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## **KOSOVO GONE, SERBIA FACES 'SEPARATIST' TENSIONS ELSEWHERE**

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Serbia is still spending big to keep a foothold in Kosovo, to the anger of other regions who want their own special status. Vojvodina: Catalonia, reads the graffiti on a wall in Novi Sad, Serbia's second city and seat of the autonomous northern province of Vojvodina. Another predicts Vojvodina will soon be a republic!

Such graffiti is commonplace in this laidback city on the River Danube near Serbia's northern border with Hungary.

It is the work of the so-called Mlada (Young) Vojvodina, an informal group of Vojvodina natives who want greater independence from the Serbian capital Belgrade.

Their name echoes that of the underground Young Bosnia movement that, in trying to force the Austro-Hungarian Empire out of the Balkans, shot dead Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 and lit the fuse for World War One.

Calls for greater independence and comparisons with Spain's Catalonia are dismissed out of hand by authorities in Serbia, a country yet to come to terms with the Western-backed secession of its former southern province of Kosovo.

More than a decade after majority-Albanian Kosovo declared independence, the issue of separatism still haunts Serbia. And Vojvodina is not alone: a recent call for special status for the southwestern Sandzak region, where many mainly Muslim Bosniaks live, was a red rag to the conservative government in Belgrade.

We are growing every day, Young Vojvodina told BIRN.

The group, which keeps the identity of its members secret but agreed to respond to questions via e-mail, said it operated in 23 towns and cities in Vojvodina, its members masked to protect their anonymity.

Besides graffiti calling for the creation of a republic, Young Vojvodina is known for its anti-fascist street slogans and for burning posters glorifying convicted Serbian war criminals.

Usually, our actions are subversive, and because of the danger of arrest or street clashes, we usually carry them out when there are not many people on the streets, the group said.

The ultimate aim is a referendum on the status of Vojvodina. If the idea of a federal state is extremism, then we are extremists, it told BIRN.

## Colonialism

A region of some two million people, Vojvodina is significantly more multi-ethnic than the rest of Serbia, with more than 25 ethnic groups and six official languages in use. Serbs make up the majority, but there are some 250,000 Hungarians too and tens of thousands of Slovaks and Croats.

Rich in agricultural land, debate has raged over the status of Vojvodina for decades; in the late 1980s, Milosevic revoked the autonomy of Vojvodina and Kosovo.

Milosevic's crackdown in Kosovo culminated in war in 1998-99. Vojvodina clawed back its rights of autonomy after Milosevic's fall in 2000, but its powers are still subject to dispute and court wrangling.

Most recently, in March, the Serbian government rejected a draft law on how the province is financed, with one ruling Progressive Party MP calling it anti-constitutional and an attempt to create the Republic of Vojvodina.

The conservative Progressives of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic took power in Vojvodina in 2016, which until then had been a holdout of the opposition Democrats. Critics say the Progressives have centralised Vojvodina decision-making in Belgrade.

Aleksandar Odzic, whose Vojvodinas Party advocates the creation of a Vojvodina Republic within Serbia, accused the Progressives of adopting a colonial policy towards the northern province.

He said Belgrade spent more money and political capital on tens of thousands of ethnic Serbs in a small pocket of northern Kosovo than the far larger and economically more important Vojvodina region.

Backed by Russia, Serbia has invested considerable time, money and political credit in trying to thwart Kosovo's recognition as a state and its integration with international institutions.

While they are increasing funding for Serbs in Kosovo, they have a colonial relationship with Vojvodina, Odzic told BIRN.

Such remarks can be explosive in Serbia; when Odzic took to Facebook in 2018 to call on supporters to free Vojvodina, political analyst Dragomir Andjelkovic said such rhetoric was reminiscent of the Kosovo Albanians in the run-up to the 2008 declaration of independence.

Belgrade is abolishing Vojvodina, Odzic said, but will never manage to abolish Vojvodinians.

Aleksandar Popov, from the Novi Sad-based NGO Centre for Regionalism, said that Serbia's Kosovo experience meant calls elsewhere for a reorganisation of Serbia's state structure were invariably met with accusations of separatism.

He said groups and parties such as Young Vojvodina and Vojvodinas Party were not particularly visible.

But Vojvodinas identity, which is created, and its institutions, are the reality, Popov told BIRN.

#### Sandzak special status

The status of Sandzak, a region straddling the border between Serbia and Montenegro and which is heavily populated by Muslims Bosniaks, has also long been debated.

So when, on June 10, the Bosniak National Council in Serbia wrote to the presidents of Serbia and Montenegro asking for special status for Sandzak, Belgrade was quick to react.

Serbias Minister for Local Municipalities, Branko Ruzic, announced he would send inspectors to examine the work of the Council, a state-designated body representing the Bosniak community.

The Councils head, Esad Dzudzo, pleaded ignorance, blaming instead the head of the Party of Democratic Action, SDA, of Sandzak, Sulejman Ugljanin.

As socialist Yugoslavia edged towards its bloody demise, Ugljanin was instrumental in a 1991 referendum in the region that called for autonomy for Sandzak.

The special status is a model of Sandzak autonomy for which the citizens of Sandzak voted in a referendum, SDA official Ahmedin Skrijelj told BIRN.

Skrijelj called it a project of wider international significance in the process of European and NATO integration of the countries of the Western Balkans.

Special status, he said, could become a way to resolve political and territorial disputes across the Balkans.

Some Serbian officials, however, were less enthusiastic. Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin warned of war and called on prosecutors to take action.

Sead Biberovic of the Novi Pazar NGO Urban-In was sceptical, saying such initiatives were not new but were often revived for political purposes.

Many Bosniaks would say they need this [the special status], he said. But the majority of them know that it is not possible because Sandzak doesnt have the capacity for this.

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