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## ***THE SERBIAN VOJVODINA: IDEA AND BORDERS UNTIL 1918\****

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**Abstract:** The concept of a Serbian Vojvodina as a political and territorial unit, was present among the Serbs in the Habsburg Monarchy from the end of the seventeenth century until the First World War. During the period it existed (1848–1861) or when demands for it again emerged (before 1848 and after 1861) the question of its borders arose. This became especially apparent when the people in Vojvodina voluntarily joined the Kingdom of Serbia, which subsequently became a newly formed state for Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in December 1918. When a common state was created, the issue of Vojvodina's borders centered on its northern borders, which were defended at the Paris Peace Conference according to historical and ethnic principles.

**Keywords:** Habsburg Monarch (Austria-Hungary), Serbs, Vojvodina, borders.

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In the past, the Serbian Vojvodina was based on various principles—ethnic, historical, and geographical. This is why “the Serbian Vojvodina, as it was called by the people, which was formed as a separate crownland as the Voivodeship of Serbia and Banat of Temeschwar, embodied the centuries-old idea and aspiration of the Serbian people to maintain their national individuality—ethnically, religiously, and politically—in a country with foreign masters and a foreign name. The Serbian people succeeded in this to some degree under incredibly difficult circumstances by spilling blood for foreign rulers and a foreign state.”<sup>1</sup> The true historian also makes a clear distinction between what is modern-day Vojvodina, an autonomous province within the Republic of Serbia, and the Serbian Vojvodina, which was created “as a political term to denote a unique national and political community through which the Serbian people endeavored to preserve their ethnic, religious, and national identity within a foreign state.”<sup>2</sup> However, historians believed that Serbs had the right to seek a Serbian Vojvodina within the Habsburg Monarchy based on the Privileges granted in the late seventeenth century, which they did through institutions and political

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<sup>1</sup> Popović 1990: 7; Njegovan 2004: 26.

<sup>2</sup> Krkljuš 1995: 5.

parties, and especially through the patriarchate of Karlovci.<sup>3</sup>

A greater presence of the Serbian people in Hungarian lands can be documented from the late fourteenth century, soon after the Battle of Maritsa (1371) and the Battle of Kosovo (1389). At this time, Serbian people seeking a peaceful life began crossing the banks of the Sava and the Danube in large numbers and settling in Hungarian lands. These Serbs brought their religion, culture, and even economic centers to Pannonia and Transdanubia, and remained separated from most of their fellow Serbs living within the Ottoman Empire.<sup>4</sup> They found themselves in new, unknown, and Catholic surroundings. Here there were scattered far and wide, from Transylvania to the Adriatic Sea.<sup>5</sup> There were quite a few leaders among them, but there was no one figure who could unite them.<sup>6</sup> This “force” who commanded ecclesiastical and secular political power emerged among the Serbs in Hungary after the Great Migration of 1690 in the figure of the patriarch Arsenije III Crnojević.<sup>7</sup>

The Serbs wanted to solidify their position as it was defined by the Privileges through the acquisition of certain lands within the Habsburg Monarchy. This was specified for the first time at the diet of Baja in 1694. This persuaded the Austrian military authorities to propose that the Serbs in northern and central Hungary settle within the southeastern part of the Military Frontier around Osijek, Petrovaradin, and Titel. At the diet in Baja, the Serbs sought and agreed to a compact, mass relocation to Mala Vlačka in central Slavonia and Kumanija in northern Bačka as soldiers with a privileged status.<sup>8</sup> At the Church Council held in Krušedol in 1708, the Serbs from Buda asked for Serbs in Hungary to be granted Bačka, Banat, Srem, and Slavonia.<sup>9</sup> After this, no Serb representative sought any separate land throughout almost the entire eighteenth century, until the Transylvanian Diet of 1790, when an explicit demand was made based on the Privileges in which this had allegedly been promised. This time, the Serbs asked for Banat. Due to deteriorating relations between Vienna and Pest, they were also supported in this by the imperial government.<sup>10</sup>

Almost until the Revolutions of 1848, Serbs in the monarchy had not been in a position to demand specific land where they could legally and politically establish themselves. At the May Assembly in 1848, they proclaimed the establishment of the Serbian Vojvodina and imbued it with the foundations of their national, political, and religious agenda. This area comprised Srem, Baranja, Bačka, and Banat, which the Hungarian government could not accept, and to which it responded with armed confrontation. This is best evidenced by the words of Lajos Kossuth: “He who wishes to found a separate state

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<sup>3</sup> Mikavica 2005: 201.

