

Vojvodina's National Minorities: Current Realities and Future Prospects

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INTRODUCTION

The political changes of October 2000 generated a variety of developments in Serbia-Montenegro. Some of those developments were of an external character (e.g. the progressive restoration of the state's membership in the various international organizations), whereas others had an internal dimension. One of the internal developments having to do with the rights and freedoms of national minorities was the introduction of a new legal framework; a new federal law on national minorities was passed in February 2002. The present state and the future prospects of the national minorities resident in the Serbian autonomous province of Vojvodina will be critically outlined in this article. First of all, the provisions of this novel legal framework concerning Vojvodina's national minorities on a federal as well as on a provincial level (e.g. the 2002 "*Omnibus Zakon*") will be set in context. Then the educational opportunities available in the province's minority languages, as well as the situation of the national minorities' media and press, will be assessed. Overall, I try to demonstrate that effective safeguarding of the collective identity of Vojvodina's national minorities primarily relies on two factors: a. the full implementation of the novel legal (federal as well as provincial) provisions; and b. the attitude of the national minorities themselves towards the question of preserving their group identities.

THE NEW LEGAL FRAMEWORK

On February 27, 2002, the federal government of Serbia-Montenegro inaugurated a new “Law for the Protection of the Rights and Liberties of National Minorities,” with the aim of guaranteeing more effective protection for the individual and collective rights of national minorities.^[1] In a foreword, national minorities are defined as “those groups within the population of Serbia-Montenegro that possess characteristics such as language, culture, national or ethnic membership, origin or religious faith that differentiate them from the majority of the population, and the members of which face some problems with the preservation of their collective identity, including tradition, culture, language or religion” (See “*Odredjivanje nacionalne manjine*,” Article 2).

As a formal indication of “positive discrimination,” the law dictates that particular attention should be paid to improving the social status of individuals belonging to the Roma national minority (“*Mere za obezbedjenje ravnopravnosti*,” Article 4). Indeed, this official recognition of the Roma as one of the state’s national minorities is in itself a notable innovation. Moreover, it strictly prohibits any attempt or legal measure that aims at the forcible assimilation of individuals belonging to national minorities (“*Sloboda nacionalnog opredeljivanja I izrazavanja*,” Article 5).

Another noteworthy provision is the right granted to members of national minorities to freely cooperate with legal subjects resident outside the administrative borders of Serbia-Montenegro, especially those to which they bear some collective ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious similarity (“*Pravo saradnje sa sunarodnicima u zemlji I u inostanstvu*,” Article 6).

With regard to the official use of minority languages and alphabets, national minority residents in the territory of Serbia-Montenegro are now entitled to officially use their language within their municipality or locality if they form 15% of the local population (“*Sluzbena upotreba jezika I pisma*,” Article 11). The same article also provides for the official use of minority languages in judicial procedures, as well as for electoral material in these languages. Moreover, the national minorities resident in the above-mentioned localities or municipalities are granted the right to name streets and other public spaces in their languages. Further, in areas where a national minority makes up 15% of the local population, federal legislation and other such enactments are to be issued in the minority’s language as well. Also, those members of national minorities that make up less than 2% of Serbia-Montenegro’s total population are given the right

to contact the Federal Parliament and other federal organs in their native language. The state is also now obliged to finance the cultural activities organized by the various national minorities (*“Pravo na negovanje kulture I tradicije,”* Article 12).

With regard to the sector of education, members of national minorities in areas where that minority makes up 15% of the local population now have the right to be educated in their native language and to attend classes that focus on the group’s history, art, and culture. At the same time, though, the parallel teaching of the Serbian language is compulsory (*“Skolovanje na maternjem jeziku,”* Article 13). The state is also obliged to offer some assistance to individuals belonging to national minorities, who plan to study abroad in their native language (Ibid., Article 14). Moreover, individuals belonging to national minorities now have the right to found educational institutions, schools, or universities that teach in the minority’s language or in Serbian as well as in the language of the minority. As far as the financing of such projects is concerned, their organizers are encouraged to seek funding from private or state’s organizations and institutions based abroad, but the state offers certain exemptions from taxation or other sorts of financial incentives (Ibid., Article 15). All national minorities are allowed to found radio or television stations that broadcast in their languages (*“Javno obevastanje na jezicima nacionalnih manjina,”* Article 17).

The most notable innovation of the new law, however, is its provision for the formation of a federal council for national minorities, consisting of the national minorities’ representatives, in the federal government (*“DELOTVORNO UCESCE U ODLUCIVANJU O PITANJIMA POSEBNOSTI I VLASTI I U PRAVI-Savezni savet za nacionalne manjine,”* Article 18). In addition to this, each national minority is entitled to its own representative council. Each council is recognized as a legal subject, is elected by each minority every four years, and consists of fifteen to thirty-five members depending on the minority’s size. These councils are responsible for the official use of minority languages and alphabets, education, public information and culture. They are to be funded by the federal budget, by various donations (*“Nacionalni saveti nacionalnih manjina,”* Article 19), as well as by the Federal Fund for National Minorities, another new focal institution responsible for financing the social, economic, cultural and other projects undertaken by individuals belonging to national minorities (*“Savezni fond za nacionalne manjine,”* Article 20).

Finally, any legal measures that might jeopardize the individual and collective rights of national minorities or alter the national structure in municipalities or localities where national minorities reside are now strictly prohibited (“ZASTITA PRAVA I SLOBODA MANJINA- *Zabrana narusavanja prava manjina*,” Article 22). Moreover, the national councils of the national minorities are authorized, in conjunction with the Federal Ministry for National and Ethnic Communities, to initiate procedures in the Federal Court of Justice if they consider the constitutional rights of individuals belonging to national minorities to be imperiled, or if an individual belonging to a minority group claims that his/her constitutional rights and freedoms have been violated (“*Sudska I ustavnosudska zastita prava*,” Article 23).

