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FROM MULTILINGUAL TO MONOLINGUAL VOJVODINA:
THE CASE OF THE GYPSIES

INTRODUCTION: SOME OLD AND NEW INFORMATION

With an area of 21506 sq kilometers, the Vojvodina contains (Mikeš 1992), according to the last census of 1991 - all in all, 2.012.517 inhabitants, of whom 57,3% are Serbs, and the rest consists of minorities: Hungarians 16,9%, the "Yugoslavs" 8,4%, the Croats 3,7%, Slovaks 3,2%, Montenegrans 2,2%, Roumanians 1,9%, Gypsies 1,2%, Bunjevci 1,1%, Ruthenians 0,9%, Ukrainians 0,24% and all other groups 3,2% (Lučić 1993).

From Ralić's (1992: 24) publication containing statistical data issued by the Belgrade Government, it can be seen that, over the period covered by the last censuses (1921-1991), the number of Serbs and Montenegrans is increasing, and the number of citizens belonging to minority ethnic groups (except the Gypsies) has decreased.

The decrease can be explained by different factors such as, for example, the increase of the group called "Yugoslavs" (which contains members both of the majority nation, minorities, and ethnic groups); the low birth-rate in minority groups and, especially, by large-scale emigration of the members of the majority nation from the south of (previous) Yugoslavia to the richer and more developed northern regions.¹

Since the last census of 1991, the demographic situation in the Vojvodina has been changing in the sense that the number of Serbs that have fled from Croatia and Bosnia and Hercegovina is on the increase, and also the number of minority group members who emigrate is on the increase (in addition to the above mentioned low birth-rate).²

By the constitution of the Republic of Serbia of 1991, the basic principle of equality (of nations and national minorities) has been substituted by more rights for the majority nation. So there are *nations*, *national minorities* (Hungarians, Roumanians, Ruthenians, and Slovaks), and *ethnic groups* which also include the Gypsies.

The new constitution has defined the Vojvodina in a new way. It is not autonomous any more, in the sense of political and economic independence, but is an inherent part of the

¹ In a publication issued by the Provincial secretariat of information (published in 1000 copies in Serbo-Croatian in Novi Sad) there is a contrary statement: "It is evident that, on the territory of the Vojvodina, there have not been significant changes in ethnic structures in the last 70 years. Consequently, there has not occurred any significant assimilation nor any kind of withholding of minority rights that would jeopardize their existence." (Lučić 1993: 6).

² Unfortunately, nowhere in Serbia can one get reliable data on this general tendency, and for that matter in the Vojvodina either.

Republic of Serbia. Therefore, laws, and regulations are passed uniformly for the whole of Serbia, the Vojvodina included.

In 1991 a new statute for the official use of languages was passed, according to which "in the Republic of Serbia, the Serbo-Croatian language is in official use. In the Republic of Serbia, the Cyrillic script is officially used, and the Latin script is used only as prescribed by this law". The law has been consistently applied these last years: Cyrillic is the only script in official use: all written documents and official papers, formal writing in administration and court are in Cyrillic, as well as in all textbooks (on which a specific law has been passed) for elementary, intermediate and higher education, street names, newspaper names and names of business enterprises. Most national minorities and ethnic groups use the Latin alphabet, including the Gypsies (those who are literate).

Also, a new University Law was enacted in 1991, according to which all instruction in the universities is in Serbian, which means a change as to the previous period when it also could be organized in the languages of the minorities. A whole series of laws and regulations have also been passed, concerning the relations between the majority nation and the minority groups in the Vojvodina.

Based on the formulations of the new laws, one gets the impression that the right of the minorities to receive education in their mother tongue is not being violated, neither their right to receive information nor to profess their religion in their mother tongue. However, the situation now is different from what it used to be. For example, the financial situation has caused Novi Sad Radio and TV editorial staffs to be reduced, the staffs for the programs in the minority languages included. Belgrade radio and TV programs are broadcast in the majority nation language only. Also, the general buying power has been so drastically reduced that those minority newspapers and magazines which are still issued do not have the same circulation as before. Today's economic situation has been used as an excuse for many deliberate acts of limiting the rights of the minorities: there is no money for printing official documents in the languages of the minorities; many newspapers and magazines have been suppressed; editorial staff for the languages of minorities on Radio and TV and in the publishing houses are being reduced, the same as the number of broadcasting hours in minority languages. Neither do minority associations get the funds needed to maintain their regular activities.

