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# **REGION REPORT**

**Charting the Development of  
Vojvodina's Autonomy**

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## Charting the Development of Vojvodina's Autonomy

### Policy Relevance Statement

This Region Report describes the fluctuating relationship between Vojvodina's regional autonomy and Belgrade's centralisation efforts, and explains how the restoration of autonomy could positively impact the region.

**Keywords:** Vojvodina; Serbia; autonomy; Yugoslavia; centralisation

### Abstract

This paper examines regionalism in Serbia through the case of Vojvodina, arguing that the province functions within a system of centrally constrained decentralisation despite formal guarantees since 2006. Vojvodina's autonomy peaked under Yugoslavia's 1974 Constitution, which granted near-republic status, but was dismantled during the Milošević era. Post-2000 reforms reinstated limited self-governance, defining competencies in areas such as education, agriculture, and minority rights. Yet contemporary autonomy remains largely symbolic, reflecting Serbia's unresolved tension between decentralisation pressures and centralist resistance. The paper concludes that without stronger fiscal and legislative autonomy, regionalism will remain superficial.

### Sažetak

Ovaj rad ispituje regionalizam u Srbiji kroz slučaj Vojvodine, tvrdeći da pokrajina funkcioniše u okviru sistema centralno ograničene decentralizacije, uprkos formalnim garancijama koje postoje od 2006. godine. Autonomija Vojvodine dostigla je vrhunac za vreme Ustava SFRJ iz 1974. godine, koji joj je dodelio status gotovo ravan republikama, ali koja je tokom Miloševićevog perioda u velikoj meri demontirana. Reforme sprovedene nakon 2000. godine obnovile su ograničeni stepen samouprave, definišući nadležnosti u oblastima kao što su obrazovanje, poljoprivreda i prava manjina. Ipak, savremena autonomija u velikoj meri ostaje simbolična, odražavajući nerešenu napetost između pritiska ka decentralizaciji i centralističkog otpora u Srbiji. Rad zaključuje da će, bez snažnije fiskalne i zakonodavne autonomije, regionalizam ostati površan.

### Key Points

- Despite partially losing its heterogeneity over the last three decades, Vojvodina continues to be a culturally diverse region, the fostering of which requires a delicate approach.
- Although the region experienced a period of substantial autonomy after the 1974 Constitution of Yugoslavia, its autonomy was revoked as Serbia increasingly centralised after the dissolution of Yugoslavia.
- Despite regaining some of its competencies with the reforms in 2002 and 2006, the central government still holds the core competencies, hindering the region's autonomy. The best scenario for the region would be the reintroduction of the quasi-republic status it enjoyed after the 1974 Constitution, as well as the adoption of the draft law on Vojvodina's Financing Resources by the Serbian Parliament.

## Introduction

Amongst the Southeast European states, Serbia holds a distinct position due to its historical trajectory of regionalisation. Not only did it participate in the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia as a constituent republic, but Serbia also contains an autonomous province (AP) within its borders. Despite this, research on regionalism in Serbia, particularly regarding Vojvodina, remains notably absent in English literature. This research aims to help fill this gap by examining the history, characteristics, and challenges of regionalism in Serbia, focusing on Vojvodina as a critical case study. Structured in two sections, the paper first elaborates on the historical evolution of Serbian regionalism to contextualise contemporary challenges. It then presents a detailed analysis of the region to highlight Southeastern Europe's inherent complexity, lack of homogeneity, and the necessity of decentralisation. Finally, it addresses the legal frameworks governing autonomous provinces within the Serbian constitutions and proposes pathways to better align them with regional needs.

Before proceeding, a conceptual framework must be established. While terminology remains contested,<sup>1</sup> this paper defines regions as socially constructed entities with distinct cultural identities, shaped intentionally or unintentionally over time.<sup>2</sup> Regionalism here denotes political or cultural demands expressing a region's unique identity.<sup>3</sup> Such demands may operate within the nation-state framework or adopt separatist tendencies, contingent on

their compatibility with national narratives of shared kinship.<sup>4</sup>

In a region marked by overlapping territorial claims and recent ethnic violence, regionalism may serve as an instrument for perpetuating peace, as well as promoting regional integration and development in Southeastern Europe.

## History of Serbian regionalism in Yugoslavia

As a country that gained independence from the Ottoman Empire relatively earlier than most Southeast European states (1878), Serbia has a long history of self-governance for its location. As the country gradually expanded at the expense of its neighbours and acquired significant multi-ethnic territories, its self-governance also reflected its unique historical stance on the federalism-unitarism debate, as it switched from a unitary state (until 1945) to a federal structure (1945-1990), just to return to a unitary system once again in 1990. As the policy paper is aimed at addressing contemporary matters, this section will focus on Serbia during the later stages of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) (1963-1992), the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1992-2003), as well as the State Union with Montenegro (2003-2006).