In all of this, the new federal law is fully consistent with the guidelines specified in the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*, drafted by the Council of Europe.^[2] For a start, the formal designation of the minority rights codified in the legal document as individual and collective alike is in firm compliance with Article 13, paragraph 2, of the convention (i.e. “persons belonging to national minorities may exercise their rights and enjoy their freedoms... individually as well as in community with others”). Moreover, the various legal and judicial provisions of the law regarding the prohibition of any acts of discrimination, forcible assimilation and any other steps that might jeopardize the rights and freedoms of individuals belonging to national minorities are firmly consistent with Articles 4 (paragraph 1), 5 (paragraph 2), and 6 (paragraph 2) of the framework convention. This is also the case with the law’s allowance for the establishment of media and press institutions by persons belonging to national minorities (Article 9, paragraph 3 of the convention). The provisions for the free public use of minority languages in those areas substantially inhabited by minority groups (e.g. street-signs and other topographical indicators) firmly comply with Article 11 (paragraphs 2 and 3) of the framework convention. This is equally the case with the federal law’s clause regarding: a. the provision of education, at all levels, in the languages of the national minorities; b. the arrangement of special textbooks for national minorities; c. the teaching of subjects relevant to the national minorities’ culture, religion, history and language; and d. the establishment of private educational institutions by individuals belonging to national minorities (Article 12, paragraphs 1 and 2; Article 13, paragraph 1; Article 14, paragraph 2). Moreover, the clause in the law that enables the members of national minorities to establish and maintain relations with legal subjects resident in foreign states, especially those to which they bear certain ethnic, cultural, linguistic, or religious similarities, is fully consistent with Article 17, paragraph 1 of the framework

convention. Some cases, such as the new law's clause regarding the state's positive disposition to offer financial breaks for the establishment of private educational institutions by persons belonging to national minorities (e.g. relaxation of taxation), go even a step beyond the guidelines of the framework convention. The convention does not oblige the state agencies involved to offer any financial incentives for the realization of such projects (Article 13, paragraph 2). Finally, it should always be borne in mind that the aforementioned provision for the establishment of a Federal Council for National Minorities, as well as of separate national minorities' councils, is a radical innovation that has no precedent in European legislation on national minorities (with the possible exception of Hungary).

Apart from these legal provisions on the federal level, specific provisions for Vojvodina's national minorities have been codified in provincial legislation as well. Most important, perhaps, the "*Omnibus Zakon*" for Vojvodina authorizes the responsible organs of the autonomous province to: a. guarantee the official use of the recognized languages and their alphabets throughout the territory of the autonomous province; and b. appoint a supervisory board with the task to carry out inspections to ensure the actual implementation of this clause (Article 18, paragraphs 1 and 2).^[3] In addition to these, Article 7, paragraph 3 provides for the funding of cultural projects, organized by members of ethnic minorities, from the provincial budget. With respect to elementary and middle-level education, Articles 12 and 13 authorize the responsible provincial organs to: a. issue educational programmes and textbooks in the languages of national minorities; and b. allow for the arrangement of teaching programmes in the languages of the national minorities, when less than fifteen students per class are native speakers of a minority language (i.e. Articles 12.4, 12.5, 12.8, 13.6, 13.11).

As specified in the law's explanatory section, with regard to the official use of the minority languages and alphabets, it is estimated that closer communication between the responsible provincial organs and the members of the local national minorities will ensure that the former respond more quickly to any requirements of the latter. It might well be argued that, in the case of Vojvodina, the federal law's provisions, in combination with the above-mentioned provisions of the "*Omnibus Zakon*," set up an appropriate legal framework for the more than adequate protection of the national minorities' individual/collective rights and freedoms.^[4]

NATIONAL MINORITY EDUCATION

Highlighted in this section are the developments in the field of national minority education in Vojvodina in the post-Milosevic era. The focus is specifically cast on the educational activities of national minorities with a recognized collective legal status resident in the autonomous province, namely, the Roma, the Hungarians, the Slovaks, the Romanians, and the Ruthenes.

The Roma

The official recognition of the Roma as a national minority by the new federal law generated some positive developments for this minority group in the field of education. According to the new law, Roma pupils attending schools in those Vojvodinian municipalities and localities where a considerable percentage of Roma live are entitled to two hours of daily classes in their mother tongue, at all levels of education, about subjects related to Roma history and culture. This is certainly an improvement compared to the situation in 1997-1998, when education in the Roma language was an optional subject, delivered on a two-hour a week basis and available only at four elementary schools and in two municipalities throughout the province.

Another improvement, as far as university-level education is concerned, is the fact that four Roma lecturers are currently employed by and approximately 56 Roma students study at the University of Novi Sad. Although these figures seem rather miniscule in relation to the entire population of the province, they signify a substantial improvement.^[5] Moreover, the establishment of a Department for Roma Language and Culture at the University of Novi Sad has been initiated by the “*Matica Romska*” and other Roma-interest groups.^[6]

However, there still exist some crucial obstacles with regard to Roma minority education. The Roma in Vojvodina/Serbia, as elsewhere in Europe, are a socially marginalized and largely impoverished group. Consequently, the various Roma organizations are not capable of fully financing Roma educational and cultural activities themselves if these are essentially private initiatives. Some financial assistance has been provided by non-governmental organizations over the past few years towards the realization of such projects. Nevertheless, this assistance has not proven sufficient. What the Vojvodinian Roma elites expect from the new federal law is that a greater percentage of state funds will be channeled towards the educational purposes of the Roma residents in Vojvodina and elsewhere in Serbia. This issue is of great significance, bearing in mind that

many Roma teachers in elementary education have not proven efficient, largely resulting from the lack of adequate training courses.

