

Issues of Language and Citizenship in the Roma Broadcast and Print Media of the Vojvodina Autonomous Province of Serbia

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the multilingual media context in the Serbian autonomous province of Vojvodina, underlining the role of local institutions in promoting and supporting a number of minority languages, in line with the city of Novi Sad's historical legacy of multiculturalism. Special attention is devoted to the status of the Romani language by illustrating the efforts made by the Roma intellectual elite to increase the status of their endangered mother tongue at an official level and to tie it with struggles of democratic participation and emancipation, in accordance with the predications of the "linguistic citizenship" conceptual framework. In particular, the paper addresses the contribution of local media to the improvement of the status and conditions of Roma communities in the region. The discussion argues that these media embody a remarkable democratic voice in the context of the Roma community's participation to debates on language and citizenship in the daily multilingual urban life of Novi Sad.

Keywords: language planning; media; minority group; multiculturalism; Roma communities; Romani language; Serbia; Vojvodina province

Résumé : Cet article porte sur le contexte médiatique multilingue dans la province autonome de Vojvodina en Serbie et s'intéresse au rôle que jouent les institutions locales de la ville multilingue de Novi Sad dans la promotion et l'appui des langues minoritaires, en particulier à l'égard de la langue romani. Nous nous penchons, dans un cadre de participation démocratique et de « citoyenneté linguistique », sur le statut du romani en faisant valoir les efforts déployés par l'élite intellectuelle à l'égard de cette langue en danger de disparaître. Pour ce faire, nous analysons la contribution de médias locaux à l'amélioration du statut et des conditions des communautés rom de la région du fait que ces médias permettent des échanges sur la langue et sur la citoyenneté dans la vie quotidienne des habitants de Novi Sad.

Mots-clés : groupe minoritaire ; aménagement linguistique ; langue romani ; médias ; multiculturalisme ; province de Vojvodina ; Roma ; Serbie

Introduction

The public display of minority languages and the official media of the autonomous region of Vojvodina represent a privileged context to study the social and political aspects of multilingualism in the public sphere of this region, and an important topic of research for the sociolinguistics of minority languages, in particular with reference to questions of language rights, representational equity and democratic participation.

On the one hand, the written display of minority languages (in the form of inscriptions and signage) in the public space constitutes an extremely significant way of giving visibility to non-dominant languages, as well as of providing legitimacy to the employment of minority languages in other settings of the public sphere, as it has been affirmed by the Linguistic Landscape Approach¹. On the other hand, official media play a fundamental role in the management of multilingualism, especially in contexts such as in the Vojvodina, as they embody a strategic actor in the “production and/or reproduction of the status quo, attitudes and ideologies”². In particular, they can be interpreted through the linguistic citizenship framework³, which connects issues of language use to sociopolitical discourses of justice, rights, and equity, as well as to issues of power and access within a political and democratic setting.

This paper presents the multilingual context of the Vojvodina province and places particular emphasis on the role of Romani language in the public sphere. Specifically, it focuses on the role of the TV programs produced by the Romani branch of the Public Broadcasting Service of Vojvodina (*Radio-Televizija Vojvodine/ RTV*) and of the print magazine *Dekada Roma u AP Vojvodini*, highlighting the importance of these tools

¹ See for example Heiko F. Marten, Luk Van Mensel, & Duke Gorter, “Studying Minority Languages in the Linguistic Landscape”, in: Heiko F. Marten, Luk Van Mensel, & Duke Gorter (eds.), *Minority Languages in the Linguistic Landscape*, Basingstroke, Palgrave-MacMillan, 2012, p. 1-15.

² Fernando Ramallo, “Minority Languages in Media Communication”, in: Kristina Bedijs, & Christiane Maaß (eds.), *Manual of Romance Language in the Media*, Berlin/ Boston, De Gruyter, 2017, p. 453.

³ Ben Rampton, Mel Cooke, & Sam Holmes, “Sociolinguistic citizenship”, *Journal of Social Science Education*, Vol. 17, n° 4, Winter 2018, p. 69-70; Christopher Stroud, “African mother-tongue programmes and the politics of language: Linguistic Citizenship versus Linguistic Human Rights”, *Journal of Multilingual & Multicultural Development*, Vol. 22, n° 4, 2001, p. 339-355.

not only for the preservation of the language, but more specifically for the construction of a discourse on participation, equality and representation of this minority group.

Vojvodina: “Europe in miniature”

The territory of Vojvodina, recognized as an Autonomous Province in 1974⁴ under the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and then again in the 2000s in post-socialist times, corresponds to almost one quarter of Serbia (24.3%). Vojvodina lies in the north of the country, bordering Hungary (North), Bosnia and Herzegovina (South-West), Croatia (West), and Romania (East). Its population amounts to slightly less than two million people and its main city is Novi Sad. Six official languages are recognized in the Province: Serbian, Croatian, Romanian, Hungarian, Slovak and Rusyn (Ruthenian): citizens can ask for official documents (like birth certificate) in any of these languages. Vojvodina, which has been subjected to Habsburg rule for about two hundred years from the end of the 17th Century⁵, is thus enriched by the presence of a variety of minorities that make its territories one of the most multilingual and multicultural⁶ in Europe⁷. According to the 2011 Census, the heterogeneous makeup of Vojvodina population is composed as follows: Serbs: 66.0%; Hungarians: 13.0%; Slovaks: 2.6%; Croats: 2.43%; Roma: 2.19%; Romanians: 1.32%; Montenegrins: 1.15%; Bunjevci: 0.85%; Rusyns: 0.72%; 9.74% other minorities.

The Article 7 of the Status of the Vojvodina Autonomous Region (Statut Autonomne pokrajine Vojvodine)⁸ claims that values of multilingualism, multiculturalism and freedom of religion are of particular importance for the territory. As a consequence,

⁴ György Szerbhorvath, “Language Politics and Language Rights on the Territory of Former Yugoslavia the Today’s Serbia/Vojvodina”, *Acta Univ. Sapientiae. European and Regional Studies*, Vol. 8, 2015, p. 59.

