*Information about interviewee:*

*Péter Vataščin is a Slovakian-Serbian journalist based in Subotica. The interview was conducted in Subotica, Serbia.*

*R= Respondent – Péter Vataščin*

*I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton*

I: Why do you believe Hungary naturalised the ethnic Hungarians in Serbia and Slovakia?

R: The first thing is the ideology this nation which is fragmented after the peace treaty of training on how to be in some ways unified politically. Usually I don’t believe in such ideologies in some ways the instrumental dimension is more important before the Hungarians outside of hunger probably you know there was a referendum in 2005. Public debate back then led by the political parties, that was the first time I realised that such debates are not constructed in a vacuum. There are political agents, parties and so on. There was the first I realise there’s always a massive political interest connected to this debate. And it was quite depressing thing back then. And it was quite clear after that full stop that the fitness party would use this tool, this mechanism, so to say for broadening political power. There was a vice president of the party, after this referendum called Ishtar Nicola, head of the health ministry, in 2007, he said that if the Hungarians outside of Hungary received this citizenship then everything will be finish for the next 20 years. It was a very strong argument to make by Aubin himself. Our vice president, who isn’t that smart, had to be the one to say this. After that the socialist government, began to fall apart in their coalition with the Liberals. In 2010 it was very interesting year with Allman and company did this as how should I say through pure power they did this. While this is the basic thing, that there is this ideology, that you would say is above all, but I think that it was used by the Fidesz. Interest is one thing, but in 2014 these new citizens had the chance to vote for the first time, and I think that finesse and auburn himself thought that now we will receive hundreds and thousands of boats because we have all these new citizens. I don’t know what the percentages are that here in 2014, they received only 16,000 or something and the previous year 18,000. Here, nearly everybody who had the chance to receive the citizenship, applied freights and received a. Probably we were talking about 200,000 new citizens. Here in Serbia. There are quite small amounts, 10%? The voting procedure was quite complicated yet, yet to register and so on, but someone needs to do more research on this, about how people felt connected to this thing. Maybe when we’re talking about sympathies, we suppose, that many of these new citizens are pro feeders in some ways. Although when it comes to some concrete steps like voting during a referendum or Parliamentary election then things are more complicated. I would like to highlight that auburn wanted to use it as a tool for power but in reality, it is much more complicated. You have these people behind your back, but it does not necessarily bear fruit in concrete situations. It will be in very interesting to see next year for example, what happens in the future. I would like to highlight one more fact, that is the role of the Hungarian minority parties, the VMS. This party, well it is very complicated, I tried to understand this many time, I tried to write some articles for newspapers on this. I tried to highlight one or two aspects; it is a very promulgated thing. But it is very important to understand that CPS has some parties in these countries. In Slovakia the SMK in Transylvania the parties the NN DS which wasn’t pro-Fidesz, during in its existence. But here is a new phenomenon. The leader of this party here, one of his basic ideas, is that we have to be on good terms with Belgrade and Budapest as well. But if I think and I can be critical of this relationship, the guys in Budapest and the guys in Belgrade are quite authoritarian. It’s quite a horrifying thing to see, how these things exist in practice. Take for example, this referendum in October, the VMS, had to organise civic forums in small towns and villages, maybe two dozen? Maybe three dozen? There were newspaper articles, television broadcasts, while they openly propagated the stance of the government in Budapest, they even have billboards and posters, informal, where there were the three leaders of the MS Belgrade and Budapest. It is very stingray you have all these politicians in one place. I’ve said is very interesting that’s the VMS did not have much place for manoeuvring. When someone says something in Belgrade these politicians have to obey. These small parties do not have, money under themselves. This is a hierarchical relationship. It’s more horizontal one is a vertical one. I argue that this situation is troubling for the voters. I will mention a very concrete example, when the parties made this civic forum, one of the main arguments was, we had to be grateful for the government in Budapest, because we have received citizenship, we have received, and are receiving, quite a vast amount of money in various forms, one of them is the Prospero party fund. These are the main arguments at these forums. This is the first argument. Chronologically. When you try to be rational, and you try to think logically, what is the connection of this argument, with the topic itself? That is, the refugee policy of Hungary and the relationship of, let’s say Brussels, or the United States. Logically rationally you cannot say that they are connected. You cannot say this is a national topic or national question, and under this umbrella that this is somehow it is connected in this context. Do we have to be great for not? But in this context, it is horrifying that this argument is made. The intensity of this campaign was quite unusual. This wasn’t for the people here somehow. This is an internal affair of hungry, or maybe an external affair if you include Brussels. We in Serbia we are in Vojvodina. If you speak of the Serbian nation as a whole you can say there is some connection, but you could say it is quite a paradoxical situation some ways. I was totally amazed at how this is used as a main argument. I try to argue on Facebook with one of the vice presidents of VMS, and he said, these are just arguments and the voters will decide. I tried to ask him. Okay, try to make arguments based on why this is proper question to discuss in this context. Why is this logical? One of my friends interviewed one of the guys running this fund, Balint Jugas, whether we had to use this argument about feeling grateful. After this interview, way gave some thin answers, he then asked for this to deleted. He tried to ask some concrete things about how the process was conducted, but he gave no concrete answers. He just repeated the argument, we should be grateful for the Hungarian state. This is very counter-productive in many ways, the people live here in quite modest conditions, the monthly income is not a high. Many voters of the party itself make 200 or €300 a month. Ethically to suggest that we need to vote because they have given us money this is not ethically sound. I think that even Fidesz or even Orbán, would have to more modest and not use this argument in these contexts. In Slovakia or Austria is somehow different, I have some troubles with these arguments even in those contexts, that here or in Ukraine, it is very troublesome. I was quite angry when I read about this. We will see what happens next year. There was one more interesting thing

