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Senator Larry Craig And The Hungarian (Dis)Connection: The Hungarians of Voivodina

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As we read the headlines regarding Senator Larry Craig's resignation, an event comes to mind relating to the Senator defeating language aimed at protecting the Hungarians of Voivodina (Vojvodina / Vajdaság).

The United States Senate approved the Serbia Democratization Act in November 1999. That Act included Section 502 relating specifically to the Hungarian minority of Voivodina.¹ A companion bill was introduced in the House of Representatives on March 3, 1999, but only adopted on September 25, 2000. That bill also contained a Sense of the Congress resolution concerning the Hungarian minority, but it differed from the Senate version.

When the Senate and the House versions differ, a conference committee consisting of members of both chambers usually convenes to iron out the differences. In this case, the House acted late – at the end of the Congressional session when everyone was working on spending bills and trying to adjourn. Consequently, the Senate decided to use a procedure whereby it would adopt the more updated House version of the Serbia Democratization Act. That procedure, however, required the Senate's unanimous consent. That is when Senator Craig arrived on the scene.

¹ Section 502 was an expression of the "sense of the Congress with respect to ethnic Hungarians of Voivodina." As such, it did not have the force and effect of binding legislation. However, it was a significant measure because it referred specifically to the Hungarian minority's situation then existing in Serbia — the harassment and intimidation campaign against them. The measure stated that "during the past 10 years this form of ethnic cleansing has already driven 50,000 ethnic Hungarians out of the province of Voivodina." The measure then expressed the sense of Congress that the President should "(1) condemn harassment, threats, and intimidation against any ethnic group in Yugoslavia as the usual precursor of violent ethnic cleansing; (2) express deep concern over reports on recent threats, intimidation, and even violent incidents against the ethnic Hungarian inhabitants of the province of Voivodina; (3) call upon the Secretary of State to regularly monitor the situation of the Hungarian ethnic group in Voivodina; and (4) call on the NATO allies of the United States, during any negotiation on the future status of Kosovo, also to pay substantial attention to establishing satisfactory guarantees for the rights of the ethnic Hungarian community of Voivodina, and of other ethnic minorities in the province, including consulting with elected leaders about their proposal for self-administration."

On October 12, a senior staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with whom I worked closely on NATO's enlargement called me to advise me that Senator Craig was holding up the Serbia Democratization Act. I confirmed this report with other staffers on both sides of the aisle.

Taking advantage of Milosevic's ouster, Senator Craig, lobbied by Serbian Americans, withheld unanimous consent for two reasons, according to the Senate sources: (1) He did not want to include the sanction provisions contained in the Serbia Democratization Act, and, (2) he wanted to eliminate any mention of the Hungarian minority, incredibly asserting that the Voivodina provision would lead to further dismantling of Yugoslavia.

This pitted Republican Craig against Republican Senator Jesse Helms, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the Committee's ranking Democratic member, Senator Joseph Biden and Republican Congressman Chris Smith – all of whom wanted the Congress to enact the Serbia Democratization Act. According to the same Senate sources, had the House acted earlier and had there been more time to take the measure to a vote on the floor, it likely would have been adopted by the Senate by at least a 90 – 10 margin.

After receiving the call from the Senate, I contacted several Hungarian American organizations and urged them to write to Senators Craig, Helms and Biden and the Majority leader. I also asked the influential Polish American Congress to support us, which they did by sending their own letter. Several Hungarian American organizations, including the American Hungarian Federation, the American Hungarian Federation of Metropolitan Washington, D.C., the Hungarian American Coalition, and the Hungarian Club of Colorado, sent letters.

We realized that if Senators Helms and Biden could not budge Senator Craig, it was unlikely that we would be more successful. The letters, however, were intended to serve three purposes: (1) we wanted to line up behind the leadership of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee which supported Section 502; (2) we wanted to send a message that the Hungarian American "lobby" and its friends were engaged and concerned and deeply concerned about Voivodina; and (3) we wanted to set the stage for a possible revival of Section 502.

Following Kostunica's victory, the Republican chairman of the Senate appropriations subcommittee on foreign operations Mitch McConnell and ranking Democrat Patrick Leahy wrote an article in the October 16 issue of the *New York Times*. In that article they urged that aid to Serbia be tied to Belgrade's "willingness to surrender war criminals," its ending "support of those who have undermined the full integration of Bosnia Herzegovina," and its respecting "the aspirations and political rights of minorities." These three conditions were included in proposed legislation.

The Clinton administration opposed such conditions or restrictions on aid and insisted on maximum flexibility toward Belgrade. Senator McConnell insisted on the three conditions noted above. The outcome was a compromise, namely Section 594 of the Foreign Operations bill relating to funding for Serbia. That bill allowed the administration to make \$100 million available to Serbia. No funds could be made available after March 31, 2001 unless the President certified that Belgrade had taken steps to satisfy the three conditions noted above.

It was unfortunate that Senator Craig killed a measure that in considerable detail addressed the plight of the Hungarians of Voivodina. When it comes to these kinds of issues, Hungarian American organizations must find the way to more effectively cooperate and coordinate their initiatives.² The American Hungarian Federation is committed to bringing organizations together so that our community's voice can be better heard.

²Although supporting Section 502, one Hungarian American organization apparently was caught by surprise by Senator Craig's intervention to defeat it. Instead of joining and coordinating its efforts with the other organizations to counter Senator Craig's actions, that organization questioned the reporting on the imminent demise of the Serbian Democratization Act at the hands of the Senator. It also asserted that the general reference to the rights of minorities contained in the Foreign Appropriations Act was a "watershed event." The organization overlooked the fact that such general language relating to the protection of minorities throughout the former Yugoslavia was not unique, as it had been included in earlier bills and reflected U.S. policy. Thanks to Senators McConnell and Leahy (and others) such language was reiterated in the Foreign Appropriations Act. If not killed by Senator Craig, the language of Section 502 specifically identifying the Hungarians of Voivodina, however, would have been a "watershed event" and worthy of inter-organizational cooperation.

The financial assistance actually given to Serbia under the Foreign Appropriations Act despite Serbia's less than exemplary record relative to the third condition -- respect for minority rights -- is another story.