Another even more crucial obstacle is the fact that the educational capacities of most Roma residents in Vojvodina are disappointingly low. It is estimated that approximately 75-80% of Vojvodinian Roma are illiterate, half-literate, or functionally illiterate.^[7] The high degree of illiteracy among the Roma is a result of their socio-economic specificities as a group. Indeed, as a result of their families' serious material poverty, many Roma pupils leave school prior to completing even an elementary education in order to assist their parents in their economic activities. Moreover, the highly patriarchal ethos still persistent among the Roma has taken its toll in the educational sector as well. Many Roma girls do not acquire any elementary-level schooling at all. Instead, they stay at home and assist their parents with various household duties.^[8] Finally, an additional "functional" obstacle is the fact that, resulting from their poor knowledge of the Serbian language, some Roma pupils are categorized as "retarded" by the classification exams for elementary schools.

The socio-economic marginalization of the Roma has generated a process whereby they have consciously assimilated into the national majority. This is principally the case with the more educated Roma, who perceive that in this way they may escape the negative social prejudices related to their group and have a more successful professional career. This process, however, may progressively render the teaching of subjects in the Roma language in Vojvodinian schools rather pointless, since the vast majority of Vojvodinian Roma currently demonstrate a greater desire to have their children educated in Serbian, or in the languages of other minority groups resident in the same communities.^[9]

There also exist some hindrances of a purely academic character. Establishing a teaching curriculum in the Roma language, for instance, would require standardizing the language itself first. However, the construction of uniform and standardized literary and linguistic styles has proven and remains a rather complicated and difficult task for Roma intelligentsia all over Serbia.^[10] Similar, and perhaps more crucial, difficulties are encountered in regard to the construction of a standardized Roma group history. Very little recorded history about the Roma is available. Moreover, there exist competing theories about the origin of the Roma that are difficult to reconcile.^[11]

The Hungarians

As far as the Hungarians are concerned, a steady decline in the number of students attending Hungarian-language classes has been observed, as well as in the number of teachers employed in the Hungarian-language educational sector in Vojvodina.[\[12\]](#) This has been the outcome of a combination of various negative factors over the past decade. First of all, it is estimated that, over the course of the 1990s, approximately 50,000 ethnic Hungarians emigrated, most of them to Hungary. This wave of migration particularly affected the more highly educated strata of the Hungarian community, especially those Vojvodinian Hungarians with higher-level educational qualifications, as quite a few were employed as university lecturers or middle-level education teachers.

To these factors should be added the persistently low birthrate among Vojvodina's Hungarians, which dates back to the 1961 national census, as well as a process of conscious assimilation. The latter factor is particularly evident in Novi Sad and other major urban centers in the province, with perhaps the exception of Subotica. It is also quite a common occurrence as far as the offspring of mixed marriages, mainly between Hungarians and Serbs, is concerned.

Statistical data is indicative of the problem's extent. For example, by late 1998, the overall number of Hungarian-language students in Vojvodina's elementary schools had dropped from 26,917 in late 1989 to 21,496.[\[13\]](#) At the same time, no classes in the Hungarian language were taught in the middle-level schools in certain Vojvodinian communities where ethnic Hungarians make up a considerable percentage of the population (e.g. Novi Becej: 21.34%, Crnja: 20.63%). The overall number of pupils per class taught in the Hungarian language in various elementary schools in the municipality of Novi Sad decreased from 25-35 pupils per class in 1990 to 12-18 pupils by 1999.[\[14\]](#)

Representatives of the Vojvodinian Hungarian political elites and intelligentsia expect that the recent legal provisions, at the federal as well as the provincial level, may generate positive developments in the field of Hungarian-language education in the near future. The prospect of cooperation with educational institutions in Hungary, as provided by Article 13, paragraph 2 of the "Hungarian Status Law," has also generated a wave of optimism.[\[15\]](#) Indeed, over the last two years bilateral cooperation between Vojvodinian Hungarian educational institutions and their counterparts, based in Hungary, has intensified. For instance, between 2000 and 2002, more than 40,000 books about the Hungarian language and Hungarian folklore were imported to Vojvodina

from Hungary in order to serve the needs of Hungarian-language schools, at all levels of education, throughout the province. Moreover, some Hungarian-language *gymnasia* in Subotica recently received financial support from certain state, as well as private, foundations in Hungary, while other Hungarian educational institutions in Vojvodina received various sorts of material support from the same foundations (e.g. computer facilities, communication systems, etc.). These recent developments take on crucial significance when one considers that over the past decade cooperation between the Vojvodinian Hungarians and Hungarian institutions on educational issues was insignificant.

The Slovaks

As far as the ethnic Slovaks are concerned, 17 primary Slovak-language schools plus two middle-level grammar schools (one in Backi Petrovac, the other in Kovacica) currently operate in Vojvodina. As is the case with the Hungarians, the Slovak-language schooling network is also burdened by certain problems that have manifested over the past decade. First of all, approximately 95% of ethnic Slovaks who have graduated from secondary schooling in Vojvodina over the past ten years have moved to Slovakia for their university studies and, in most cases, stayed there. This has resulted in a long-term “brain drain” among the circles of the Vojvodinian Slovak intelligentsia. This “brain drain” has affected the educational sector as well, in the form of a shortage of teaching staff at the various Slovak-language schooling institutions in the province.

Moreover, the offspring of ethnically mixed marriages in some predominantly Slovak settlements (e.g. Backi Petrovac) often have not demonstrated a particular interest in being taught in the Slovak language. As a matter of fact, the Slovak-language grammar school in Backi Petrovac and in Kovacica currently suffer both from a lack of adequate teaching staff and from a shortage in pupils interested in taking classes in the Slovak language. What is even more notable is that at the *gymnasium* of Stara Pazova (i.e. an area where over 7,000 ethnic Slovaks live) most subjects are taught in Serbian.[\[16\]](#)

On the other hand, there exist certain problems with the training of Slovak-language teachers, especially at the level of elementary education. In Vojvodina, the task of training elementary-level teachers is assigned to the Faculty for Elementary Teaching in Backi Petrovac (i.e. an outpost of the Sombor-based Faculty for Elementary School Teachers). However, according to an opinion poll conducted in Vojvodina’s predominantly Slovak localities in early 2000, most locals do not regard this training as particularly useful, since the teaching-staff is

larger in number than already required and most lectures, except some practice classes organized in Slovak, are held in Serbian.[\[17\]](#)