the communication of the VMS when it was directed towards the Hungarian media, pastoral, was talking about percentages, that 20,000 voters registered, out of this 20,000 18,000 had registered in one day, that is 90%, and it sounds good. One journalist in the daily newspaper, political, totally misunderstood, she wrote that, 90% of the Vojvodina Hungarians voted for Fidesz, that should be 150,000 voters or something. The basic thing is that Pastor, tried to manage, try to construct his communication in quite creative ways. 18,000 is a small town in Hungary or something, so it is not significant. I don’t know what the reaction Orbán and was himself. They met after the referendum. Everyone was shaking hands, smiling into the camera, and I don’t know what his impression was. If my memory serves me correctly then the relationships in Transylvania and Slovakia was not much better. It will be quite hard for all the to instrumentalist this population and maybe he will not succeed.

I: What is the relationship with VMS and Fidesz like?

R: I don’t have a bigger picture of the relationship between Fidesz and VMS in the 1990s. but before 2010, these parties I would say, had more autonomy, more space, more manoeuvring. And after that, when you take into account assimilation, depopulation, these parties have some hard times. On the other hand these regions, like Vojvodina, like Transylvania, a periphery. From an economic and social point of view, this manoeuvring space, becomes smaller. And on the other hand you have a government, Fidesz, in Budapest, is in the negative spiral, in many ways, and I’m not pleased with this relationship built by the Fidesz government. Task one is to get voters for the Fidesz. I’m not sure what is happening with this, Prosperitati. In May 2015, there was a big scandal with this, someone leaks the document, of this development in an Excel table, basically a list of some entrepreneurs and about the amount of money they would receive. This is a very big scandal here in Vojvodina. After that things were silent for some months, they somehow reconstruct the project, so that now various lay men and very small businesses receive several thousand or tens of thousands of euros, but the big money is still to come. So maybe this is a case of, you know, when you are throwing pennies in the crowd. And after that it becomes much easier to engage in corrupt ways. We will see we will see. I’m not sure the mechanisms, but is it is fair to say, but they made a deal with the Belgrade government as well. One of my friends said, for example, but to ethnic Serbians received funding as well, who have Hungarian citizenship, but they are ethnic Serbians who were part of SNS. So maybe the Serbian state receives a concrete amount money of this fund. I sincerely hope that, that journalists will try to track down the money, and get themselves into this topic. On the other hand, I am sure that in some ways, this party gives back some money in black for other ways to the government. It is a big political play. I’m totally sure they didn’t intend to leak this document; it was a trouble in their system. The Prosperitati foundation gives people who are political engaged in Vojvodina financial contributions which strengthens the position of Fidesz in Hungary. The model appears to be to pump money into the Hungarian banks which is probably a form of money laundering.