<sup>4</sup> (Radojčić 1958: 5–7.) *The Zbornika Matice srpske za društvene nauke*, which published the paper cited here, was banned for many years due to this very paper by Dr. Nikola Radojčić.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 5–6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>7</sup> On Patriarch Arsenije III Čarnojević and the granting of Serbian privileges, see: Adamović 1902: 21–33; Ivić 1991: 299–311; Radonić 1940: 1–47; Simeonović-Čokić 1940: 61–70; Radonić, Kostić 1954: 1–18; Gavrilović 1991: 7–24; Id. 1996: 12–15; Gavrilović 2001: 16–20; Mikavica, Gavrilović, Vasin 2007: 15–24; Mikavica 2011: 18–22; Mikavica, Lemajić, Vasin, Ninković 2016: 149–181.

<sup>8</sup> Savković 1952: 21–51; Gavrilović 1991: 7–23; Krestić 1994: 88–113; Mikavica 2011: 11–14.

<sup>9</sup> Mikavica 2005: 15–16; Id. 2014 b: 13–18; Gavrilović 2014: 67–78.

<sup>10</sup> Gavrilović 2005: 121–123; Mikavica 2005: 19–25.

within the bounds of Hungary is a rebel and an insurrectionist.”<sup>11</sup> This declaration of the Serbian Vojvodina was only recognized by the Croatian Sabor, which led to the disappearance of this free-thinking, democratic, and autonomous region of Serbs in Hungary when the revolution ended.<sup>12</sup> The government in Vienna attempted to reward the Serbs for their loyalty during the revolution and for their persistence in the bitter fight against the Hungarians by establishing the Voivodeship of Serbia and Banate of Temeschwar as a separate crownland, which lasted from 1849 to 1860. However, creating the Voivodeship, with German as its official language and its seat in Timisoara at the fringes of Serbian ethnic space in the monarchy, satisfied the Serbs in name only, and stood in stark contrast to the idea of autonomy the Serbs had been seeking at the 1848 May Assembly.<sup>13</sup> The clearest expression of this dissatisfaction came from Svetozar Miletić, the leader of the Serbs in Hungary, in what has become known as the *Tucindanski članak* (article), published in January 1861, in which he asserted that if the voivodeship were to be abolished, the Serbs would not lose much because the autonomy they had within it was fictional, and that, for the Serbian nation within Hungary and the monarchy, the fight for true independence was yet to come.<sup>14</sup>

An attempt was made to resurrect the Serbian Vojvodina at the Annunciation Assembly of 1861, with the assertion that “this area, in which a Serbian majority lived, was to be recognized as a Serbian area within the Kingdom of Hungary, or rather within a proposed Triune Kingdom of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia under the name *Vojvodovina Srbska* [Serbian Vojvodina].”<sup>15</sup> However, the demands made at the Annunciation Assembly for a Serbian Vojvodina were never met, and were instead used by the Viennese court as a threat against the Hungarians. After the Dual Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was created in 1867, the services of the Serbian people within the monarchy were forgotten. The vast

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<sup>11</sup> Gavrilović 2000: 13; Mikavica 2000: 23–39.

<sup>12</sup> Savković 1952, 21–51; Gavrilović 1991: 7–23; Krestić 1994: 88–113; Gavrilović 2000: 7–31; Mikavica 2005: 23–38.

<sup>13</sup> At the time of the conquest, the Voivodeship of Serbia and Banate of Temeschwar was a part of Bačka and Banat, without the Military Frontier, and with only a part of Srem and the Ruma and Ilok districts. The remainder was granted to Croatia as part of the Triune Kingdom. (Gavrilović 2000: 30–31; Mikavica 39–57; Stevanović 2014: 23–24.)