⁵ Claudia Mayr-Veselinović, “Multiculturalism and Acculturation in a Changing Multicultural Environment. Vojvodina and Bela Crkva”, *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov*, Series IV: Philology & Cultural Studies. Vol. 1, 2018, p. 29.

⁶ See Melanie Mikeš, “Languages of national minorities in Vojvodina”, in: Ranko Bugarski, & Celia Hawkesworth (eds.), *Language Planning in Yugoslavia*, Columbus, Slavica Publishers, 1991, p. 59.

⁷ Bojan Belić, “Linguistic Vojvodina: Embordered Frontiers”, in: Tomasz Kamusella, & Motoki Nomachi (eds.), *The Multilingual Society Vojvodina. Intersecting Borders, Cultures and Identities*, Sapporo, Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2014, p. 1.

⁸ Statut Autonomne pokrajine Vojvodine, in: *Službeni list AP Vojvodine*, br. 20/ 2014.

the AP Vojvodina, encourages and supports, within its competence, the preservation and development of multilingualism and the cultural heritage of national minorities - national communities inhabiting in it, and through specific measures and activities, it helps mutual contact and respect for the languages, cultures and religions [...] ⁹.

Such values ¹⁰ seem to be to a certain extent reflected at the public level in two particular spheres, corresponding to the linguistic landscape of the public space and of the programmings of the Public Broadcasting Service of Vojvodina (*Radio-Televizija Vojvodine/ RTV*).

Vojvodina's Multilingual Landscapes and Public Broadcasting Service

The analysis of the use of minority languages in public sphere proves very useful for the detection of the power relations and for the analysis of the “salient” linguistic markers in the institutional spaces. Understandably, minority groups (ethnic, linguistic and also social) manifest the need to be symbolically present and mark their social space through their languages and scripts ¹¹. Furthermore, the instances of public “linguistic landscapes” we come across reveal a lot about a country, especially its identity-building practices, the image it intends to provide to external observers, but also about the local population, in terms of “self-representation” patterns ¹². In this sense, the city of Novi Sad in Vojvodina

⁹ “Višejezičnost, višekulturalnost i sloboda veroispovesti predstavljaju vrednosti od posebnog značaja za AP Vojvodinu. AP Vojvodina, u okviru svojih nadležnosti, podstiče i pomaže očuvanje i razvijanje višejezičnosti i kulturne baštine nacionalnih manjina - nacionalnih zajednica koje u njoj žive i posebnim merama i aktivnostima pomaže međusobno upoznavanje i uvažavanje jezika, kultura i veroispovesti u AP Vojvodini.” (My translation into English)

¹⁰ In the context of the respect for linguistic rights of minorities in Serbia, decisive steps have been made in the last two decades, including the adoption of the Bill of the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities in 2002, the joining of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 2001, the ratification of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages in 2006, as well as bilateral international agreements on reciprocity of the protection of minorities signed with Hungary, Romania, North Macedonia, and Croatia.

¹¹ See Christina Kramer, Dejan Ivković, & Victor Friedman, “Seeing Double: Latin and Cyrillic in Linguistic Landscape”, in: Liljana Mitkovska (ed.), *Зборник на трудови од меѓународната конференција за примена лингвистика*, Skopje, Fon University, 2014, p. 14.

¹² See Rodrigue Landry & Richard Bourhis, “Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality. An Empirical Study”, *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, Vol. 16 n° 1, 1997, p. 24-25.

embodies a rare case of multilingual landscape, with examples of up to eight different languages (Serbian in Cyrillic alphabet, Serbian in Latin alphabet, Croatian, English, Romanian, Hungarian, Rusyn and Slovak) appearing on the official signs of some institutional buildings. Such fact is representative of a region that has always presented itself as openly and intentionally multicultural. It would certainly not be possible to affirm the same about Belgrade: the official public inscriptions in the Serbian capital appear for the most part exclusively written in Serbian with Cyrillic alphabet. Nonetheless, this positive display of minority languages inclusion in Vojvodina has its limits, as no trace of Romani language can be found in the public writing (road signs, official signboards, etc.)¹³. Such negligence derives from the widespread and unjust perception that Roma people do not have a tradition of written language and therefore do not need any public recognition in this respect¹⁴.

As far as the public representation of multilingualism in local media in Vojvodina is concerned, we find the unique model of a multilingual public TV station. The *Radio-Televizija Vojvodine* (RTV) constitutes indeed a valuable encouragement to the use of smaller minority languages, such as Bunjevac, Rusyn and Romani, with programs broadcast also in Croatian, Romanian, Slovak, Czech, Macedonian, Hungarian, German, Ukrainian languages: it thus represents an unparalleled case at the European level¹⁵. The *Radio-Televizija Vojvodine* broadcasts programs in as many as 16 languages and, in order to promote multiculturalism and multilingualism, endeavors to offer the content it produces to all national communities living in the territory of Vojvodina on all platforms¹⁶.

In the context of the nation-state, language represents a fundamental instrument in the dynamics of power affirmation and preservation,

¹³ In a region where even smaller minority languages as Bulgarian, Czech mark their presence in the public signage of some villages.

¹⁴ Regarding the topic of the stereotypization of other populations as “illiterate” see Michel De Certeau, *La scrittura dell'altro*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2005.

¹⁵ One is surely the North Macedonian channel MRT2, which broadcasts programs for the national minorities in the following languages: Albanian, Turkish, as well as programs in Serbian, Romani, Vlach and Bosnian.

¹⁶ See the article “Дунавска медијска мрежа – нови пројекат Радио-телевизије Војводине”, appeared on the website of RTV on 12/28/2020: <https://bit.ly/3HSrJQ> (last accessed 5/1/2021).

especially within an ethnically diverse society, and, as a matter of fact, the language(s) of media tends to serve as the prolongation of the dominant rhetoric and hierarchical structure. In this respect, the inclusion of minority languages in the official media landscape can contest the status quo of the hierarchical relationship among languages and communities. Furthermore, it is important to point out that, in the case of ethnic minorities and their languages, media, in form of TV broadcasting, can challenge perceptions of minorities as being old-fashioned and “crystallized in time”. Sure enough, when small languages are actively employed for the creation of contents on modern media, they automatically become a contemporary living tool, acquiring a higher prestige also in the eyes of minority communities’ members, especially children and teenagers. As it has been affirmed¹⁷, TV broadcasting is considered one of the main types of institutional support minorities can receive, and the daily exposure to contents in the minority languages on mainstream state television can make the difference, implying the maintenance and survival of a vulnerable language¹⁸. In addition to this, media can contribute in challenging the existing power structures through the selection of events to portray¹⁹ and the inclusion of crucial topics such as access to education in mother tongue, daily discrimination, women’s rights, etc.