I: Were these names connected to the VMS?

R: Yes many of them, many of them. Demidov Bonfort, the chairman of, Masterplats, he was the second one. The first one is one of the greatest tycoons in Vojvodina, he is Chaka, and some other tycoons as well, I’m not sure about the percentage, but the main group of these people were connected, or even were members, of the party. On the other hand, from a rational point of view, they are the basis of the Hungarian economic power here in Vojvodina. So there is a rational dimension of this. Here in Vojvodina, and Serbia in the region as a whole the layman are the prisoners of the system. And I think that the minority parties, that are using their power, do not want to be self-critical, because it is about their existence, the whole story is about their existence. Someone from the VMS said if we do not receive this money from Budapest from Fidesz, we are finished. This is what he actually said. It is not clear whether he was talking about the party, or the Hungarian community, but I think that it doesn’t matter in the end. It is quite an amount of money here in Vojvodina, here it is wow! I think there was a need to receive this money. Many people here are prisoners of this power system. In my interpretation, Fidesz is abusing this power system, by using the tool of dual citizenship. In the end it is interesting that they do not have tools to terrorise people, so out of 200,000, 180,000 people are not voting you cannot just grab them. So even the Hungarian government is exposed to this. Maybe in some situations, every vote count, so maybe next year they will receive 25,000, that is an amount as well. They will receive some chairs in the National Assembly and maybe that’s enough of them to get what they want.

I: Do you believe the Hungarian state wanted to encourage migration to Hungary?

R: If you take the position that every population in central Europe is declining, on Hungary does not want to find economic migrants outside of the EU. Here we have 200,000 Hungarians in Transylvania we have 1,500,000. In Slovakia 400,000. For hungry this is an economic resource. This can be at all Hungary; the big question is whether this will be enough. You can have a plan as a government, as a political party, but you just cannot see how these concrete individuals or groups, will behave, because many people here use their Hungarian passports to migrate to Austria to Germany to the UK. They went to work in London, my friends, with the help of the Hungarian passport. For Fidesz it is quite difficult to manage the situation.

I: Do you believe Fidesz want some political leverage in the regions where they have Hungarian communities?

R: Yes 100%. It is because of power, because of economic migrants. I would not say politicians in feeders or VMS are totally instrumentalist, but I would say that they believe in this somehow. I cannot call them sheep, these voters, they have agency they have their own view of the world. The idea of nationhood is important to them, many of them. Maybe some of them are more pragmatic, but usually these things become quite blurred in reality. These things are not against each other, they can coexist in many ways, but in order to see this you have to engage with these concrete people, these concrete communities. Especially here. The general public is very blind to this. Up until the general election or the referendum, you had three or four years, where these public debates were somehow silence. You did not have commentaries in the public media about the problems facing the Hungarians in Vojvodina. It was Pax VMS. We don’t have the figures we don’t have the vote sure turnout, and the public debate was very thin it was only published in blogs or something in the periphery. Where you don’t have vast amounts of readers and so. Istvan Pastor. The VMS established a mini authoritarian regime in this context, maybe he began to construct this even before 2010. The National Assembly of Hungarian community, there they received 95% of the votes in 2014, before this there was voting on level of Vojvodina, they received the overwhelming majority of Hungarian voters, it was like North Korea. He then became more and more obsessed with this miniature power, and this was his greatest motive to engage with Fidesz, and he had this individual motivation to preserve power to consolidate power.

I: Orbán ideology?

