

Media and Minorities in Serbia

VOJVODINA – QUANTITY, BUT QUESTIONABLE QUALITY

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The province of Vojvodina has the only serious media offer in Serbia and Montenegro in ethnic minority languages. Decade-long media tradition, which for some minorities dates back not just to the middle of the 20th century, but even further into the 19th century, and the social and political support which was mostly public, continuous, although not equally sufficient in all periods, directs us to focus this article on everyday informative life in Vojvodina. All the more so because it meets the criteria of good standard which may be questionable for other multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural communities.

Statistically speaking, the right of ethnic minorities to information in their own language is fully satisfied in Vojvodina.

Generally speaking, over the past 35 years media in ethnic minority languages underwent four development periods directly conditioned by the current political context. At the time of strengthening of autonomy, i.e. in the early 70's and until the end of the 80's of the previous century, they were stimulated both in terms of staffing, as well as in technical and technological terms. Newspaper circulations rose and airtime on Radio Television Novi Sad was increased.

With the arrival of Milosevic into power, when the main political credo was centralization in all walks of life, media in ethnic minority languages did not stagnate statistically, but they were basically victims of this policy. All, with the exception of media in the Hungarian language, visibly supported the Milosevic regime because they were funded by the state and shared the fate of all state-centrist media. Since there was no interest in their further development, they were suffocated using more subtle means. A strict restriction on employment of new, young people was in effect (in many media, for 10 years no one young was hired even part-time, let alone full-time), equipment was not

refreshed and existing equipment was not maintained adequately, and no investments were made in computerization of newsrooms or digitalization of broadcasters (editing units...).

During the NATO campaign, transmitters were destroyed, including the ones that transmitted minority media signal. They were also the last to be restored because it was more urgent to restore signal of media in the majority language.

Even now, after the changes in 2000, i.e. in the fourth period, which we stratified as crucial in development of media in minority languages, investments are again being made, once more primarily with the support of the provincial executive authorities, to restore these media outlets, both in staffing as well as technical terms. However, after decade-long stagnation and a rigid social climate, it is hard to quickly revitalize everything that was allowed to “die a natural death.”

In this present period, newspapers are published regularly and several-hour long daily/weekly radio and TV programming is broadcast in as many as eight languages (Hungarian, Slovakian, Romanian, Ruthenian, Ukrainian, Romany, Croatian and German). Media in the Hungarian language have the most broadcast hours, while media in German have the least, which matches the participation of these languages in Vojvodina’s total population.

In Vojvodina, there are 150 papers published in ethnic minority languages. Radio and TV programming in seven languages of ethnic minorities is broadcast by the Broadcasting Institution of Vojvodina as the public service of all citizens and 22 local radio stations founded by municipal assemblies which broadcast radio programming in at least two languages (majority and minority, and some of them even in several minority languages, depending on how many languages are in official use in the particular municipality).

The province does not have a developed network of private radio and television stations in ethnic minority languages and these broadcasters are very sporadic. “Multiradio,” the second program on the regional Radio 021 (Novi Sad), is the only broadcaster that airs programming in several languages, as well as the local television in the Slovakian language Backi Petrovac. There are several other initiatives such as the regional TV

Kikinda (yet being established), which is supposed to broadcast in Serbian and Hungarian according to the project.

There are generally no private print media which would constitute relevant informative press in ethnic minority languages. An exception is “Csaladi kor,” a Hungarian language weekly and the highest circulation newspaper in any minority language in Vojvodina.

At the initiative of the Provincial Executive Council, the number of media in minority languages rose by two more. Since recently, a Croatian language magazine called “Hrvatska Rijec” has been coming out, as well as a magazine in the Romany language called “Tehem” (end of November 2003). It is of note that two magazines in the Romany language were published in Vojvodina, “Alav e Romeg” and “Romologija,” as editions of the Society of Vojvodina for Romany Language and Literature and the Matica of Romanies (central Romany cultural and publishing society). Their discontinuity is not only a reflection of lack of money, but also staff, way of distribution, and what is most important, the unsolved main problem – Vojvodina’s Romanies speak the Romany language poorly and practically do not read it at all. Thus, it is not surprising that “Tehem” declared itself as a paper for Romanies and Non-Romanies. There are a lot more fans of Radio Novi Sad programs in the Romany language and TV Novi Sad programs broadcast within the national network since they are aired on Radio Television Serbia’s so-called Channel 2. What characterizes these programs is the model that is used to bridge the language problem. Bilingual programs are usually made (Serbian-Romany), and when they have guests from areas where other languages are spoken, then the programs are multilingual. The Romanies were the first in Vojvodina’s media space to introduce the highest lingual standard – a program in which each participant speaks in his or her native tongue without subtitles or simultaneous translation and lip-synching.