Among the programs of the multilingual offerings of *Radio-Televizija Vojvodine*, a prominent position is occupied by *Paleta*, whose contents appears in many languages of the minorities inhabiting the territory, with subtitles in the Serbian language. As stated in its official website, the program aims at bringing “all communities closer to one another²⁰” through the broadcasting of reports and documentaries on specific

¹⁷Howard Giles, Richard Bourhis, & Donald Taylor, “Towards a theory of language in ethnic group relations”, in: Howard Giles (ed.), *Language, Ethnicity and Intergroup relations*, London, Academic Press, 1977, p. 307-348, cited in: Seyed Hadi Mirvahedi, “The Role of Satellite Channels in Language Shift/ Maintenance: The case of Tabriz, Iran”, in: *Language Endangerment in the 21st Century: Globalisation, Technology and New Media. Proceedings of the Conference FEL XVI*, Auckland, Te Ipukarea – The National Maori Language Institute – AUT University, 2012, p. 37.

¹⁸On the topic of minority and immigrants’ languages in relation to TV Broadcasting see Claire Frachon, & Marion Vargaftig (eds.), *European Television: Immigrants and Ethnic Minorities*, London, Libbey, 1995.

¹⁹Fernando Ramallo, *op. cit.*, p. 453.

²⁰Description of the program “Paleta” on the website of RTV, available (in Serbian) at: https://www.rtv.rs/sr_lat/paleta (last accessed 05/01/2021).

events, which are considered relevant for the preservation of cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity in Vojvodina²¹. Consequently, we can assess that the values on ethnic coexistence and minorities' respect appear to be particularly represented in their work:

The affirmation of multiculturalism as a model of living together in Vojvodina. We offer viewers diversity and credibility. We break the language barrier, we look and listen, so we can understand each other better.²²

A validation of these principles comes from the fact that *Radio-Televizija Vojvodine* is the only media company in the world that has continuously broadcast programs in Romani language for the past 30 years. With more than 16,000 minutes of programming a year, the Roma-language broadcast stands out as a successful experiment in support of intercultural dialogue and Roma emancipation.

Roma Communities in the Republic of Serbia

According to the 2011 Serbian Census²³, there are 147,604 citizens who identify themselves as Roma in the country, corresponding to about 2.1% of the total population. The Southern and Eastern parts of the country host the largest communities of Roma (around 38.0%), followed by the Northern province of Vojvodina, inhabited by 28.85% of the total Roma population. At least 50,000 of them were internally displaced from Kosovo after the war of 1999. Unofficial sources estimate up to 450,000 people²⁴, but it is clear that many do not want to declare themselves as Roma due to the lower status assigned to this ethnic identity, considering that in Serbia (and in Europe as well), the biggest ethnic discrimination is directed towards people of Roma descent. According to the same official sources, almost 50,000

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* My translation from Serbian: “Afiramacija multikulturalnosti kao modela zajedničkog života u Vojvodini. Gledaocima nudimo raznovrsnost i verodostojnost. Probijamo jezičku barijeru, gledamo se i slušamo, da bismo se bolje razumeli.”

²³ See Dragan Vukmirović, “Nacionalna Pripadnost. Podaci po opštinama i gradovima/ Ethnicity. Data by municipalities and cities”, in: *Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova 2011. u Republici Srbiji/ 2011 Census of Population: Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Serbia*, Beograd, Republički zavod za statistiku, 2012, p. 21- 23, available online: <https://bit.ly/3gHAGN8> (last accessed 5/1/2021).

²⁴ The same problem was evident in the Census data during Yugoslavia. See August Kovačec, “Languages of National Minorities and Ethnic Groups in Yugoslavia”, in: Ranko Bugarski, & Celia Hawkesworth (eds.), *Language Planning in Yugoslavia*, Columbus, Slavica Publishers, 1991, p. 52.

people of Roma origin live in Vojvodina. Their religious affiliations vary from Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Sunni Islam, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Evangelism.

The Romani language belongs to the groups of the Indo-Aryan Languages²⁵ and is divided into several subgroups using distinct, although related, Romani dialects. The main Romani dialects in Vojvodina and Serbia are Gurbetski (Vlah) and Arlijski (non-Vlah, with a higher percentage of words of Turkish, Arabic and Persian origin). The two variants are pretty much mutually intelligible. Nevertheless, only a part of the Roma population in Vojvodina speaks Romani language. In the last census²⁶, only 26,790 Roma in Vojvodina, out of 42,391, declared Romani as their mother tongue. The others declared Serbian, Albanian, Hungarian, Vlach and Romanian as their first language.

The Romani alphabet, mainly written in the Latin script²⁷, has 38 letters and appears to be already standardized in different genres of writing in Serbia today²⁸. The public media are contributing to support this mission in a significant way, choosing the Gurbetski dialect in Vojvodina, but with some variation²⁹. In this respect, it is important to remark that the Council of Europe supports the recognition of the Romani Language at the European level³⁰, as well as its promotion within the educational systems, its usage in speech and writing, in public and private life. Serbia has ratified the Council of Europe's *Charter for Regional and Minority Languages*, which lists twelve languages that should be introduced into official use³¹.

²⁵ William D. Davies, & Stanley Dubinstky, "Minorities of Migration. Roma in Europe", in: William D. Davies, & Stanley Dubinstky (eds.), *Language Conflicts and Language Rights*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 257.

²⁶ Svetlana Radovanović, & Aleksandar Knežević, *Popis Stanovništva, domaćinstva i stanova 2011. u Republici Srbiji. Romi u Srbiji*, Beograd, Republički zavod za statistiku, 2014, p. 32.