<sup>14</sup> The *Tucindanski članak* was published in the 102<sup>nd</sup> (and final) issue of *Srbski dnevnik* in late December 1860. It was written in answer to Emperor Franz Ferdinand’s decision to abolish the Voivodeship. (Mikavica, Popov 1999: 232–235; Mikavica 2006: 35–67; Mikavica 2018: 299–335.)

<sup>15</sup> According to the attached authentic drawing, this area included: 1) all of provincial Srem, i.e., Ruthenian, the Ilok and Vukovar districts; 2) Lower Bačka with the border settlements still belonging to Vojvodina, starting from the Danube: Sonta, Sombor, Stari and Novi Sivac, Kula, Stari and Novi Vrbas, Sentomaš, and Mohol; 3. Banat with the following border towns and settlements, which are still in Vojvodina, starting from the Mureş: the Hodoş monastery, Novi Bodrog, Nova Vinga, Fenlak, Sekusić, Nadfala, Varjaš, Ketteľj, Knez, Perjamoş, Srbski Sentpeter, Staro Bešenovo, Vrbica, Crna Bara, Mokrin, Velika Kikinda, Mali Orosin, Klara, Keća, Čenej, Nemet, Mali Bečkerek, mehala, Timisoara and its surrounding settlements, Frajldorf, Utvinj, Romanski Sent Mihalj, Dinjaš, Srbski Sentmarton, Ivanda, Čebza, Čakovo, Macedonija and Gad, Đir, Tolvadija, Soka, Denta, the Sentdurađ monastery, Berekuca, Komorski Sentdurađ, Omor, Brešće, Dežanfalva, Mali Žam, Veliko and Malo Središte, Mesić, Jabuka, Vojvodince, Subotica, Potporanj, and Vljakovac. The Banat part of the Serbian Vojvodina included everything between the designated area of the Military Frontier, where the Tisa and Mureş lie. The Petrovaradin, German-Banat, and Serbian Banat regiments and the Titel battalion with their respective free military communities were considered an integral part of the Serbian Vojvodina. (Radojčić 1958: 17; Vasin 2015: 21–68.)

majority of Serbs residing in Hungary then fell under Hungarian supremacy, and they were only able to exercise their rights through Hungarian institutions.<sup>16</sup> Although they were constantly under political threat, the Serbs built themselves up as a modern nation, which confirmed Jovan Skerlić's position that "in Vojvodina, a hundred and fifty years have been thought of and written about for all Serbs."<sup>17</sup>

What had been an awareness of the existence of Serbian Vojvodina created during the Revolutions of 1848, and what proved to be the unquenchable desire of the Serbs at the Annunciation Assembly in 1861, then became the main driver of all Serbian cultural and political activity in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. It awaited fertile ground, which showed itself at the end of the First World War with the direct annexation of the "resurrected Vojvodina" within the Kingdom of Serbia. Serbia's wartime objectives, expressed in the Niš Declaration and confirmed in the Corfu Declaration, also included the issue of Vojvodina. It was an eloquent plebiscite about the unification of Serbia with Vojvodina began in Russia during the war, when captive South Slavs (Yugoslavs) from the Austro-Hungarian army began joining volunteer units to fight in the Serbian army against the Central Powers. Serbs made up the largest percentage of volunteers, followed by Bosnians and Herzegovinians, and then Vojvodinians—first those from Banat, then those from Srem, and finally those from Bačka and Baranja.<sup>18</sup> Steps taken by Austria-Hungary in the form of persecutions, arrests, and internment of the more prominent Serbs showed the Vojvodinians their future and the unification of Baranja, Bačka, Banat, and Srem with the Kingdom of Serbia. Arrests and internment of all prominent Vojvodinian Serbs began immediately after war was declared against Serbia in 1914. Among those imprisoned were Mihailo-Polit Desančić, leader of the Serbian liberals; Jaša Tomić, leader of the Serbian radicals; along with Vasa Stajić, Mita Klicin, Emil Gavrića, and other prominent Serbian intellectuals. These Serbs were taken to internment camps in Szeged, Arad, Timisoara, Eger, Debrecin, Székesfehérvár, Velký Meder, Szombathely, Kecskemét, Tata, and Komárom.<sup>19</sup>