Furthermore, financial problems persist. The library of the Department for Slovak Language and Literature at the University of Novi Sad, for instance, has hardly acquired any new reading material over the past ten years. This has largely to do with the fact that a particularly small number of new publications were issued by the “*Matica Slovacka*” during this period, largely due to the financial crisis facing the institution. As in the case of the ethnic Hungarians, a limited amount of books and other teaching material was imported from Slovakia over the last ten years.[\[18\]](#) Since the political changes of October 2000, however, the links between the Vojvodinian Slovaks and certain educational institutions based in Slovakia (e.g. the University of Bratislava and the Slovak Ministry of Education) have been largely re-established. The major expectation of the Vojvodinian Slovaks is that active cooperation with the various Slovak institutions, combined with the latest domestic legal developments, will generate more fertile conditions in the field of Slovak-language education in Vojvodina.

The Romanians

As far as the ethnic Romanians are concerned, 28 primary Romanian-language schools currently operate in the province. Nevertheless, the Romanian-language schooling network is being hampered by certain negative catalysts. As is the case with almost all other minorities, the shortage in adequate state and private funding for the organization of educational activities is a major hurdle. Another, and perhaps the most crucial, one is the process of conscious assimilation that has been taking place within Vojvodina’s Romanian community. Indeed, many Romanian parents believe that their children will have better prospects for further education and employment the earlier they master the Serbian language. Consequently, the interest of elementary school pupils in attending Romanian-language classes in Vrsac and the rest of the Banat areas characterized by a dense ethnic Romanian concentration has been disappointingly poor.[\[19\]](#)

This has had a rather negative impact on certain aspects of the social life of the Romanians in the Banat. For example, the local councils in municipalities and localities where a large percentage of ethnic Romanians reside often cannot find a satisfactory number of local Romanians with a good enough command of their native tongue to be employed in local administration.

Still there have been some optimistic prospects over the last two years, though not many. Cross-border cooperation between Vojvodinian Romanians and

certain institutions in Romania is slowly being restored. The Romanian Ministry of Education has been offering scholarships to young Romanians from Vojvodina in order to study in Romania, while the Romanian Foreign Ministry has recently offered books and other equipment to the Romanian-language schools in the province. Given that over the past decade little communication between Vojvodinian Romanians and Romanians in Romania was possible, this is certainly a notable improvement.[\[20\]](#) Moreover, quite a few Vojvodinian Romanians who moved to Romania (e.g. Timisoara, Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca) during the 1990s, mainly for educational purposes, have returned to their native places of origin. This may provide a “short-term” remedy for the shortage in Romanian-language teachers in the various schools in the ethnic Romanian-populated parts of the Banat and also for the shortage of cadres with an adequate knowledge of the Romanian language in the local administration.

The Ruthenes

Finally, as far as the Ruthenes are concerned, there exist three elementary schools in Vojvodina, in which subjects in the Ruthene language are taught. The problems facing the Ruthene minority, with regard to the educational sector, have primarily to do with the small size of the community. This, combined with the fact that the Vojvodinian Ruthenes live mainly in small rural communities (e.g. Ruski Krstur), has often led Ruthenes to consciously assimilate into the national majority. Bearing also in mind that the Ruthenes are not among the wealthier groups in the province, many Ruthene parents assess their children’s chances of better employment and economic opportunities as higher which an adequate command of the Serbian language. In fact, by mid-2000, a mere 15 out of the total 125 Ruthene students enrolled at the University of Novi Sad studied at the Department of Ruthene Language and Literature.[\[21\]](#)

The problem of limited state sponsorship for Ruthene educational activities is an additional negative factor that is hard to ignore. Moreover, the active cooperation between Vojvodinian Ruthenes and their counterparts in Slovakia and the Ukraine over educational matters is not yet widespread.[\[22\]](#)

THE NATIONAL MINORITIES’ MEDIA AND PRESS

The media and the press of all national minorities resident in Vojvodina seem to have been generally affected by some negative “objective” factors. The one of them is the damage inflicted on the installations of *Radio-televizija Srbije* Novi Sad during the NATO bombing. Especially the fact that the building of RTS Novi

Sad was utterly destroyed in the course of the bombing has in the long term become a major obstacle that has seriously hindered the efforts of all minority journalists engaged in radio as well as television broadcasts. Because of the loss of necessary technical equipment, many national minority broadcasts at RTS Novi Sad have, over the last two years, basically been repetitions of older, mainly folklore and social, programmes. Also, provincial TV stations have often had difficulty broadcasting throughout the entire territory of Vojvodina as result of damage inflicted on the transmitting installations. Second, an atrophying private national minority media network exists in Vojvodina, and, therefore, the press and the media of the province's national minorities are currently being financed almost exclusively by the state. As is the case with the educational sector, however, state funding of the national minority media and press in Vojvodina has been anything but sufficient. This, of course, is another symptom of the financial crisis facing the state. Third, the way the province's media are being privatized may have a rather negative effect on broadcasts in the languages of the national minorities. Indeed, trade-orientated media entrepreneurs are not particularly keen on financing programmes that appeal to a rather restricted audience, including, therefore, broadcasts in the languages of the national minorities. Following the recent privatization of Radio Vrsac, for example, its Romanian-language programme was cut. An additional problem is that Vojvodina's national minorities do not seem to currently be in a position to set up private media institutions and take advantage of the relevant provision in the new federal law. In the following, each national minority is focused on individually.