R: In some ways they are neoliberal, the economic policy, but they are not necessarily right-wing, there are neoliberal as well. The present time is very interesting, but it be more interesting to see this after 10 or 20 years. Some people say that this is not an interesting thing, these are small communities, et cetera but one of the greatest questions you can ask about political power, is how is it maintained at a micro level? In towns and villages and so on. Basically we are talking about state-level all the time, and politicians on top, and this little miniature debate here can reveal more about the power relationships. The biggest question is what we have in these villages and towns? Serbian social sciences lack funding and autonomy and so we don’t have our own social science, so basically, we are blind. I don’t know what the cases with the political parties themselves, do they see more than we do? Maybe they see more inside their circles of power. Maybe they do? Orbán and Vochic, maybe just know how to use some tools, but I would say they do not know what the situation society is. I believe they do not think compassionately about society as a whole. They simply invented the golden tool to abuse this in their own interests. One of the good examples of this is the Hungarian citizenship. Or it was intended to be. We will have to wait till next April to see the effects of this. The presidential elections here in March, István Pasztor was ordered to conduct a campaign in favour of Vochic, in some ways it was similar to the thing in October. I don’t know how many votes he received from Hungarian voters, it was about 30, 000. It was certainly more significant than the October voting. What the voters think here in Vojvodina? We came to the conclusion that the voters here emotionally more connected for a Serbian presidential election then for a Parliamentary election in the mother state. Maybe? I’m not sure but I think it is like this. The severe very interesting thing to explore. This would require big blow to the idea of the Hungarian nation that as a minority community in an alien state your more connected to this alien state then the mother state. When it comes to concrete voting, maybe. The VMS used to receive 50,000 votes. Now they are paranoid. When it comes to voting it is clear that these voters can be mobilised for this party, anything other than this is secondary or even further behind, and I am not sure that this can change. Pastor Istvan was an individual candidate in 2008 and 2011 and I think he got 70,000. Maybe even some Serbian voters is connected to our political establishment, voted for him. Some people asked him why he was he wasn’t an individual candidate anymore, because of his political capital, he can mobilise voters, he doesn’t need to win the election. Done garret parties can provide 10,000 or 20,000 boats if that is the shortage. And it will create a difficult situation for him if there is a second-round, which is a more complicated. Basically this is my conclusion that they have to serve these interests of the party of the SNS. It’s quite depressing thing to see that these big guys in Belgrade and Budapest order this party to do something for them and this party would do it. There is no self-criticism is no counterarguments all they do is obey.

I: Who has the biggest influence?

R: I’m totally unsure we would need to see everything, all the money or the power. I’m not sure maybe it is equal with the SNS and Fidesz. The MS as part of the political structure of Serbia so VMS as a party cannot decide just to go to Hungary. If it is on those terms with this government with this power everything will be fucked up for them. I think the control is absolute in both directions from the SNS and Fidesz. When they are ordering these processes there are no counterarguments from either direction. Last year the parliamentary elections were held at provincial level and there was a gargantuan election Festival here in Vojvodina. There were some debates of the coalition will at local level, and Pastore suggested that maybe the party of the liberal socialist democrats Vojvodina, that maybe we should establish coalition with them. I’m pretty sure he made his commentary individually, without the approval of the party elite without the approval of the SNS and after that Igor Merovich made fierce comments about Pastor. He was put into place basically. He basically said you do not make such comments its better you are silent. After that there were no comments. And totally sure this relationship is a vertical one the MS has no autonomy. The relationship between Serbia and Hungary is quite good. In the previous years there is no trouble. Even Siato, came to campaign for the SNS in favour of the SNS. He made a famous statement that if I was Serbia not vote for SNS and if I was Hungarian, I would vote for the VMS. This statement did not reach Budapest. Everyone here thought it was totally nonsense. Many of the SNS were parts of the Serbian radical party for 2008 and we can characterise them as some sort of neofascist organisation. Really fierce nationalists during the 90s and this year when you follow comments in many ways there are directed towards this past of Vochic, any basically said what happened in the past we have to look forward, and afterwards he argued we received money and government aid. There is no intention in this relationship between Belgrade and Budapest. Many lower ranking party officials talk about this incident forums throughout ongoing community because this is their interpretation, that many Hungarians here remember this past and this anti-sentiments against this Serbian nationalism is very strong. Many Hungarians here are fiercely against this policy of cooperation with the Serbian parties. In some ways the SNS is the product of the scene in the 90. Not just Milosevic, but other right-wing political parties. That was one of the factors which meant he didn’t receive many votes. Some of the comments I looked at on Facebook for quite radical, saying things that held a, how can we vote for this man. Especially from the ultra-right-wing commentators on Facebook or right-wing media at the periphery. We don’t know voter preferences, we don’t have sociological institutes that conduct research on this, so we don’t know the role this sentiment played during this campaign during the voting process.