What may also be considered a reflection of a strive to create multicultural programming is the 60-minute-long program “Zajedno” (Together). Since January 2002, this cultural magazine-type program has been broadcast on the first channel of Television Novi Sad every fourth Sunday of the month in the Serbian, Hungarian, Slovakian, Romanian and Ruthenian languages. All items are aired in the native tongue and there are subtitles in

Serbian. It is also envisioned that journalists who write in the Ukrainian or Croatian language join in.

Still, however this may seem by looking at statistics and the contents of the different programs, one could not say that the situation in the informative market in ethnic minority languages in Vojvodina is really excellent.

Statistics are one thing and reality is another. Newsrooms working in ethnic minority languages are “old,” journalists are 40 years old on average; they are usually neither motivated nor educated for contemporary journalism; the problem of language competence is very pronounced, actually language assimilation is considerable; the media public is small; media competition is significant; sources of information are closed to them more often than to their competition in the majority language¹; the material situation of these media ranges from mediocre to poor; their future is uncertain, especially for media whose owners are local communities or those who are supposed to change their title-holder and then enter the privatization process².

¹ A recent example presented at the international conference “Mass Media and Conflict Management,” Romania, September 22-29, 2003, is advisable. It regards the Romanian language weekly *Libertatea* whose journalists have been waiting for almost half a year for an interview with then Minister of Minorities Mr. Rasim Ljajic, who is normally known as a very tolerant person and well-disposed toward journalists. One of the causes is that public figures calculate that if they appear in a leading outlet in the majority language, other media will also quote them. The language barrier and insufficient availability of media in minority languages clearly limit this possibility.

² With regard to privatization (must be carried out over the next four years) of broadcasters founded by local bodies of self-rule (municipality, city) – Articles 96 and 126 of the Law on Broadcasting – it was concluded during a public discussion in Vojvodina that this is a fatal solution for local media in ethnic minority languages. Up until now the municipality provided for and supported programming in ethnic minority languages which according to the Statute of the particular municipality are in official use regardless of what percentage of the population of the municipality belongs to the particular lingual community because this was considered to be in social interest. Market and centrist oriented media are not very interested in supporting minority language programming – it is realistic to presume that they will disappear over time at the level of local broadcasters where they are needed the most. Such examples have already been reported (with the privatization of Radio Vrsac a Romanian language program was discontinued and now there is not a single strong local radio station that broadcasts in the Romanian language).

Interpretation of Article 96 of the Law on Broadcasting, or more precisely the model of privatization of what are called municipal radio stations, was one of the most frequent questions posed by local communities to the Republic Ministry of Culture and Media last year. The Ministry adopted the stand that municipalities can keep their information centers and radio stations that operate according to the principle of broadcasting services with a certain percentage that guarantees multi-ethnicity.

This raises the justified question of how to bridge the gap between statistics and reality, that is to say whether it is only laws³ that can contribute to this or make the gap even bigger. Judging by everyday practice in the area of public information, laws are just a good foundation or guarantor of a more stable future, while more money and creative incentives should be invested in motivating young people to work in journalism in their mother tongue. It is also necessary to make the profession positively valued by society and also well provided for materially.

Investment in media in ethnic minority languages is, among other things, an investment in fulfilling commitments assumed by Serbia and Montenegro by signing and ratifying different international documents qualifying it as a democratic country and recommending it for membership in the EU.

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³ Let us recall three laws from a package of media laws that directly regard the media in ethnic minority languages: Law on Broadcasting (July 2002), Law on Public Information (April 22, 2003) and Bill on Free Access to Information of Public Significance (at the time this article is written, February 2004, it is still undergoing procedure). Also, according to solutions from the Law on Establishing Certain Powers of the Province (2002), better known as the Omnibus Law, which restores some of Vojvodina's autonomy (basically this is not a media law, but it does reinforce some solutions in the area of public information), media in ethnic minority languages are founded and supported by the provincial government. One of the proposals is for the role of their founders to be assumed by National Councils as instruments of cultural self-rule of ethnic minorities, but consensus has not yet been reached on this.