When it was clear the fall of Austria-Hungary was near after the breakthrough on the Salonika Front in September 1918, the Serbs of Vojvodina did not want to be caught off guard by a future peace, so they began forming Serbian national committees and councils, along with a Serbian National Guard in the largest towns in Vojvodina. Other ethnic groups in the region were not forgotten, and national committees for Hungarians, Bunjevci, Germans, and Slovaks were also formed.<sup>20</sup>

The first Serbian National Committee in the future Vojvodina was established in Nagybecskerek (now Zrenjanin) on October 31, 1918, so the Novi Sad National Committee,

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<sup>16</sup> After a series of heated debates at the Hungarian diet, the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 was passed on May 29, 1867. Resistance came not only from non-Hungarian peoples, but also from the Hungarian representatives, representatives of the left, and part of the Hungarian diaspora led by Lajos Kossuth. The Compromise was followed by the Nationality Law of 1868, which gave legal backing for increased Magyarization in Hungary. (Popov 1997: 371–373; Kirilović 2006: 42–78; Mikavica 2011: 147–154.)

<sup>17</sup> Popov 1997: 373; Njegovan 2004: 28–29.

<sup>18</sup> Radojčić 1958: 21; Njegovan 2004: 205.

<sup>19</sup> Mikavica 2014 a: 191–213.

<sup>20</sup> In some towns, mixed national committees were created, including the Serbian-Bunjevci Committee in Sombor, the Bunjevci-Serbian Committee in Subotica, the Serbian-Hungarian Committee in Bečej, and others. (Njegovan 2004: 206.)

founded on November 3,<sup>21</sup> could take responsibility for the overarching political and social issues. The committee in Novi Sad then prepared for an election and convened the Great National Assembly in Novi Sad on November 25, which declared that Banat, Bačka, and Baranja would join the Kingdom of Serbia. Meanwhile in Srem, which had always been a stumbling block for Serbian-Croatian relations within the monarchy, there was also agitation for the Kingdom of Serbia to directly annex it. An assembly of representatives of the people's committees in Srem was held on November 24, 1918, and it passed a resolution stating that Srem should be immediately join the Kingdom of Serbia.<sup>22</sup> Based on these resolutions by the Great National Assembly in Novi Sad and at the assembly in Ruma, all of Vojvodina, which had been dreamed about and once again resurrected, voluntarily agreed to an act of unification with the Kingdom of Serbia, thus becoming an integral part of the new state of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.<sup>23</sup>

While these political events were unfolding, military action was also underway. The Serbian army was rapidly moving to cross the Sava, Drava, and Danube rivers to secure the borders. By early November 1918, the Serbian army had occupied territory in Banat, Bačka, Baranja, and Srem within a circle starting at the Orșova River that ran through and along Mehadia, Karánsebes, Ara, the Mureș, Szeged, Subotica, Baja, Pécs, Barcs, the Drava, Osijek, Šamac, the Sava, and the Danube, and then back to the Orșova. This line also became a line of demarcation determined by the Belgrade Armistice of November 13 of that year.<sup>24</sup> This line clearly indicated that this territory in Vojvodina was also part of the northern frontier of the newly created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (SCS). Defending this was a difficult task for its representatives at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.<sup>25</sup>

Within the Yugoslav sub-committee for Geography, Ethnography, History, colloquially known as “the Territorial,” the head of the committee, Jovan Cvijić, a geographer and ethnologist, and Stanoje Stanojević, a historian from Vojvodina who drew up a memorandum to defend and seek Vojvodinian territory and to justify its inclusion in the Kingdom of Serbia (later the shared state of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes), in particular distinguished themselves due to their work and commitment. The Yugoslav delegation had the difficult task of defending Serbian claims to land in Austria-Hungary stretching from