I: Do Hungary directly finance the VMS?

R: Basically the whole Prosperitati is like this, but it is much more blurred. But I don’t have any concrete examples. Usually they say this money is for the funds not for the party for example the synagogue we have here is under redevelopment and this is funded for by the uncaring government. But this money is received by the assembly. Basically the power is in the hands of those who connected to the party and they’re the ones received the money. The weapon in the past and I don’t know what the other ways of transferring money to VMS are. This is always covered in mist. There are some clues that there is corruption. This is the handicap of our public life here, in order to dip yourself deep into these things you need to have money, you need to have an institution built around you, with lawyers with some other people, we don’t have such institutions. Up until now there not particularly interested in our public life. But this vast money coming in, unprecedented in Serbia, has led journalists to become more interested in the topic. It is possible that up until now everything is legal, and they are not abusing the system that maybe this will be a topic for the future, but I’m quite sure that this will not vanish. It will continue to exist like this. I’m quite sceptical about the vanishing power of this party. Let’s say the voter preferences of the VMS will fall under 40,000 you have the SNS to arrange some of their voters votes for BMS they are on top of the system, they can do this, and nobody can say a thing. As long as they can use the VMS for their political goals, and I think that the VMS does everything that they can to preserve this relationship. A lot of people in this region don’t care about corruption in this region because this party is the only carrier of national interests in Serbia now. This is the price we have to pay to have a government here in Vojvodina, we need to have a Hungarian government, Hungarian Parliaments, to serve Hungarian interests, maybe they’re stealing? Maybe they’re corrupt? But they are still a national party. They have a lot of internal legitimacy. Whether they have some practice politicians at the local level, who knows? I have a friend who works the prospect of the and he said, yesterday steel, then maybe we will get some crumbs of the table, so they are better off than they were before, so this argument again so we receive money, we citizenship, we should be happy, this is a real argument as if we were prisoners. When I wrote a text about this argument I had a comment under my text from a man who is working in Germany but is properly connected to VMS, who said I don’t know whether the whether the writer of this text has Hungarian citizenship issue given back if he does he has it because of Viktor Orbán or than and say should shut up. A surprise people use this argument in reality, the voters everyone. I talk to someone who received money from this foundation, who said I will not say anything critical about the VMS because they gave me money. This was the concrete argument that she used to describe the relationship with her mother as well she said I do not criticise my mother because she gave me food. These are just micro examples that these can be much more generalizable. I do not see any resolution or way out of this madness. If someone is being genuinely sincere, I don’t think you should make a fall of them. If someone believes this then okay. The negative thing is how do these parties manage the situation and it’s quite one-sided and that’s the problem, the problem is not the people believe in the nation all that’s Pastor and Orbán as pioneers of the Hungarian nation. The problem is when they are abusing and misusing the people here for their own political gain. There is a stadium here in Subotica, and about a month ago farmers from Vojvodina were transported here, and it was here that they had to sign their contracts for this money for tractors, the development Ministry and the Ministry of foreign affairs came from Belgrade with this Istanu pastor, and and they made a big political show. It would be much easier for the farmers to sign their contracts in the local offices but instead they’ve bust into the stadium and got a lot of political coverage. It was and expensive thing but politically interesting. Politically they had to use this chance that was on the table. When there is a chance, when there is an occasion, to use the tools, they use them there not shy. Maybe this is paid for by the prosperity foundation as some of the money goes to management’s administrative costs et cetera. Maybe they can receive money informally from Budapest. I know they have secretive meetings here for example, in 2015. Orbán came here to meet with Pastor. Totally in secret. The journalist was sent back. Go away there will be an unofficial meeting here. Is quite important for both of them for this relationship to work.