²⁷ Although with some exceptions, as in some cases the Romani language has also been written in Cyrillic alphabet.

²⁸ Svenka Savić, "Корпус(на) лингвистика и ромологија у Србији", in: *Očuvanje, zaštita i perspektive romskog jezika u Srbiji: zbornik radova sa naučnog skupa održanog 20-21. oktobra 2016*, Beograd, Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 2018, p. 204.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See Dieter W. Halwachs, "Language planning and the media: the case of Romani", *Current Issues in Language Planning*, Vol. 12, n° 3, 2011, p. 381-401.

³¹ These are: Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Bunjevac, Croatian, Hungarian, Romani, Romanian, Western Rusyn, Slovak, Ukrainian and Vlach.

Notwithstanding its inclusion in the Charter, Romani still faces obstacles in reference to its status as an official language in the country³²: this right is guaranteed by the Constitution of Serbia to all national minorities, but in practice it is not applied to the Roma, who are the second minority community in Serbia by number. According to the *Law on Official Use of Languages and Scripts* (2005), the language of a national minority becomes official in a local unit, if members of that minority in the territory constitute at least 15 percent of the population³³. However, the introduction of Romani into official use was not initiated by any municipality, and this fact shows the limits of the efficacy of the legislative framework alone in supporting and promoting the use of the language, when it is not accompanied by grassroots practices of (linguistic) citizenship.

Although representing the fourth largest minority community in Vojvodina, citizens of Roma origin cannot use their language at an official level in the provincial or local administrations and institutions³⁴. In some places, members of minority national communities who are significantly smaller than the Roma have their language in official use. For instance, in the city of Zrenjanin, in addition to Serbian, the minority languages of the Hungarian, Romanian and Slovak population are in use, but no Romani, although the Roma form the second largest minority group immediately after the Hungarians³⁵.

The Romani language programs: decades of success

Radio and Television Broadcasting, electronic and print media are of great importance to Roma people and their emancipation. They offer them an opportunity to exchange and enrich their experiences and find ways of active co-operation. All these forms of media are also relevant for the mission of giving concrete support to Romani, a vulnerable language that has been defined as “endangered” by UNESCO³⁶.

³² See *Evropska Povelja o regionalnim ili manjinskim jezicima. Deo II* (Član 7), Srbija, Beograd, 2010, p. 22-23.

³³ Zakon o službenoj upotrebi jezika i pisama, “Službeni Glasnik RS”, Beograd, 2005.

³⁴ Svenka Savić, professor emerita at the University of Novi Sad, has reminded local institutions on several occasions that the Romani language has the status of an official language, but that, in practice, it does not apply.

³⁵ See the article “Romski jezik van službene upotrebe”, which appeared on the website of RTV on December 15th, 2015 : <https://bit.ly/3rYCd7J> (last accessed 5/1/2021).

³⁶ See Christopher Moseley (ed.), *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, Paris, UNESCO Publishing, 2010, www.unesco.org/languages-atlas (last accessed 29/11/2019).

Without media, Roma communities would not be able to establish their own scientific and cultural institutions and thus raise the social and cultural status of the minority group. Furthermore, Romani language media can serve as an attractive economic perspective for its members and support the goal of creating a unified voice on matters of social justice and integration. All of these conditions are present in the media landscape of the Vojvodina region, especially by virtue of the work performed by the Roma broadcaster of the State Television (*Radio-Televizija Vojvodine*) and the printed/electronic publication of the magazine/bulletin of the Roma Inclusion Office. In what follows, I will analyze in more detail the activities of the *Radio-Televizija Vojvodine*, while in the second part of the discussion I will turn my attention to the printed/electronic publication.

Since its foundation in 1991, the Roma editorial office (*RTV Romske*) of *Radio-Televizija Vojvodine* has been producing over 60 hours of radio and television programs every month, with an average of about two hours a day. Part of the television program in Romani is broadcast once a week on the entire Serbian territory, the highest number of hours after the Hungarian programs. Even though the Roma editorial staff is the smallest by number of employees³⁷, it is also among the youngest and most educated; furthermore, it is composed mainly by women.

The aim of the Roma editorial office is to contribute to solving the problems Roma face in their daily life (social, cultural, linguistic, etc.) through the media and attract the attention of both Roma and non-Roma people to these problems. Its editorial staff has undeniably and significantly contributed to the advancement of the position of this national community³⁸ in its almost 30 years of existence. Thanks to the programs of *Radio-Televizija Vojvodine*, the communication with the Roma communities from all over Serbia has been greatly facilitated: “the media, and the broadcasting media in particular, enter people’s homes and influence their perceptions, attitudes and thoughts³⁹”. In this respect, the Roma editorial office at *Radio-Televizija Vojvodine*, with its broad slate of programs (at least six) represents a remarkable example

³⁷ As affirmed by its director: “It is a pity that a large number of young and educated people cannot take part in our story because we do not have the space to engage them.”

³⁸ This is the term used in the official language, in Serbian “nacionalna zajednica”

³⁹ See Seyed Hadi Mirvahedi, *op. cit.*

of a TV and Radio Broadcast that is not made “for minorities” but “by minorities⁴⁰”.

The editorial office contributes to increasing the visibility of all that is important for the Roma, as well as to pointing out all the problems they face in Serbian and Vojvodina society, while at the same time making the contents suitable to wider, collective interests⁴¹. To this aim, it was also necessary to adapt Roma cultural and traditional values to contemporary times: this was (and continues to be) done by dealing with crucial issues such as the position and role of women in modern societies, the obstacles faced to access health care, promoting emancipatory messages such as gender equality, education for all, human rights, etc. In this way, we could claim that balances of power are being questioned and contested by speakers of a non-dominant and less powerful language such as Romani. Such struggles and the consequential transformation were and remain essential in the perspective to overcome social, economic, educational and institutional invisibility and discrimination which, according to editorial director Petar Nikolić⁴², were much more pronounced before Roma people had a tool of media representation: “It was necessary for us, the Roma, to start it ourselves, because as the people say: if you do not respect yourself, others will not respect you⁴³”.