The Roma

The Roma press in Vojvodina is not particularly developed as a consequence of the combination of two negative catalysts, both already mentioned.[\[23\]](#) One is the fact that the Roma language in Serbia is still in its phase of standardization. The other is the high degree of illiteracy among this particular national minority. As far as radio is concerned, though, quite a few local radio stations in Vojvodina broadcast programmes in the Roma language.[\[24\]](#) The most noteworthy of them is the daily Roma-language programme on Radio Novi Sad, which runs for 2 hours and 30 minutes every day. As far as TV programmes are concerned, RTS Novi Sad broadcasts a daily informative programme in the Roma language, which runs for an hour and a half. Most of these programmes, however, are bilingual (i.e. half Serbian/half Roma). This has to do with the lack of staff fluent in the Roma language due to the aforementioned assimilation with the Serbs and other groups. Moreover, no satisfactory cooperation between Vojvodinian Roma

journalists and their counterparts abroad has yet been realized; however, some small-scale projects on the Internet do exist.[\[25\]](#) Nevertheless, always bearing in mind the problem of widespread illiteracy among the Roma as well as their impoverished financial state, the current situation of the Roma media in Vojvodina can be generally regarded as satisfactory.

The Hungarians

The lack of “fresh” cadres in Vojvodinian Hungarian press and media institutions (i.e. the relevant broadcasts at RTS Novi Sad and the daily *Magyar Szo*), in combination with their inadequate sponsorship by the state, has recently generated certain problems.[\[26\]](#) In addition to the emigration over the past decade noted above, of a large percentage of the Vojvodinian Hungarian younger generation, especially the higher educated strata, the salaries of the journalists employed in the Hungarian section of RTS Novi Sad, as well as the local Hungarian press, have seriously decreased,[\[27\]](#) and the technical equipment at the Vojvodinian Hungarian press and media institutions has not been renewed for a rather long period of time. A problem that emerged soon after the “change of guard” in October 2000 has been the constant attempt by the two main Hungarian political parties in the province to exert as much control as possible on their national minority’s media and press. This is mainly the case with Jozsef Kasa’s “Alliance of Hungarians in Vojvodina,” the DOS-affiliated party that currently enjoys the support of the majority of ethnic Hungarians resident in the Northern Backa “enclave.” Indeed, this party’s attempts to monopolize Vojvodina’s ethnic Hungarian media seem to have replaced the previous decade of censorship with an equally obstructive element. Apart from that, subjects of a political nature, such as minority rights, are generally not analyzed in depth in the *Magyar Szo* and the other publications of the ethnic Hungarian press in Vojvodina (e.g. the periodical *Csaladi Kor* and the Subotica weekly *Het Nap*).[\[28\]](#)

A rather positive development, on the other hand, is the fact that over the past two years the Hungarian press and media institutions in Vojvodina have received some, even though limited, material support (e.g. computer systems and other communication facilities) from state as well as private foundations based in Hungary. Some cooperation, though on a highly personal and informal level, has also been taking place with Vojvodinian Hungarian journalists currently employed by state-owned as well as private media organizations in Hungary. It is expected that the provisions of the new federal law on national minorities' cross-border cooperation, in combination with those of the “Hungarian status law” (Article 17 on the Hungarian-language media based in neighboring states), will

generate positive prospects for more official cooperation between Vojvodinian Hungarian journalists and their counterparts in Hungary within the near future. Finally, certain projects are currently being launched by the Hungarian state television for the benefit of Vojvodinian Hungarians and the rest of the Hungarian diaspora, for example, the so-called “Danube Television” satellite channel, which is directed mainly towards those ethnic Hungarians resident in the neighboring countries.[\[29\]](#)

The Slovaks

The Vojvodinian Slovaks, on the other hand, currently publish seven periodicals in their native language and no dailies at all. The most notable of those periodicals is the weekly *Hlas Ludu*, the oldest Slovak-language edition in the province. Moreover, TV Novi Sad broadcasts a daily informative programme in the Slovak language, two and a half hours a day, and Radio Novi Sad also broadcasts a daily five-hour programme in Slovakian, approximately two hours less than was the case in 1999.

The problems currently facing the Slovak-language press and media in Vojvodina are of various kinds. First of all, as with the Hungarians, the massive emigration of young educated Vojvodinian Slovaks over the past ten years has resulted to a shortage in “fresh” cadres to work in the media and press institutions in Vojvodina. At the same time, the salaries of those journalists employed at the Slovak-language informative sector considerably decreased, while the technical equipment continued to age. The technical support recently offered to the Slovak-language sector at RTS Novi Sad by the Provincial Secretariat for Information and the Federal Ministry for National Minorities and Ethnic Communities is not sufficient.

With regard to the Vojvodinian Slovak press, it rarely covers subjects of a political character, and when it does, the coverage is mainly of an informative rather than an analytical nature. As a matter of fact, the popularity of *Hlas Ludu* and the rest Slovak-language informative publications in the province has seriously declined.[\[30\]](#)

The Romanians

The Romanian-language press network in Vojvodina comprises, in total, seven weeklies and periodicals. The oldest and most notable is the weekly *Libertatea*. Moreover, Radio Novi Sad broadcasts an informative five-hour daily programme in Romanian, one hour shorter than was the case in 1999, TV Novi Sad

broadcasts a half-hour daily programme in Romanian, and there are seven local private radio stations in the Southern Banat. Most subjects in the Romanian language media and press focus on cultural and social issues and rarely have a political dimension.[\[31\]](#)

As far as the Romanian-language press is concerned, its current prospects are seriously hindered by persistent financial problems. The Romanian minority's focus is the electronic media, and the Romanian-language programmes at RTS Novi Sad are currently not much of a priority. Also, a shortage of young cadres threatens to shut down the Romanian-language boards at certain radio stations in the Southern Banat, such as Radio Alibunar.[\[32\]](#) Attempts are currently being made by various representatives of the Vojvodinian Romanian elites, for example, the "Alliance of Vojvodinian Romanians," the "Community of Romanians in Serbia-Montenegro," and the "Romanian Language Society," to secure badly needed material assistance from the relevant state authorities in Romania.

The Ruthenes

The most noteworthy Ruthene-language informative publication is *Ruske Slovo*. Four local radio stations – those based in Kula and in Vrbas are the major ones – broadcast three hours of Ruthene-language informative programmes a day, while TV Novi Sad broadcasts for approximately 7,700 minutes in the Ruthene language per year. As with the other national minorities, most political and minority-related subjects in the Ruthene press and electronic media are of an informative rather than an analytical nature.