Moreover, the Orthodox Church has greatly intensified its efforts to convert not only atheists, but also members of other confessions from minorities and ethnic groups (Dimić 1993).

In 1992, the Center for the Research of Public Opinion, Programs and Audiences of Novi Sad Radio and Television (government founded) organized an examination of the

current relations between nations, minorities and ethnic groups. And the main result was that "in the Vojvodina no nation or minority is imperialized".³

THE GYPSY ETHNIC GROUP

The Gypsies are a specific ethnic group in Serbia, and the Vojvodina (Petrović 1992), where it has significantly more members than was confirmed by the last census; many more members than, for example, today's Ruthenians who are acknowledged as a minority group. Their exact number, however, is not known, but the census figure for the Vojvodina is 24.895. Therefore, they have repeatedly demanded the status of a national minority for themselves. By the 1991 census, there are only 1161 Gypsies living in Novi Sad (Lučić 1993: 14). Čakan (1993) the ethnologist has conducted an on-the-spot investigation and concluded that there are many more - about 6000 of them in Novi Sad. This investigation suggests that the number of Gypsies in the Vojvodina today greatly exceeds the census figure (24.895), but it is difficult to fix the exact number. In any case, there are those who are very mobile and often change their place of abode, and there are those who are more stable and live in one place for a long time.

In recent years, numerous activities have been organized to raise the level of education of Gypsies in the Vojvodina, and to secure/salvage their specific cultural features. So in September 1992, a program on Gypsies was introduced in Novi Sad Radio and Television network. A Vojvodina Cultural Society for the Language, Literature and Customs of the Gypsies has been active for several years, starting the magazine "Romologija" (since 1990), published in Serbo-Croatian, with several articles in Romany in each issue. A number of scientific and professional conferences have been organized to discuss questions of the social and cultural presentation of the Gypsies, at such eminent institutions as Matica Srpska, the Vojvodina Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences, where a Board of Gypsy Studies has been active for a long time (and which organizes meetings and publishes the proceedings regularly every other year).

The newly scientific data have shown that our knowledge of the Gypsy culture is much broader than it used to be (Savić 1990; Savić/Todorović 1989). Still, our prejudices have not changed. Is that the reason for their still not having any better social status in the society? The activities that are being conducted are not meant to advance their situation but rather to improve the image of the majority nation.

Measures have also been taken to translate Orthodox liturgical texts into Romany (to be included into official translations of Orthodox liturgical books published by the Srpska Patrijaršija). The aim of this activity is to make it possible for Orthodox Gypsies to have

³ The poll was conducted by telephone in 47 towns and villages in the Vojvodina, 885 subscribers were chosen at random from the telephone directory, 180 of whom refused to co-operate, and 201 of whom were not contacted, so the poll was taken among 504 persons polled.

the service in their mother tongue in Serbian Orthodox Churches. There are several Gypsy priests in the Vojvodina who could officiate in Romany.

How much has been achieved by these activities?

Some results have been published by Mitro (1993)⁴ in her research work on the Novi Sad autochthonous Gypsy population: the Novi Sad Gypsies do not exactly know how many of them there are, all in all; neither do they know the latest census figures for Gypsies (mostly exaggerated in their estimates).

In a questionnaire (given in the appendix) which was handed out to 30 Novi Sad Gypsies, they were asked whether they know there was a broadcast in Romany on the Novi Sad Radio and Television. The answers showed that the majority did know about the broadcast in Romany, but only 50% of the Gypsy population are regular radio listeners, and the number of TV viewers is even smaller. Similar to the Novi Sad data (Mitro 1993) are those for the whole of the Vojvodina (D. Čakan 1993). Both Čakan and V. Mitro conclude that Gypsies are religious, but the Mitro data show that they rarely go to church (some 5 or 6 times a year on an average); they are not religiously intolerant: in an interview, a Catholic Gypsy woman said, after she had been to an Orthodox church the previous day: "To me, it is all absolutely the same".