As regards the emancipation of Romani women, the promotion of their rights was to a certain extent encouraged by the media in Romani language, as the *Radio-Televizija Vojvodine* programs in Romani occasionally offer shows on Romani human rights which include Romani women's rights. Education is considered the foundation of everything and is explicitly recognized as the element Roma representatives have relied on from the beginning to bring about change⁴⁴. As Nikolić affirms: “Our desire was, and still is, to create an intellectual and economic elite⁴⁵”. In this respect, it can be maintained that, among the Romani

⁴⁰ See Dan Caspi, & Nelly Elias, “Don't patronize me: Media by and media for minorities”, *Ethnic and Racial studies*, Vol. 34, n° 1, 2011, p. 62-82.

⁴¹ Personal interview with Petar Nikolić at the headquarters of the Roma editorial office of Radio-Televizija Vojvodine in Novi Sad, April 25th 2018.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Svenka Savić, “Obrazovane Romkinje-prijedlog za model interkulturog razumijevanja i slušanja”, in: Svenka Savić, & Svetlana Slapšak (eds.), *Kultura, drugi, žene, urednice*. Jasenka Kodrnja, Zagreb, Hrvatsko filozofsko društvo - Plejada, 2010, p. 187-202.

⁴⁵ Interview with Petar Nikolić.

communities in Vojvodina, there is a noticeable increase in the level of education among the youth in comparison to the older members⁴⁶, and nowadays a much higher percentage of youth have completed secondary and higher education⁴⁷. However, the level of education among men, both young and elderly, is much higher than among women, although there are very encouraging examples of highly educated Romani women in Vojvodina, even at the Doctoral level⁴⁸.

The “linguistic mission” of the Roma editorial office

One of the salient aspects of the linguistic scenario of Serbian Roma communities, as already mentioned, is their very low competences in the Romani language. Thus, it is easy to understand why the Roma editorial office strives to support this part of the population with bilingual programs which enable Roma as well as (potentially) the rest of the population to get to know important elements of the language, history and culture of Roma. In this manner, *Radio-Televizija Vojvodine* is enriched through the use of the Romani language, and gives a valuable contribution to the affirmation and development of the language at a public level, a factor widely acknowledged by sociolinguistics as capable of fostering the vitality of endangered, minority languages⁴⁹.

Language maintenance is a particularly delicate question for an endangered tongue like Romani and requires resources that have to be adequate to the contemporary challenges of language erosion, language loss, dominance of global languages⁵⁰ and so on. In relation to minority languages, broadcasting media play a role which is both educational and status-building⁵¹. The two sides are equally represented in the work of the Roma editorial office of *Radio-Televizija Vojvodine*, constituting the most authoritative media allowing advancements in the status of

⁴⁶ See the article “Sve manje vojvođanskih Roma odustaje od škole” by Jelisaveta Simić, which appeared on the web portal *Novosti* on 7/24/2014: <https://bit.ly/3BM7pe1> (last accessed: 1/5/2021).

⁴⁷ See Svenka Savić, & Milana Grbić (eds.), *Akademskim obrazovanjem do romske elite. Ženske studije i istraživanja*, Novi Sad, Futura publikacije, 2008.

⁴⁸ See Svenka Savić, “Visokoobrazovane Romkinje u Srbiji: mogućnosti za očuvanje i razvoj identiteta”, in: *Promene identiteta, kulture i jezika Roma u uslovima planske socijalno-ekonomske integracije*, Beograd, SANU, 2012, p. 71-85.

⁴⁹ Sayed Hadi Mirhavedi, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁵⁰ In Vojvodina these are English, Russian and, increasingly, Chinese.

⁵¹ Sayed Hadi Mirvahedi, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

the Romani language. In this context, it is appropriate to mention that in the course of the last 10 to 15 years, internet and social media have played a non-negligible role in the context of minority languages preservation, especially in terms of the proliferation of contents produced by users in non-majority languages⁵²: this is a common pattern for minority languages all over the globe.

In relation to the unification of the language varieties and to the visibility of Romani in Vojvodina among the non-Roma audience, the role of the television and radio are much more impacting. This is because public service broadcasting is the place where the standardization of the Romani language in spoken and written form (the latter through subtitles) is slowly being realized. It is essential for Romani to be used, supported and reinforced in a prestigious domain. In fact, state TV confers on Romani language a truly “authoritative status”, indicating to the audience that the language deserves to be used also in the public sphere⁵³. Nevertheless, in respect to vulnerable languages, broadcasting media cannot be a factor in their maintenance if “their contents and actions are not aligned with other macro and micro factors such as economy, politics, education, people’s attitudes, perceptions and so on⁵⁴”. In the case of the Roma team⁵⁵ at *RTV Romskei*, the efforts to preserve the language are accompanied by a continuous cooperation with institutions and eminent representatives of the academic world that support Roma struggles for integration and representation. In this way, we could maintain that the Roma editorial office is thus “[p]utting democratic participation first, emphasizing cultural and political ‘voice’ and agency rather than just language on its own⁵⁶”. As a consequence, through the programs of the Roma editorial office, speakers of the language reclaim their place in the social, political and cultural arena of Vojvodina and Serbia: this is made possible through linguistic practices

⁵² On the topic and in relation to Romani language in Serbia, see: Nevena Andrić, “Identiteti Obrazovanih Romkinja i Roma na društvenoj mreži Fejsbuk”, in: Dejan Pralica, & Norbert Šinković (eds.), *Digitalne medijske tehnologije i društveno-obrazovne promene* 6. Novi Sad, Filozofski Fakultet, 2015, p. 11-27.

⁵³ In contrast to the perception of Romani as a language having a lower status in comparison to the dominant one. See on this matter. See Dieter W. Halwachs, “The Changing Status of Romani in Europe”, in: Gabrielle Hogan-Brun, & Stefan Wolff (eds.), *Minority Languages in Europe*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 196.

⁵⁴ See Seyed Hadi Mirvahedi, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁵⁵ United in the cultural institution of the *Matica Romska*.

⁵⁶ Ben Rampton, Mel Cooke, & Sam Holmes, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

that promote ideals of transformation, engagement and democratic participation.