The main problems facing the Ruthene-language media and electronic press in Vojvodina are a lack of both state funding and young cadres. As in the case of the Romanians, the latter negative development largely reflects the process of the local Ruthenes' conscious assimilation into the national majority. The salaries offered at the institutions in question are not particularly satisfactory either. Furthermore, as in the Ruthene-language educational sector, not much cooperation with Ruthene-interest foundations based in the Slovakia and the Ukraine has been possible over the last two years.[\[33\]](#)

The Croatians

Finally, the press and media network of Vojvodina's largest national minority with a still non-regulated collective legal status, the ethnic Croats, is not particularly developed. In July 2001, a brief informative broadcast in the Croatian

language on TV Novi Sad was introduced, organized by a local NGO, while a daily two-hour informative programme in the Croatian language has been broadcast on Radio Subotica since December 1998. With regard to the Croatian-language press in Vojvodina, the main publications are currently issued by the Roman Catholic Church and certain ethnic Croat cultural organizations based in the proximity of Subotica. A noteworthy development took place in 2002: the formation of an ethnic Croat newspaper-publishing company called *Hrvatska Rijec* in Subotica. *Hrvatska Rijec* is soon expected to issue a Croatian-language daily with the same title. The initiation of more positive developments for Vojvodina's Croats in the field of public information as well as education remains conditional, however, upon the concession of a collective legal status to this specific minority.

Inter-ethnic issues

To round out this section is a consideration of the prospects for inter-ethnic dialogue in the national minority media and press in Vojvodina. The quantitative data cited derives from a survey conducted in late 2000 by the NGO "Novi Sad School of Journalism." As a matter of fact, only a few references to the other national minorities, resident in the province as well as to the national majority, had been made by that time in the various minority media based in the province. Most of those references to "others" were made in the Roma-language radio broadcasts at Radio Sombor (i.e. 14% of the total broadcasts). The case of the other national minority media and press was far more negative. In fact, in *Magyar Szo* a mere 4% of the articles published focused on the other national groups resident in Vojvodina, in *Hlas Ludu* also a mere 4%, in *Libertatea* and in *Ruske Slovo* only 1% each. On the other hand, references to Vojvodina's national minorities were also rather rare in the Serbian-language media and press in the province (e.g. *Dnevnik*: 3% of the total articles, *Glas Javnosti*: 2%, Radio Sombor/Serbian-language programme: 9% of the total broadcasts).^[34] This incidence, however, does not seem to have particularly affected inter-cultural relations in Vojvodina at a grass-roots level.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

The provision of certain institutional guarantees to national minorities, regarding the official use of their languages and the preservation of their cultural identity, is essential to safeguard their group identity as a whole at a global level. This is

particularly the case as far as the sectors of public information and education are concerned. As outlined in this article, the recent institutional codification of minority individual/collective rights and freedoms in Serbia-Montenegro and the autonomous province of Vojvodina can be regarded as positive and, in some cases, more than satisfactory.

Nevertheless, as demonstrated here, the actual state of national minority press/media and education in Vojvodina is, at the moment, not particularly promising. In fact, both the above-mentioned sectors currently bear the legacy of the past “lost decade.” Some negative “objective factors” that seem to have affected all national minorities equally, are the state’s inability to adequately finance their activities as result of the broader prevailing economic crisis, the lack of “fresh” and sufficiently trained staff in the public information as well as the educational sectors, and the lack of necessary technical equipment (largely resulting from the latest UN embargo and, especially as far as the electronic media are concerned, the recent NATO bombing).

As recommended by local NGOs, and also as expected by Vojvodina’s national minorities, certain provisions of the latest legal arrangements on national minorities should be implemented as fully as practicable. What needs to happen?

First of all, the responsible federal and provincial bodies should channel more substantial financial assistance towards the educational and public information projects organized by the province’s national minorities within the bounds of the provincial state-managed institutions (e.g. the state-owned TV and radio institutions, the relevant minority-language departments operating at all levels of the state-administered educational system, etc.). With specific regard to the media and press, the technical equipment of the relevant minority-language institutions should also be updated. This means that a certain percentage of the financial assistance channeled towards Serbia-Montenegro by international organizations (e.g. the World Bank, the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe operating within the bounds of the EU, etc.) should be earmarked for the above-mentioned purposes. Bearing in mind the recent renewal of bilateral cooperation between Vojvodina’s national minorities and their “motherlands” and its positive, though limited, effects, the provisions of the recent state’s minority legislation, in regard to cross-border cooperation, should be implemented in full. Certain measures should be taken to more adequately train the staff employed in the media/press and the educational institutions of the national minorities in Vojvodina. Also, as far as the media and press are concerned, national minority

journalists should make some additional efforts themselves to establish more coherent cooperation with their colleagues from the rest of the national minorities, so that crucial issues of common importance for all minority groups can be discussed and resolved. Finally, certain preventive measures should be taken so that the national minorities' media and press are not monopolized even by interest groups operating within the minorities themselves.

In addition to these "top level" provisions, however, one must not neglect the grass-roots dimension. In other words, the more efficient functioning of the national minorities' educational and public information institutions also relies to a large extent on the national minorities themselves. As already mentioned in the case of the Roma and the impact of certain patriarchal modes still prevailing among them, the attitude of certain groups towards education may be additionally conditioned by their social ethos. Therefore, unless "changes from within" also take place, the application of positive discrimination measures may not, in itself, bring about any radical developments.

Most important, however, is to reverse the aforementioned process of conscious assimilation into the national majority. Especially as far as the smaller national minorities are concerned, the persistence of this phenomenon may progressively lead to the extinction of certain group identities in Vojvodina. For example, with specific regard to the ethnic Romanians, demography experts at the University of Novi Sad estimate that if not reversed, this process of conscious assimilation, in combination with the group's low birthrate, may lead to the extinction of Romanian group identity in the province by the year 2065. Given the persistence of the economic crisis plus the scarcity of employment opportunities in rural areas populated by national minorities, this process seems rather irreversible at the moment. It seems that the younger generations of almost all national minorities will continue to seek better employment prospects in the major urban centers (e.g. Novi Sad, Belgrade), where Serbian language and culture overwhelmingly prevail.