As the SFRY was one level higher than the Serbian Socialist Republic (SR),<sup>5</sup> this research shall be focused on the Serbian SR constitutions of 1947, 1963 and 1990. The Vojvodina region gained

its AP status in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, in September 1945. This status was reaffirmed in the 1947 Constitution, whereafter it was possible to talk about the regionalisation of the APs.

The ninth chapter of the 1947 Constitution of the Serbian SR dealt with the rights and obligations of the AP of Vojvodina. For example, Article 90 states *“the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina manages the economic and cultural development of the Province; administers economic enterprises of provincial significance and adopts the economic plan and budget of the Province; takes care of the full realization of the equality of all nationalities of the Province; ensures compliance with the law and protection of citizens' rights; [...] manages primary and secondary schools [...] social welfare affairs [...] the public health protection service [...] and] cultural and educational institutions.”*<sup>6</sup> Although this sounds promising for decentralisation and limiting state power, the 94th Article also reinstates the supreme authority of the Serbian SR: *“In the event of a discrepancy between the provisions of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and the laws of the People's Republic of Serbia, the laws of the People's Republic of Serbia shall apply.”*

These provisions placed the AP's autonomy somewhere between municipalities and republics within the federation. This structure was a source of dissatisfaction amongst the Serbian elite, who viewed Vojvodina's autonomy

as undermining Belgrade's authority,<sup>7</sup> and because Serbia was the only republic that had such a structure.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the region's autonomy was even increased with the subsequent 1963 Constitution of the Serbian SR.

Chapter 6 of the 1963 Constitution allowed *“Provincial administration bodies [to] pass administrative acts and undertake administrative actions only when this is placed in their jurisdiction by provincial regulations, as well as in matters that are placed under the jurisdiction of republican administration authorities by republican regulations, except for those matters that are placed under exclusive jurisdiction by republican law or regulation of the republic's administrative bodies. By provincial regulations, the adoption of administrative acts and the undertaking of administrative actions can be placed under the jurisdiction of provincial administrative bodies only when it is of interest to the province as a whole.”*<sup>9</sup>

With the further constitutional amendment in 1968, the APs received not only the title prefix "Socialist" but also tasked the federation to protect their autonomy, allowing these provinces to have independent delegations to the Federal Assembly and legislative autonomy,<sup>10</sup> albeit substantially limited.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the APs also received legislative authority, de facto transforming APs into quasi-republics.<sup>12</sup>

The 1974 Constitution followed this decentralisation trend and coincided

with the removal of centralist hardliners within Communist Party ranks. This also marked the most pro-AP constitution of Serbia and Yugoslavia, transforming Yugoslavia into a highly decentralised federation with a special emphasis on self-management.<sup>13</sup> This caused greater tension between Vojvodina and the Serbian SR due to the latter's nationalists' dissatisfaction.<sup>14</sup> The period also experienced a significant improvement in the rights of non-Serbian citizens of Vojvodina. Cultural autonomy was guaranteed and positive discrimination implemented to ensure equal representation of minorities in almost every aspect of life,<sup>15</sup> according to Vojvodina's cultural diversity.

As the constitution was devolving power from the federation to the republics and APs, Serbian nationalists perceived this as an attack on Serbian minorities in other republics and the sovereignty of the Serbian SR. Moreover, although APs became de facto republics with their extended autonomy, they retained their seats in the Serbian Assembly and were able to influence Serbian politics.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, as the federation lost its power, the autonomy of APs began to be diminished by the Serbian SR, culminating in 1988 with the so-called "Yoghurt Revolution",<sup>17</sup> where, as part of Slobodan Milošević's antibureaucratic revolt, Vojvodina's autonomy was abolished by the Serbian SR.

The 1990s marked the collapse of the SFRY. War, chaos and authoritarian state practices driven by nationalism in



**Figure 1.** Map of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina within Serbia

Serbia inevitably affected the autonomy of the province, which was decreased,<sup>18</sup> along with the withering of funds and powers for implementing minority policies.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the Yugoslav War period was (in comparison with other parts of the Federation) relatively peaceful in Vojvodina, with only a few notorious cases of violence.<sup>20</sup>

The 1990 Serbian SR Constitution abolished the autonomy of Vojvodina, its autonomous decision-making mechanisms and powers reduced to the level of municipalities.<sup>21</sup> Despite the existence of political movements and policy proposals to restore Vojvodina's autonomy,<sup>22</sup> the centralisation initiatives of the Serbian SR remained in force until the fall of Milošević's regime in 2000, when a window of opportunity emerged to push for a decentralist agenda. Although these efforts were largely fruitless and brief,<sup>23</sup> with the adoption of the

Omnibus Law in 2002,<sup>24</sup> limited reforms relating to increased autonomy were reached.<sup>25</sup>