In this respect, the initiatives of the local editorial office have been supported over the years by Romologists such as Trifun Dimić⁵⁷ and Svenka Savić, by institutions such as the University of Novi Sad, the provincial government and the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. The first crucial step to be taken as a joint initiative coordinated by these different actors was the introduction of Romani into primary schools as an elective subject⁵⁸. To achieve this goal, an alphabet, a primer and textbooks had to be created and compiled. Philologist Dimić⁵⁹ was able to make up for this lack of resources⁶⁰. The course "Romani language with elements of the national culture" was included as an optional one in 1998⁶¹, and later the language was also introduced into the church, with the translations of all liturgical books⁶², and liturgies. Roma editorial office director Nikolić comments on such achievement with enthusiasm: "You know, to pray to God in the mother tongue for the first time, this is some kind of civilization's progress⁶³".

Up to this day, universities in Serbia have not yet established a Romani department where educated experts can seriously deal with the standardization of the language⁶⁴. Efforts have been made since the early 1990s and even earlier⁶⁵ in order to reach orthographic uniformity of

⁵⁷ Prematurely passed away in 2001.

⁵⁸ Trifun Dimić created a curriculum for the subject "Language and National Culture of Roma", and held numerous seminars for Roma language teachers in Vojvodina. See Trifun Dimić, *Jezik sa elementima nacionalne kulture Roma (priručnik za nastavnike)*, Novi Sad, Društvo Vojvodine za jezik i književnost Roma, 1996.

⁵⁹ Considered the Romani equivalent of "Vuk Karadžić", that is the Serbian philologist who standardized the Serbian Cyrillic alphabet, published the first dictionary and translated the New Testament into Serbian in the 19th Century.

⁶⁰ See in particular his *Lil grafemengo: palo angluno klaso fundoske školako*, Beograd, Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, 2000.

⁶¹ Although examples of textbooks already existed in the times of Yugoslavia. See Snježana Kordić, *Jezik i nacionalizam*, Zagreb, Durieux, 2010, p. 292.

⁶² See Trifun Dimić's translation of the Bible into Romani (Gurbetski variant): *Nervo Sovlabardo Ćidiçe*, Novi Sad, Dobra Vest, 1990.

⁶³ Interview with Petar Nikolić.

⁶⁴ An important exception was the "Škola Romologije", active from 2004 to 2016, to which we took part.

⁶⁵ See Marcel Courthiade, "Who is afraid of the Rromani language?" in: Peter Thelen (ed.), *Roma in Europe. From Social Exclusion to Active Participation*, Skopje, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2005, p. 102.

the Romani language for educational and cultural purposes. This is still a current issue and we can understand how it is often treated by local Roma representatives as an element of utmost importance. Positive signs in this direction have started emerging in recent years following the initiatives of the Roma Inclusion Office. Indeed, the plan and program of the Office include financial support for students, with a view to creating a highly educated staff for the Romani language at the College of Professional Studies for Educators ‘Mihailo Palov.

The Choice of Bilingualism

In opposition to the other minority language editorial offices of the Vojvodina Radio-Television, which are almost exclusively “monolingual”, the Romani office puts a special emphasis on practices of bilingualism, with the specific aim of providing “dialogical contents in its programs⁶⁶”. The motto underlying this choice is “Let’s get to know each other”, as an inspiration for an openly multicultural programming⁶⁷, against any form of “self-ghettoization”. As stated by director Nikolić, the choice of bilingualism is extremely relevant for the purpose of reaching a wider audience that also comprises Serbs, other minority communities, as well as Roma who do not speak their mother tongue and who lack opportunities to learn it properly: “When dialogue and communication are missing, then we have conflicts and in the end wars... The aim of this editorial staff is precisely to prevent all this⁶⁸”.

The choice of opening up space for multilingualism proves quite effective and its implications can be judged as particularly positive in terms of intercultural communication enhancement. In the media landscape of any country, as a rule, majority channels prevail over minority ones, being preferred even by minority language speakers by virtue of the “attractiveness” of the programs. Clearly, the existence of minority channels is not sufficient in itself to guarantee a future to a vulnerable language: according to sociolinguist Joshua Fishman, “media can never replace face to face communication, nor intergenerational transmission

⁶⁶ Interview with Petar Nikolić.

⁶⁷ See Europe Singh, “From Monochrome to Technicolour: The history of PBME”, in: Claire Frachon, & Marion Vargaftig (eds.), *European Television: Immigrants and Ethnic Minorities*, London, Libbey, 1995, p. 65-66.

⁶⁸ Interview with Petar Nikolić.

in particular⁶⁹". Furthermore, minority broadcasters have a hard task in appealing to their intended audiences, as the language used in these media "is not usually of great instrumental and economic value to the people⁷⁰". Nonetheless, in the RT Vojvodina case, we find an exception due to the choice of bilingualism and to the "non folklorization" of the contents related to this specific minority⁷¹, consisting instead of very current and practical topics, including information on educational, health and gender rights, and encouragement to agency and participation.

No signs of anything "national" or "nationalist" find place within the discourses on identity circulating on Roma media, as Roma have constructed their identity always according to a "non exclusivist" vision. With respect to the value assigned to the language, Romani is often seen as the most important element of Roma identity because Roma populations are very heterogeneous⁷² and lack a unitary history, a territorial affiliation, a single religious belonging, or, precisely, a national identity⁷³. As reminded by linguist Ljuan Koko:

The Roma are the largest national minority in ex-Yugoslavia, in Serbia and in Europe. The problem is that the Roma are scattered everywhere. Very few Roma children learn Roma as their mother tongue. If at least ten percent of Romani children learned the language, we would be the leading national minority to learn our mother tongue⁷⁴.

Statements like these confirm the fact that Roma intellectual elites have taken up a mission to improve the status of the Romani language: hope is that Romani can be more used in the official sphere of the province, in line with the languages of other national minorities.

⁶⁹ See Joshua Aaron Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*, Cleveland, Multilingual Matters, 1991.

⁷⁰ See Seyed Hadi Mirvahedi, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁷¹ Contrary to what can be stated for a minority community like the Rusyn one, whose programs on the same broadcaster tend to focus on a sort of "crystallized time of the past".