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<sup>21</sup> The Novi Sad People's Committee was preceded by the Central Committee of Banat, Bačka, and Baranja for the Reception and Accommodation of War Orphans and Poor Children from Bosnia, which was founded in Novi Sad on December 14, 1917. It should be noted that, during the preparations for the Great National Assembly in Novi Sad, scheduled for November 25, 1918, several variations for unifying Vojvodina with Serbia were presented. One, presented by the Radicals led by Jaša Tomić, called for the immediate unification of the Vojvodinian regions. Another, presented by the supporters of democratic ideas led by Vasa Stajić, called for initially including the part of Vojvodina within the self-proclaimed State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs based in Zagreb, and then a subsequent unification of these areas with the Kingdom of Serbia. Due to the efforts of other nationalities in Vojvodina, primarily the Bunjevci, the immediate unification of the regions in Vojvodina with the Kingdom of Serbia won out with the support of a large majority. Unification was announced at the Great National Assembly on November 25, 1918, in Novi Sad. (Njegovan 2004: 210–211; Mikavica 2005: 193; Marković 2020: 79–81.)

<sup>22</sup> Njegovan 2004: 229.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 246.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 249–250.

<sup>25</sup> Stanojević 1921: 76–90; Kirilović 1938: 120–129; Radojčić 1958: 22–26; Njegovan 2004: 250.

Gorica in the west to Banat in the east. In addition to asserting territorial claims according to ethnicity, the Serbian delegation also prepared a memorandum about what the Serbian people had suffered during the war, which stated that, during this time, the Serbian population had lost 1.150.000 people. The composition of the delegation itself underlined Vojvodina's importance; in addition to Stanojević, there were four other Serbs from Vojvodina: Ilarion Zeremski, bishop of Bačka and administrator of the sub-committee; Stevan Mihaldžić, a historian and priest from Baranja; and Nikola Radojčić and Vasa Stajić, two young yet already distinguished historians. The Serbian delegation itself was headed by the highly experienced former prime minister, Nikola Pašić.<sup>26</sup>

That Austria-Hungary had ceased to exist as a state was a positive element for resolving territorial disputes, creating new borders for the Kingdom of SCS, and dealing with the issue of Vojvodina. The Serbian army also held all the territory in Vojvodina, in which the people had voluntarily voiced their support for unification.<sup>27</sup> English and American representatives, who were in charge of the work and the commissions for demarcation, required first and foremost that ethnic criteria be respected, and that economic and military considerations also be taken into account. All other criteria, especially historical territorial belonging, would be relegated to the background. Therefore, when demarcating the borders of Vojvodina, those of Baranje and Bačka would be a matter to be determined in cooperation with the newly created Hungarian state, and Banat's would be determined in cooperation with Romania, while Srem was unquestionably considered part of the Kingdom of SCS.<sup>28</sup> In Banat, the border was determined according to the Serb and Romanian majorities. Delineating between the two peoples based purely on ethnicity was not possible, so an attempt was made to determine the final border through a system of reciprocity: for example, approximately the same number of Serbs would remain in Romania as Romanians did in Serbia. There was a significant number of Germans and some Hungarians present, but they were not at all considered to be an important factor in delineating these borders. In Bačka and Baranja, the relationships among all the Slavic peoples and the Hungarians, not including the Germans and the Romanians, were considered according to the same principle.<sup>29</sup> Banat was a particularly delicate issue for the commission because it had become an ally and later joined the Entente in 1916, but an offer had been made for it to enter the war on the side of the Allies. After many disagreements and attempts by the Serbs and the Romanians to gain as much territory in Banat as they could, a realistic border was established. Serbia (Kingdom of SCS) lost Timisoara, and the Romanians lost Vršac and Bela Crkva.<sup>30</sup> This border has withstood the test of time and other internationally recognized borders, and even today it is still the northeast border between the Republic of Serbia and Romania.

The question of delineation between Hungary and Baranja and Bačka was dealt with jointly and determined according to the same ethnic principle. At times, the Serbian delegation had an easier time with this issue than with Banat because only the Serbs (the kingdom) had pretensions and claims to this territory, but at other times it was even more

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<sup>26</sup> Radojčić 1958: 22–23; Njegovan 2004: 286–287.

