

The Slovaks of Vojvodina: A Traditional Bridge for Cooperation

Miroslav Lajčák

Ambassador of the Slovak Republic to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Belgrade

When mentioning the Slovaks of Vojvodina, two ideas emerge in the minds of most inhabitants of Yugoslavia: (1) Bački Petrovac, the traditional geographic and social center of this community, and (2) Kovačka, the place where the School of Naive Art was born half a century ago. In the following paper I would like to show that the phenomenon of the Vojvodina Slovaks cannot be reduced to these associations alone. I will also elaborate on the basic demographic and social features of our expatriate community in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and, at the same time, I will attempt to take a closer view of their present and future relations with their country of origin – the Slovak Republic (SR).

There are several reasons why Slovakia considers its expatriate community in the FRY to be unique. It is the largest Slovak community living in a compact diaspora, which is, at the same time, a loyal and non-politicized national minority recognized by the

governments of both the SR and the FRY as a factor of stability and a bridge for cooperation in bilateral relations. According to the 1991 FRY census, 66,863 persons were reported as belonging to the Slovak national minority, which has a history of 250 years in a multi-ethnic Vojvodina. Though the final 2002 census results have not been published yet, according to realistic demographic estimates there are some 60,000 Slovaks living in Vojvodina today. The numbers for the Slovak population are, on the one hand, influenced by the low natural growth rate of the population in Slovak or mixed marriages and, on the other, the natural assimilation pressure by the majority Serbian population and, in some sub-regions, by populations belonging to other national minorities as well. The largest concentration of Slovaks can be found in Stara Pazova (7,000), Bački Petrovac and Kovačica (6,500 each), Padina (6,000), Kisač (5,000), Pivnica and Selenča (3,000 each), Kulpin (2,500), Gložan (2,200) and the administrative center of Vojvodina, Novi Sad (2,000). The traditional center of the Bačka Slovaks is Bački Petrovac, which is, at the same time, the only district in the FRY where Slovak expatriates represent an absolute majority. The center of the Banat Slovaks is Kovačica, while that of the Srem Slovaks is Stara Pazova.

Matica slovačka in Yugoslavia, with its seat in Bački Petrovac, is an umbrella expatriate organization, an apolitical social organization which brings together approximately 12,000 members. Matica slovačka is the main partner in communication with state authorities in the SR and the FRY, and a substantial part of the financial and material-technical assistance for the Slovak community from both countries is channeled through its structures. The Slovak Evangelical Church in Yugoslavia, which registers four times as many expatriates as Matica slovačka, plays an important role in the life of the expatriate community. The role of both institutions in preserving the linguistic and national identity of Vojvodina Slovaks is indisputable. In addition, the church is very active in the area of education, in particular with respect to expatriates' pre-school and school-age children. In addition to the Evangelical Church, the Roman Catholic Church also plays a role among a smaller part of the expatriate community (in particular the Selenča community), while the Greek Catholic Church is represented marginally.

After the defeat of Milošević's authoritarian regime in October 2000 and, to a lesser extent, even before its fall, several non-government organizations specializing in activities aimed at more effective enforcement of their members' and target groups' interests were established within the expatriate community. The most important representatives of the NGO sector are the Association of Slovak Pedagogues (which includes 500 members and is, inter alia, drafting new curricula for Slovak language instruction), the Forum of Slovaks (whose objective is overall modernization of expatriates' lives), "Center" (covering activities in the area of culture), and the Association for the Support of Child Development (teaching Slovak to children from mixed marriages), among others.

In contrast to other national minorities in the FRY (e.g. Albanians, Bosnians, Hungarians, Croats and others), the Slovaks of Vojvodina do not have their own ethnic-based political party. There are two reasons for this: (1) a relatively small expatriate community in an election system that precludes the possibility of getting into parliament independently, and (2) no generally-respected person with the power to bring people together, and who could thus found such a political party and establish it on the political scene, has emerged among Slovak expatriates so far. The basic desire for an ethnic-based political profile is an objective fact. The foundation of the National Council of Slovaks, which is to take place based on the FRY's Law on Protection of the Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities in January 2003, will be significant with respect to future communication between the Slovak community and the authorities in the FRY, Serbia and Vojvodina in the areas of culture, education, public information and use of the mother tongue. At this point, I wish to emphasize that Slovakia welcomes the decision by the FRY's Government to adopt such a law, and shares the position of the Council of Europe and the OSCE that the law in its adopted form fully complies with, and in some provisions even exceeds, common European standards in the field of human and minority rights.