⁷² "While the majority societies tend to see all Roma as the same, in reality the Roma are the most diverse ethnic community in terms of religion, first language, identity and customs". See Hugh Poulton, "Insiders and outsiders: The transnational minorities – Jews, Armenians, Vlachs and Roma", in: Hugh Poulton (ed.), *Minorities in Southeast Europe: Inclusion and exclusion, Report*, London Minority Rights Group International, 1998, p. 19.

⁷³ Even though it has been used. See for example Rajko Djurić, "A Standard Romani Language – A Precondition and basis for a national and cultural identity for the Roma", in: Peter Thelen (ed.), *Roma in Europe. From Social Exclusion to Active Participation*, Skopje, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2005, p. 79-80.

⁷⁴ See Ljuan Koko's statement in *Dekada Rom a u AP Vojvodini*, br. 62, 2017, p. 7.

The publication of *Dekada Roma u AP Vojvodini*

With regard to the inclusion of Roma minorities in Vojvodina, many positive actions have been taken, as a result of the synergy between the Roma editorial office and other institutional frameworks in Novi Sad. A first important step has been the establishment of the Roma Integration Council⁷⁵, in 2004, followed by the Roma Inclusion Office⁷⁶, in 2005, and then the Sector for the Advancement of the Roma⁷⁷, created in 2014. Furthermore, another relevant factor was the introduction of appointed Roma coordinators at the municipal level, of teaching assistants in pre-school and elementary education, as well as mediators in the field of health and information. At the national level, a prominent role is occupied by the Roma National Council, founded in 2003.

In order to continue the process of preserving, nurturing and developing the Romani language in institutions, the Roma Inclusion Office and the cultural association *Matica Romska* launched in 2009 an initiative to start a study program for educators in this language. This study program aims at training language teachers at the *College of Professional Studies for Educators 'Mihailo Palov'* in the city of Vršac in the Romani language. Subsequently, the Provincial Government and the Roma Inclusion Office started awarding scholarships to Roma students, allowing them to participate in the program and become educators for future generations of Roma pupils.

Among the tasks carried out by the Roma Inclusion Office, an important one is the publication of a trilingual magazine in the Romani, Serbian and English languages. The process of standardization of Romani as an official language can thus be monitored and implemented at an administrative level through the translation work of the official texts coming from the Serbian language. Previously, a monthly multilingual magazine in Romani and Serbian languages – titled *Them* (Council) – targeting educated Roma audiences in particular, had been published in 3000 copies, between 2003 and 2009. There was also the children's newspaper *Čavrikano Lil*, which was published monthly in 1000 copies⁷⁸. After 2009, the publication of the *Them* magazine was discontinued, and in 2011 a second editorial office was formed, that changed its name

⁷⁵“Savet za integraciju Roma APV”.

⁷⁶“Kancelarija za inkluziju Roma”.

⁷⁷“Savet za unapređenje položaja Roma”.

⁷⁸See Svenka Savić, “Корпус(на) лингвистика и ромологија у Србији”, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

into *Dekada Roma u AP Vojvodini* (Roma Decade in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina), in reference to the important initiative happening at a European level in favor of Roma inclusion, called “The Decade of Roma Inclusion” (2005-2015). The new magazine started being issued on a monthly basis. In 2016, after the end of the Roma Decade, the monthly became a quarterly, and in 2017 a semi-annual. Its circulation is 1000 copies. A total of 66 issues have been published so far, all trilingual: Serbian in Latin script, Romani in Gurbetski dialect and Latin script and English.

The articles of the magazine reconstruct the fights of Roma citizens for the affirmation of their rights, as a reaction against the marginalization and stereotypes active in many mainstream media. In addition, the texts attempt to create the conditions for dialogue and understanding between Roma and other communities of Vojvodina. Despite its limited circulation⁷⁹, the trilingual Roma Decade strives to explore several important topics as social rights, language, education and culture, in relation with the socio-political changes in Serbian and European context over the last 10 years, with a special attention given to the international initiative “The Decade of Roma Inclusion”.

For example, the periodical provides readers with important information concerning the rights of Roma people in the field of education, housing, language maintenance, culture and arts, journalism, as well as many others. An important aspect is the promotion of the activities of various organizations dealing with the theme of Roma inclusion in Serbian society. Every issue of this publication presents different sections devoted to the above-mentioned topics, through which a positive image of Roma communities is spread, a factor which can contribute in the dissolution of widespread prejudices towards them.

The trilingual character of this publication can be considered a very relevant element, implying a symbolic but also practical valorization of the Romani language. The importance of language preservation, and also of the possibilities of making a public use of the language (in school setting, as well as in printed media, etc.) is related to a big “void” which has to be filled: this is the absence of Romani written language in the public contexts of the Republic of Serbia, notwithstanding the

⁷⁹The magazine cannot be bought in local kiosks, for it is only distributed through institutional channels.

not irrelevant tradition of printed media of Roma communities in ex Yugoslavia⁸⁰. Many articles are dedicated to the promotion of a cultural and linguistic awareness within the Roma community, discussing questions related to literacy in the mother tongue language and language erosion. This shows that the written word still has great symbolic significance for socio-economic advancement and positive self-representation.

Valorizing all forms of the written language

The Periodical *Dekada Roma u AP Vojvodini* deals with the topic of the written form of the Romani language in many of its issues. Vojvodina has a lot of potential in this direction, constituting the only region in Europe which has a higher education institution where Roma people are trained to provide for the demands of the Roma community in their own language⁸¹. In addition to this, a number of articles of the magazine *Dekada Roma u AP Vojvodini* deal with the valorization of written Romani language, mentioning the various initiatives aimed at promoting Roma Poetry (such as the one of Trifun Dimić, as well as of Rajko Jovanović) among the young ones, especially children⁸². It also promotes the events organized by the Association “Phralipe - Novi Sad”, a non-governmental, non-profit organization which focuses on the field of functional literacy of active people aged 15 to 40 years who failed to get educated within the statutory deadline⁸³.