<sup>27</sup> Stanojević 1921: 84–85.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 85.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 86.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 86–88.

difficult because the Slavs (there were Slovaks and Ruthenians in addition to Serbs) were scattered throughout the area, rather than being more concentrated, as in parts of Banat. For this reason, the Serbian delegation was explicitly told that the borders of these areas had to encompass at least 51 percent of the Slavic population. After much evidence was presented by the Serbs and Hungarians, the border was drawn with the largest losses to the Serbs in Baranja, with Pécs, Mohács, and Baja going to Hungary, and Osijek and Beli Manastir to the kingdom. In Bačka, the Serbs lost Szeged but gained Subotica and Sombor. The undisputed Serbian right to Novi Sad was asserted and confirmed.<sup>31</sup> The northern borders acquired by the Kingdom of SCS, however, did not remain unchanged. The territory granted to them in Baranja was excluded from Vojvodina in 1939 with the creation of the Banovina of Croatia, and after the fall of Yugoslavia it became part of the newly created Republic of Croatia. The border established for Bačka between the kingdom and Hungary has remained unchanged to this day and is currently the northern border of the Republic of Serbia.

Just how difficult it was to reach a compromise regarding the borders of Vojvodina while also satisfying the Kingdom of SCS, Romania, and the Allies, was evidenced by the position of the French General Le Rond, which was presented in August 1919, during the conference, to Ante Trumbić, the kingdom's minister of foreign affairs. Le Rond warned Trumbić that Romania was respected by the Allies, "and that it would be a great and powerful state, that it was rich in ore and raw materials, and that it would rapidly develop." Yugoslavia, he stressed, "[had] no quarrels with it, apart from the question of Banat, and that very small piece of land itself was in a difficult position, being surrounded by Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Albania. If you are on good terms with Romania, you are protected." Therefore, "Crown Prince Aleksandar could marry a Romanian princess."<sup>32</sup>

Considering the Serbian people's position in the monarchy and its constant vacillation between Vienna and Pest, the Vojvodina that was proclaimed in 1918 at the People's Assembly in Novi Sad and its inclusion in the Kingdom of Serbia guaranteed their political and national survival by merging with a state (the Kingdom of Serbia) in which Serbs were a constituent and majority group. When they proclaimed their own Vojvodina, a hitherto unattainable ideal, they rightly believed that joining the Kingdom of Serbia (which would become the Kingdom of SCS), would set the stage for their national preservation and their cultural and economic advancement.<sup>33</sup> Vojvodina's continued existence through two Yugoslavias (as a kingdom and a republic) and its autonomy within the modern-day Republic of Serbia shows just how correct the Serbian people in Hungary were in bringing to fruition the idea of Vojvodina as separate cultural, historical, and economic construction. Throughout the development of their own Vojvodina, the Serbian people have always respected a multiethnic principle, and have lived as part of community with other peoples, which we also demonstrate by further developing Vojvodina as a region within a united Europe, while also respecting its special place within the Republic of Serbia.

Translated by *Elizabeth Salmore*

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 88–89.

<sup>32</sup> Krizman 1929: 31–72; Kardum 1989: 136.

<sup>33</sup> Mikavica 2005: 202.

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## **СРПСКА ВОЈВОДИНА – ИДЕЈА И ГРАНИЦЕ ДО 1918. ГОДИНЕ**

### **Резиме**

Идеја *Српске Војводине*, као политичко-територијалне јединице, била је присутна код Срба у Хабзбуршкој монархији од краја 17. века до Првог светског рата. У време када је она постојала (1848–1861) или када је поново захтевана (пре 1848, после 1861) постављало се питање њених граница. То је посебно било наглашено приликом добровољног уласка становника Војводине у Краљевину Србију, односно новостворену државу Срба, Хрвата и Словенаца, децембра 1918. године. Питање војвођанских граница је чином стварања заједничке државе постало питање њених северних граница, које су брањене на мировној конференцији у Паризу према етничком, али и историјском принципу.

**Кључне речи:** Хабзбуршка монархија (Аустро-Угарска), Срби, Војводина, границе.

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