Table 1.

The national structure of the autonomous province of Vojvodina according to the 1991 national census.

Serbs	1,143,723	56.79%
Hungarians	339,491	16.86%
Croats	74,808	3.71%
Slovaks	63,545	3.16%
Romanians	38,809	1.93%
Montenegrins	44,838	2.23%
Ruthenians	17,889	0.9%
Albanians	2,556	0.13%
Yugoslavs	174,295	8.65%
Roma	24,336	1.21%
Muslims	5,851	0.29%
Others	83,718	4.14%
TOTAL	2,013,889	100.00%

SOURCE: *Popis stanovništva 1991*, knjiga 3, Savezni Zavod za Statistiku, Belgrade 1993.

Table 2.

The national structure of the autonomous province of Vojvodina according to the 2002 national census.

Serbs	1,321,807	65.05%
Montenegrins	35,513	1.75%
Yugoslavs	49,881	2.45%
Albanians	1,695	0.08%
Bosnjaks	417	0.02%
Bulgarians	1,658	0.08%
Bunjevci	19,766	0.97%
Vlachs	101	0.00%
Goranci	606	0.03%
Hungarians	290,207	14.28%
Macedonians	11,785	0.58%
Muslims	3,634	0.18%
Germans	3,154	0.16%
Roma	29,057	1.43%
Romanians	30,419	1.50%
Russians	940	0.05%
Slovaks	56,637	2.79%

Slovenes	2,005	0.10%
Ukrainians	4,635	0.23%
Croats	56,546	2.78%
Czechs	1,648	0.08%
Ruthenes	15,626	0.77%
Others	5,311	0.26%
Non-declared	55,016	2.71%
Regional affiliation	10,154	0.50%
Unknown	23,774	1.17%
TOTAL	2.031.992	100.00%

SOURCE: *Konacni rezultati popisa 2002.*, Saopštenje, broj 295, god. LII, Republika Srbija, Republicki Zavod za Statistiku, Belgrade 24.12.2002.

ENDNOTES

- [1] For a full text-version of the law see “*Zakon o zastiti prava I sloboda nacionalnih manjina*,” in *Sluzbeni List SRJ*, broj 11, Belgrade, 27 February 2002.
- [2] For further information, see Council of Europe Publishing House, *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*, Strasbourg 1995.
- [3] The “*Omnibus Zakon*” was drafted by the executive council of the autonomous province of Vojvodina, in Novi Sad, on December 14th, 2001, and officially approved by the republican parliament in Belgrade, on February 4th, 2002. For a full text-version of the “*Omnibus Zakon*,” including an explanatory section, see <http://www.vojvodina.com/prilozi/omnibus.htm>.
- [4] To these provisions should be added the function of a “Council for Issues Regarding the Protection of the Rights of National Minorities and Ethnic Groups” at the executive council of A.P Vojvodina. This body consists of various experts in the fields of law,

education, information and culture, coming from the province's national minorities with a recognized legal status and other ethnic groups. With regard to the use of the term "ethnic groups" in the legal framework of Serbia-Montenegro, it refers to the ethnic communities that have not yet been granted a collective legal status as far as the affirmation of their group rights (e.g. in education, public information in their mother tongue, etc.) is concerned. In the case of Vojvodina, such groups are the Ukrainians, the Czechs and the Croats. For further information, see <http://www.vojvodina.sr.gov.yu>.

- [5] It should be further noted that, by the end of the year 2000, 3,983 Roma students were enrolled in 231 elementary schools throughout the province. Most of them were enrolled in elementary schools at the municipalities of Novi Sad (329 Roma students), Pancevo (216), Vrsac (191), Ruma (190) and Zrenjanin (181). About these figures, see Stevan Konstadinovic, "Zaceci ili krah obrazovnog sistema Roma u Vojvodini," in *Informator*, brojevi 22-3, Centar za Multikulturalnost, Novi Sad 2001, p11.
- [6] Interview with Roma journalist at RTS Novi Sad, Novi Sad 09/04/2002.
- [7] See Ibid. Also, Bojana P. Pajic, "Lako je reci: 'Romska deca su siromasna'-razgovor sa Trifunom Dimicem", in *Informator*, CMK, brojevi 4-5, Novi Sad 1999.
- [8] About this issue see Stevan Nikolic, "Odnos Subotickih Roma prema obrazovanju", in *Informator*, CMK, brojevi 2-3, Novi Sad 1999. See also the results of a micro-level survey conducted in Roma settlements in Conoplja (Western Backa), in Milos and Kata Marjanovic, "Romi u Vojvodjanskim naseljima: Conoplja", in *Zbornik Matice Srpske za Društvene Nauke*, vol. 93, Matica Srpska, Novi Sad 1999, pp 278-95.
- [9] It has been estimated that, by late 2000, 3,527 elementary-level Roma students in Vojvodina received schooling in the Serbian language (88.55%), 349 in Hungarian (8.76%), 92 in Romanian (2.31%), 8 in Slovak (0.20%) and 2 in Ruthene (0.18%). For these figures see "Zaceci ili krah...", p11.
- [10] There are two Roma dialects spoken in Serbia. One, the so-called "gurbetski," is predominantly spoken in the south and has been largely influenced by the Turkish and Albanian languages. The other, the so-called "arlijski," is mainly spoken in Vojvodina and has been influenced by Serbian and the rest languages spoken within the old Habsburg Empire.
- [11] According to the most prominent theory, the Roma originate from the Punjab, India. According to a less credible theory, though, the Roma originated in Egypt.
- [12] It has been estimated that, by the year 2000, 27 secondary schools teaching in the Hungarian language operated in Vojvodina. These included 8 grammar schools (in the communities of Backa Topola, Stari Becej, Zrenjanin, Novi Sad, Senta, Sombor and Subotica) plus 19 technical/occupational ones (in Ada, Backa Topola, Stari Becej, Zrenjanin, Kanjiza, Novi Sad, Senta, Sombor, Subotica: six schools, Temerin, Coka). On the other hand, 120 Hungarian-language primary schools were running in the province at that time. It should be further noted that no private Hungarian, or any other minority language, schools currently function in Vojvodina at any level. About these figures, see Dubravka Valic-Nedeljkovic, "Education and Mass-Media in the Languages of Ethnic

communities in Vojvodina”, (unpublished work), Novosadska Novinarska Skola, Novi Sad 2000, pp 1-15.