The cultural activities of our expatriate community, based on their more than 250-year-old history in the region of Vojvodina, are exceptionally rich. The Slovaks of Yugoslavia organize several folk festivals, the best known of which are "Tancuj, tancuj" and "Zlatá brána". The "Stretnutie v pivnickom poli" festival of original folk songs is also very popular. Theatre performances have been staged in Bački Petrovac since 1866, while the theatre in Stara Pazova will celebrate its 100th jubilee this year. The literary activities of Slovaks in Yugoslavia have a history of more than 200 years, and have mainly been concentrated around the magazine "Nový život". The publishing activities of Slovak expatriates are linked primarily to the "Kultúra" publishing house in Bački Petrovac, which carries on the tradition of the first Slovak printing house founded in 1919. The "Hlas ľudu" weekly, the "Vzlet" journal for youth and "Rovina", a social magazine, all disseminate information among the public. In 1949 Novi Sad Radio began broadcasting in Slovak, with TV broadcasts following in 1974. The Zuzka Medved'ová Gallery in Bački Petrovac and the Naive Arts Gallery in Kovačica are the main institutions representing activities in the fine arts among Vojvodina Slovaks. It should be stated that the culture and art of the Vojvodina Slovaks have become an essential part of the cultural heritage not only of Yugoslavia, but of Slovakia as well. Contributions have been made by such personalities as the artists Mira Brtkova and Pavel Čanji, Zuzana Halupova, the leading representative of the Kovačica Naive Art School, the theatre directors Ljuboslav Majera and Miroslav Benka, and the literary scholar and prose writer Vičazoslav Hronjec, among many others.

Under the new political and socio-economic conditions in the FRY, the expatriate community is facing several challenges. It continues to be a problem-free minority which is loyal to the state and functions as a stabilizing and integrating element in bilateral relations. However, for the sake of objectivity it must be stated openly that the consequence of this unproblematic status, coupled with the absence of adequate political coverage (e.g. the absence of persons from the Slovak minority in higher political or state office), is, at times, less attention on the part of the FRY authorities in fulfilling the justifiable needs of the Slovak community as a whole. On the other hand, Slovak expatriates themselves must make the best use of the instruments provided by the FRY's democratic minority legislation, mainly via the National Council of Slovaks as the future body for minority self-administration.

The Slovak Republic has responded to the new political and socio-economic conditions in the FRY by, inter alia, analyzing and partially re-evaluating its foreign policy towards the Slovaks of Vojvodina, with the objective of further improving it. Independent of the changes in the life of society in the FRY during the second half of 2001 and the beginning of 2002, Slovakia redefined the performance and management of its policy concerning expatriates at an institutional level. An amendment to the Constitution of the SR emphasized its commitment to taking due care of the development of cultural identity among the diaspora. The General Secretariat for Slovaks Living Abroad in the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, as the "single address" in Slovakia for expatriates to address their proposals to, has been established, and should improve the effectiveness and efficiency of access to information and mutual communication.

In the coming period, Slovakia will continue its efforts to create favorable conditions for the preservation of national identity within the expatriate community and to ensure its multifaceted development, in full compliance with the principles of modern European minority policy, which is based on the principle of non-violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state in which the minority lives, and in cooperation with authorities in the FRY, Serbia and Vojvodina. In the political sphere, Slovakia will continue its intensive dialogue with relevant factors in the expatriate community. The SR will endeavor to pursue its national interests in the Yugoslav area by means of

expatriates who hold important positions in public and state bodies, the business community, and society in general in the FRY. Slovakia is interested in lending added dynamism to commercial and economic cooperation with its expatriates, which is lagging far behind our contacts and dialogue at the political level – it may even be said to be stagnating. A higher level of activity can only be achieved through direct contact between businesses in Slovakia and the expatriate community. In the consular sphere, the visa regime clearly plays a limiting role in Slovakia's relations with its diaspora in the FRY. It is understandable that the SR, as an EU candidate country, and considering its ambitions and commitments towards the EU, cannot proceed with the abolishment of its visa obligation towards the FRY. However, the liberalization of the special visa regime implemented by the SR since June 1, 2002 has eased and simplified the Slovak visa acquirement procedure for nationals of the FRY. The introduction of a visa obligation between Hungary and the FRY, scheduled for the second half of next year, will be an additional negative aspect in this regard. Therefore, it should be in the interest of all stakeholders to see that persons belonging to the Slovak national minority do not become “collateral victims” of these measures, and that there is no negative impact on the currently intensive exchange of individuals and groups in both directions and in pursuit of mutual interests.

