela Crkva* was a multi-ethnic and multicultural village, mixed relationships were not common; neither did the different groups take over customs or traditions one from another. However, customs and traditions that were brought by the settlers from their places of origin, are still practiced. The

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population changes in *Bela Crkva* happened because of the rising nationalism and rising movement of the German population in the run-up to World War II, although the Vojvodina was a part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Serbian settlers from the south was given land and property, still, the German population in the city was strong and remained, customs and traditions were held high (Exhibition catalogue 2009). Many took the option in World War II to relocate in other parts of the German Reich as so-called *Volksdeutsche*, the last ones remaining were forced to migrate in the aftermath of WW II. Today the German population lives in foreign countries (mostly Austria and Germany), therefore also societies supporting the last German Vojvodians emerged and live on. This is also an important economic factor, since because of such historical bounds; often projects funded by the "new homelands" come to be.

Today's visible remains of the different ethnic groups living side by side are not only houses in the typical style of the region, but also houses of worship, which are still in use. The annual Flower Carnival is a relic from the past that shows the multi-cultural society is still alive.

4. Conclusion

Living in a multicultural environment can provide the basis for a multicultural society. However, this also means that different (ethnic) groups within the society have to change and adapt, sometimes assimilate, to form a common whole. If done naturally, by free will of its participants, this can lead to a functional, modern society/civilization (like for example Lichtenstein or Switzerland). Unfortunately, the driving forces behind often are political intensions, territorial hegemony or claims and so on. Visible in the region of Vojvodina, if not disturbed by external factors, nearly 30 different ethnicities can live together relatively calm. Nationalism and chauvinism, on the other hand side, had a lasting impact on the population and its progress, as the extermination of the Jewish population lowered the number of higher educated people immense; or the forced and unforced resettlement of Germans during and after WW II which led to significant population changes in several villages like *Bela Crkva*.

One problem that AP Vojvodina as well as Serbia in general is struggling with (which also affects all other countries in south-eastern Europe) is emigration. Not the demographic change is responsible, but the migration abroad for better living and working opportunities. Thus, the population decreases annually by about 25,000 people (with the number of migrants and the number of deceased is about the same). The population of AP Vojvodina in 2016 amounted to 1, 881.357 million

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inhabitants, compared to 1, 891.701 million in 2015 (Statistic Yearbooks 2015, 2016). By the disappearance of the population, the multi-ethnic, lingual, social, cultural society of Vojvodina might disappear too, sooner or later.

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