- [13] For these figures, see Tibor Meszmann, “O stanju školstva kod Vojvodjanskih Madjara,” in *Informator*, brojevi 4-5.
- [14] See Zoltan Bunjik and Laszlo Galambos, “Stanje I problemi skolovanja dece madjarske nacionalosti na maternjem jeziku u Novom Sadu”, in *Informator*, brojevi 8-9, Novi Sad 2000.
- [15] See Office for Hungarian Minorities Abroad, *Act LXII of 2001 on Hungarians Living in Neighbouring Countries*, Budapest, 19 June 2001. The Act’s provisions for the Vojvodinian Hungarians, specifically, are further facilitated by Article 6 of the new federal law. They are also endorsed in the bilateral agreement on the protection of minorities, signed between Serbia-Montenegro and Hungary on December 27th, 2002.
- [16] See Viera Boldocka, “Srednje I visoko skolstvo Slovaka u Jugoslaviji”, in *Informator*, brojevi 20-21, Novi Sad 2001, pp 17-20.
- [17] See Valic-Nedeljkovic 2000, pp 4-6.
- [18] See Marina Simakova, “Osvrt na razvoj I rad Katedre za slovakistiku na Filozofskom Fakultetu u Novom Sadu”, in *Informator*, brojevi 8-9.
- [19] At Vrsac’s *gymnasium*, for instance, only 75 out of the total 855 pupils attended classes in the Romanian language in 1999. Also, in the town’s elementary school a mere 235 out of the total 875 pupils attended Romanian-language classes. Moreover, at the economic school of Alibunar (middle level), only 116 out of 691 students attended Romanian-language classes. Similar instances occurred in those schools operating in the smaller Banat communities with an ethnic Romanian population (e.g. Novo Selo, Vladimirovac, Uzdin, Dolovo, etc.) as well. About this issue, and Romanian-language education in general, see Nicu Ciobanu, “Skolstvo na Rumunskom Jeziku u Vojvodini-Knjiga sa sva Manje Stranica”, in *Informator*, brojevi 4-5.
- [20] Interview with a Romanian journalist at RTS Novi Sad, 24/04/2002. To these should be added the conclusion of an agreement between Serbia-Montenegro and Romania, on the treatment of national minorities, on October 30th, 2002.
- [21] About this figure, see Brian J. Pozun, “Caught in the Middle: Carpatho-Rysyns and the Vojvodina”, in *Central Europe Review*, vol.2, No.25, June 2000.
- [22] Interview with Ruthene journalist at RTS Novi Sad, 22/04/2002. See also Janko Ramac, “Cetiri modela organizovanja kulturno-prosvetnog I nacionalnog zivota Rusina u Jugoslaviji”, in *Informator*, brojevi 8-9.
- [23] As a matter of fact, only two Roma-language journals currently circulate in Vojvodina: *Alavi Romengo* and *Romologija*.

- [24] These are the radio stations in Bela Crkva, Vrsac, Kikinda, Srbobran, Sombor, Stara Pazova, Odzaci, Beocin and Indjija.
- [25] Interview with a Roma journalist at RTS Novi Sad, 09/04/2002.
- [26] In November 1999, a mere 12 out of a total 56 individuals employed at the Hungarian sector of RTS Novi Sad were below the age of 40. On this issue, see Dubravka Valic-Nedeljkovic, "Media in the Multicultural and Multilingual Province of Vojvodina", (unpublished work), NNS, Novi Sad 1999, p3.
- [27] For example, it has been estimated that by autumn 2000 the average monthly salary of the senior journalists at the Hungarian sector of RTS Novi Sad had fallen to less than 100 DEM. About this figure see Ibid.
- [28] Interview with the manager of the Novi Sad-based media NGO, Novi Sad 15/03/2001.
- [29] Interview with a Hungarian journalist at RTS Novi Sad, Novi Sad 24/04/2002.
- [30] According to a survey carried out in Vojvodina in autumn 2000, a mere 0.6% of the sample stated that they were regular readers of *Hlas Ludu*. About this issue see "Education and mass media....," p11.
- [31] Interview with the manager of the Novi Sad-based media NGO, Novi Sad 15/03/2001.
- [32] Interview with a Romanian journalist at RTS Novi Sad, Novi Sad 24/04/2002.
- [33] Interview with a Ruthene journalist at RTS Novi Sad, Novi Sad 22/04/2002. See also Velimir Paplacko, "Razvoj radio informisanja kod Rusina I Ukrajinaca od pronalaska radio aparata do danas u Istocnoj Slovackoj, Zakarpatju I u Jugoslaviji", in *Informator*, brojevi 2-3, Novi Sad 1999.
- [34] About these figures, see Dubravka Valic-Nedeljkovic, "Interetnicki dijalog javne komunikacije u Vojvodjanskoj svakodnevnici", (unpublished work), NNS, Novi Sad, 2001, pp 1-15. It should be further noted, though, that the Romanian-language *Libertatea* recently started to publish articles focusing on political issues, such as minority rights, prepared by authors and journalists from Vojvodina's other national minorities. A similar initiative has also been carried out recently, though to a more restricted extent, in the Ruthene-language *Ruske Slovo* as well. Nevertheless, both initiatives have not been very fruitful so far, due to the financial difficulties facing the two institutions.

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