## Current state of affairs in Serbia

With the 2006 Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Vojvodina experienced an increase in its autonomy. Though not to the same extent as the 1974 Constitution, the competences and rights of the province were drastically increased, especially in comparison to the Constitution of 1990. Autonomous provinces are elaborated under Articles 183-187 of the Serbian Constitution, which empowers them to regulate their own institutions, elections, and administrative services via provincial statutes. Competencies under AP jurisdiction include urban planning and development, agriculture, forestry, water management, tourism, environment, transport (roads/rivers/rail), craftsmanship, education, sports, culture, healthcare, social welfare, and provincial media. Additionally, APs are responsible for ensuring human and minority rights protections, establishing provincial symbols, and managing provincial assets.<sup>26</sup> Financially, the law stipulates that in addition to its dedicated direct revenues, Vojvodina's annual budget must equal at least 7 percent of Serbia's national budget, with 43 percent of this provincial budget allocated to capital expenditures.<sup>27</sup> Although the constitution stipulates that statutes shall be the supreme legal act of autonomous provinces, statutes still require the approval of the National Assembly,<sup>28</sup> hindering the ability of regional actors to act independently.

This is further evidenced by Article 186, which states that the central government can challenge provincial decisions before the Constitutional Court.

Since the adoption of the 2006 Constitution, Vojvodina has passed two statutes, in 2009 and 2014.<sup>29</sup> However, these statutes remain significantly restricted by the central government. Even in the educational field, Vojvodina's authority remained solely in the realms of establishing and maintaining institutions and not in regulating curricula. Moreover, this requirement for state approval of provincial statutes serves as a guarantee for Belgrade, ensuring that any fundamental decision in Vojvodina shall be taken by the Serbian state, not the province. This makes Vojvodina's autonomy quite limited, akin to a decentralised administrative unit rather than a federal entity, such as a German *Land*.

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

With a level of autonomy designated as 'weak' by the European Commission,<sup>30</sup> the AP of Vojvodina's ability to act independently is significantly hindered by a number of factors. Since the Law on Vojvodina's Financing Resources (hereinafter 'Draft Law'), Article 8 of which elaborates the process of increasing the province's autonomy by introducing a provincial Tax Administration, has not yet been adopted,<sup>31</sup> the region remains fiscally dependent on Belgrade. This not only prevents Vojvodina from having a foreseeable budget and planning accordingly; it also makes the region vulnerable to

Belgrade's coercion. Furthermore, the staggered reform process of the local government system is noted by the European Commission.

To establish and maintain Vojvodina's autonomy in the short term, the Serbian government should adopt the Draft Law and fulfil its financial obligations towards the region as stipulated in the constitution. After ensuring fiscal stability, the country can devolve more autonomy to the region, especially on educational matters. In this regard, school curricula play a crucial role in properly reflecting the demographic and cultural complexities of the region. Regarding this cultural complexity, it is worth noting that the demographics of Vojvodina changed significantly over the course of the 20th century, starting with the displacement of ethnic Germans in the aftermath of the Second World War. The Yugoslav Wars, along with the resettlement of Serbian refugees to the region, and the migration of non-Serbian citizens away from the region,<sup>32</sup> have ensured an absolute Serbian majority. As noted by Moró and Reményi,<sup>33</sup> the diversity index of the region had fallen sharply by the 2000s, and the region experienced a process of homogenisation. Nevertheless, the region still remains one of the most ethnically diverse corners of the European continent. To sustain this diversity, along with the necessary impending law changes, Belgrade should also reintroduce the provisions of the 1974 Constitution, enabling the region to properly and sustainably

govern itself in the long term.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that Kosovo's independence and Yugoslavia's dissolution continue to haunt Serbian politics, which has led to the perception among some Serbian leaders of regional autonomy as a precursor to secession. Until this narrative is confronted, meaningful decentralisation remains politically fraught.

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**15.** Stjepanović, D. (2018). p. 150.

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**19.** Ibid. p. 150.

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**21.** Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, 44 (1990). Articles 109, 113.

**22.** Đulabić, V. (Ed.). (2024). pp. 127-128; Stjepanović, D. (2018). p. 151.

**23.** Đulabić, V. (Ed.). (2024). p.128.

**24.** B92. 'Skupština Srbije U Načelu Usvojila Omnibus-Zakon'. B92.Net, 23 January 2002. Basically, more than 200 competencies related to social and cultural sphere were returned to the authorities in Vojvodina.

**25.** Ibid.

**26.** Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, 67 (2006). Article 183.

**27.** Ibid. Article 184.

**28.** Ibid. Article 185.

**29.** The 2014 statute is translated into English and interesting to read. (*The Statute Of The Autonomous Province Of Vojvodina - Skupština Autonomne Pokrajine Vojvodine, n.d.*)

**30.** European Commission. (2024). Serbia Report 2024 (Enlargement Package). *European Commission*. p. 24.

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