Schools, culture and raising public awareness will continue to be the clear priorities of Slovakia's expatriate assistance policy. The Department of Slovak Language and Literature of the Faculty of Arts at Novi Sad University, with a lecturer seconded by the SR, the Slovak Section of the Faculty of Education in Sombor, and the oldest secondary school among the diaspora – the Jan Kolar Secondary School in Bački Petrovac – all contribute in a significant way to the preservation and cultivation of national identity among young expatriates and the growth of Slovak intellectuals. It will be necessary to support contacts and cooperation between the Petrovac secondary school and Novi Sad University's faculties and departments, on the one hand, and universities in Slovakia, on the other, while continuing to organize language courses for students and linguistic and methodological courses for teachers at kindergartens and primary and secondary schools. The most successful and highly beneficial events are those organized by Comenius University in Bratislava and Košice (the Studia Academica Slovaca and courses given by the Institute for Language and Academic Preparation for Foreign Students) and Matej Bel University of Banská Bystrica (courses given by the Methodological Center for Slovaks Living Abroad). In the field of education, it will be necessary to rationalize the Slovak Government's current model for granting scholarships for study at institutions of higher learning, so that graduates, upon finishing their studies, are guaranteed work primarily in the expatriate community after their return to the FRY, since granting scholarships should not represent assistance to individuals but, rather, to the entire expatriate community.

In the area of expatriate electronic and print media, efforts to improve their material and technical facilities should be actively supported, since these media shape national awareness and contribute to the preservation of the mother tongue in its “living” form. The mass media are negatively affected by the fact that no electronic medium in Slovakia operates a satellite broadcasting service which is available abroad. The cultural dimension of Slovakia's foreign policy towards Slovaks in Yugoslavia and its cooperation with the expatriate community is very broad, covering literature, publishing, music, folk art, the fine arts, and so on. The most frequent forms of cooperation, which need to be continued, include exchanges of cultural ensembles, exhibitions and sporting events, cooperation between Evangelical Church choirs, youth camps, and the like. In the field of scientific contacts, activities include various symposia, joint research, technical conferences, study residences, secondment of experts, and cooperation in publishing activities. It may be stated that the level and intensity of contacts with Slovakia meets the objective needs of the expatriate community. In the context of changes in society in the FRY, Slovakia's assistance to its expatriates should also be directed towards projects emphasizing the development of civil society in a multi-ethnic environment. The newly-created NGOs seem to be the most appropriate partners here.

In concluding, I would like to mention, at least briefly, Slovak legislation concerning care for Slovaks living abroad. As early as 1997, the National Council of the Slovak Republic (i.e. parliament) adopted the Act on Slovaks Living Abroad, whose basic objective was to support national awareness and cultural identity among Slovaks of the diaspora. Here I must stress the fact that this law was well received by the relevant international institutions dealing with human and minority rights. No state on whose territory a Slovak national minority is living expressed any objections. Therefore, it may be said that this piece of legislation is in full compliance with valid Council of Europe and OSCE standards, meaning that it has no extraterritorial effects and introduces no discrimination based on an ethnic principle.

The Slovak Republic believes firmly in the principle that Slovaks living abroad are an important component of the Slovak nation, and therefore Slovakia has a permanent interest in the most active possible cooperation with them,

based on a respect for the historical and contemporary international political, economic and cultural significance of these links for the development of Slovakia and its integration within Euro-Atlantic structures. Slovaks living abroad, including the more than 60,000 Vojvodina Slovaks, are considered an important avenue and a natural bridge for bilateral cooperation with the countries in which they permanently reside. It may also be said that the activities and way of life of the Slovak national minority in Vojvodina represents a positive example of the role a national minority can play in relations between two countries at the beginning of the 21st century and, as such, may serve as a model worth studying and implementing in a broader, European-wide context as well.