Many articles are devoted to important figures of cultural and linguistic importance, such as Alija Krasnići, an established poet and writer who, after more than 35 years of work, published a dictionary of Serbian-Romani language. The dictionary, considered a capital work, contains more than 70,000 words and has 884 pages. Krasnići considered this his life's duty: the dictionary is the “legacy he will leave as an inheritance to his nation”⁸⁴. His hope is that the dictionary will:

[...] leave everlasting marks on the new generations and [...] that they will have things to learn from it, and that they will spread every new word

⁸⁰The first Roma newspaper in Serbia, called *Romano Lil* started being published in Belgrade in 1935. For more on this topic see Dragoljub Acković, *Istorija Informisana Roma u Jugoslaviji, 1935-'94*, Novi Sad, Štamparija Izvršnog veća Vojvodine, 2004, p. 55.

⁸¹See *Dekada Roma u AP Vojvodini*, Nr. 62, 2017, p. 2-5.

⁸²See *Dekada Roma u AP Vojvodini*, Nr. 56, 2015, p. 22.

⁸³*Ibid.*

⁸⁴“Zadužbina koju ostavljam u nasledstvo svojoj naciji.”, in: *Dekada Roma u AP Vojvodini*, n° 30, 2013, p. 25.

among adults, with the aim of keeping their mother tongue, the Romany language, safe from oblivion and extinction. With this dictionary we prove that we exist as a nation which has its own language, tradition, customs, culture⁸⁵.

The *Dekada Roma u AP Vojvodini* remains confined to institutional circles and its articles do not reach Roma communities, nor the majority population. The problem of minority media such as this periodical is that, notwithstanding their deeply valuable content and aims, they do not have a sufficient widespread distribution and therefore remain practically unknown to the wider and even more specialized audience. On the one hand, the European Initiative of the *Dekada Roma u AP Vojvodini* surely constituted a significant opportunity to carry out better strategies of integration of Roma communities in the region, and, to a certain extent, such chances have been taken and realized. On the other hand, it seems that the entire potential of such initiative has not been used, as many efforts have remained incomplete, and Roma people have not experienced big improvements as was expected in their daily life. We can add that in the field of written culture, there is still a lot of work to be done, and hopefully positive examples such as the magazine *Dekada Roma u AP Vojvodini* will face better conditions and find innovative ways of manifesting themselves in all their communicative potential as well as outside institutional channels. Nevertheless, this magazine's existence shows how important the Roma press has been in giving back a voice to the silenced, and in challenging the widespread prejudice that the written form of the language is a question of no concern to this community⁸⁶.

Romani as a public language in Vojvodina

The Vojvodina example of multilingual media landscape represents a positive model in the Southeast European context and, although not taking place in an EU-member country, it can be valued at a wider level in terms of European linguistic diversity promotion. In this respect, the Roma editorial staff at *Radio-Televizija Vojvodine* has become, over time,

⁸⁵ *Dekada Roma u AP Vojvodini*, n°. 30, 2013, p. 25. My translation from Serbian: "[...] ostaviti neizbrisive tragove novim pokoljenjima, [...] da će iz njega imati šta da nauče, te da će širiti svaku novu reč kod ostalih, s ciljem da maternji romski jezik ne bude zaboravljen i izbrisan iz sveta jezika. Ovim rečnikom dokazujemo da postojimo kao narod koji ima svoj jezik, tradiciju, običaje, kulturu."

⁸⁶ See Dieter W. Halwachs, "The Changing Status of Romani in Europe", *op. cit.*

a social and intellectual force that institutions acknowledge, respect and consult. Their work has become the fertile ground for the emergence of a stronger cultural and social voice that is sensitive to both issues of Romani language use and political emancipation, seen as indivisible aspects of the same question.

An essential factor in this respect is the desired inclusion of Romani at an official level in the public space, in line with the principles of the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* undersigned by Serbia⁸⁷. Positive signs indicate that Vojvodina is an open environment that could soon be ready for the introduction of the Romani language into official use, a fact that could improve the quality of life of the Roma community, help reduce discrimination, increase the presence of Roma in the institutions, and also allow members of the majority people and other national communities to become familiar with Romani language and culture. Indicators of the “maturity” of the province’s society are found in the encouraging cases of the presence of Romani language as an optional subject of instruction in dozens of elementary schools, where it is used since 1998 in the optional subject “Romani language with elements of the national culture⁸⁸”, as well as the existence of the College for teachers in Vršac. Furthermore, in the course of the last 10 years hundreds of Roma students have enrolled at the University of Novi Sad and some have completed their Doctoral Studies.

Another reason for optimism comes from the *Radio-Televizija Vojvodine*, which has contributed to create a Roma intellectual elite and which carries out continuous practices of dialogue and exchange, allowing the problems of Roma to reach a wider audience, awakening interest and curiosity, contributing to dissolve unfounded prejudices. The most important factor of its work is that it is placed within the official framework of the state broadcast television and that it is extremely well connected with the other institutions dealing with Roma issues, acting as a bridge between different spheres.

⁸⁷ See Goran Bašić, “Pravo na službenu upotrebu jezika nacionalnih manjina u Republici Srbiji – perspektive romskog”, in: *Očuvanje, zaštita i perspektive romskog jezika u Srbiji : zbornik radova sa naučnog skupa održanog 20-21. oktobra 2016*, Beograd, Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 2018, p. 13-30.

⁸⁸ See Trifun Dimić, *Језик са елементима националне културе Рома (приручник за наставнике)*, op. cit.

In the Vojvodina setting, the presence of two very different media such as the Vojvodina TV broadcaster and the bulletin *Dekada Roma u AP Vojvodini* can also serve as a prelude to the participation of the community's elite (cultural and political representatives, activists, etc.) in complex social activities at a national and European level, enabling it to further develop its political goals, for it is through the media that members of a society can acquire the information and knowledge enabling them to participate to these initiatives.

Even though much has been accomplished, the situation of Roma communities in Serbia is still extremely difficult. Hopefully, the 2021 European Capital of Culture in Novi Sad could prove to be a valuable chance for the inclusion of Roma minorities and their culture in the wider offer of the city's program, and for the realization of successful projects with long-term benefits with respect to Roma participation to local social and cultural life.

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