Several data from both of these research projects testify a significant improvement of that Gypsy population: in young indigenous families, there is a tendency to have a smaller number of children; the number of illiterate persons has also decreased; a greater number of children do finish the elementary school; parents usually want their children to accomplish "what they themselves wanted to do", and to be able to earn their own living. A new kind of tolerance is evident on the part of the parents as to what calling their kids are going to choose.

Another element of the general liberalizing tendency is seen in the answer to the question "After whom was the child named?". The old tradition to name children after the godfather (Grković 1989) is followed by only 50% of the families, while the other 50% were named after one or both of the parents, a relative, or after some other source (a film or TV drama, and the like), and the Novi Sad situation in non-Gypsies families, as to the child's first name, is very similar (Zejak 1993).

In another survey conducted by the Center for Public Opinion, Programs and Audiences Radio and TV Serbia (government organization), the psychologist D. Čakan (1993) concludes that the Gypsies of Vojvodina are satisfied with their situation; that less than half of the persons polled watch and listen in to TV and radio programs intended for them, but only 20% of these understand the Romany dialect chosen for the broadcasts: So the broadcasts do not fulfill the educational role assigned to them.

⁴ The survey was carried out within the project 'Psycholinguistic Studies' at the Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Serbian Language and Linguistics in Novi Sad in 1993.

PREJUDICES STILL EXIST

The psychologist Kuzmanović (1992) provides data on the negative attitude of young members of the majority nation (in Belgrad and Titograd) toward the Gypsy population.

Mitro (1993) wanted to check how Gypsies accept such a negative attitude of the young members of the majority nation. In her survey Mitro has given the Gypsies *the same stereotypes* Kuzmanović noted in order to check the difference between the estimates of Gypsies by Serbs from those by the Gypsies themselves. From data (in Appendix 2, column 2) it can be seen that in several instances, the attitudes of the Serbian population differs from what Gypsies think of themselves. The characteristics in question are those by which the Serbs identify the Gypsies: *untidy, dirty, prone to stealing*. It is precisely those characteristics that Gypsies themselves deny. An interpretation of these results could possibly be the following:

First, Gypsies themselves know they are ascribed those features by the majority nation, so they deny them.

A second explanation can be found in statistical data given by Stanković (1992: 176), viz. that Gypsies are forced to steal to be able to subsist in a hostile society.

A third explanation would be the one offered by Djurić (1990), based upon the anthropological elucidation from cultural values: "In the culture and value system of Gypsies, the clean-unclean pair ('užo-marime') is put very high. That is a kind of invisible border line between life and death on the one hand and, on the other, the border between the Gypsy and non-Gypsy worlds ('Gadža').".

From Mitro's latest data on the autochthonous Gypsy population it could be concluded that it has made great progress in its development, which is reflected in the size of the family, the concern for its health (D. Čakan 1993), finishing elementary schooling, kids' first names, etc. The progress has not yet been recognized by the majority population which retains its stereotypes concerning the Gypsies, with many more negative features (Kuzmanović 1992).

CONCLUSION

In this fragmentary survey, we have tried to show that in the new legal regulations of Yugoslavia, and the Vojvodina more specifically, the concerns of the majority nation have been given preponderance. The picture becomes even the more complicated by the constant influx of refugees from the war-stricken areas of former Yugoslavia. Their good-will for intercultural better understanding on the part of the Gypsy has not yet been realised by the majority nation and the government, and the old stereotypes concerning given ethnic groups still prevail. It seems that the community is not yet ready to give up prejudices and allow the Gypsies to receive the status of a national minority.

APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

First and family name:

age: sex: f m

GENERAL QUESTIONS ON FAMILY

1. Do you know the number of Gypsies in Novi Sad today?
2. Do you know that number according to the census?
3. Which parts of the town do they live in?
4. Do you think the census has not covered them all? Why?
5. Since when have you lived in Novi Sad?
6. How many children have you got?
7. What are their names?
8. After whom were they named?
9. Do they go to school? Yes No
10. Which grade are they in?
11. Are they good pupils? Yes No
12. Is/Was the child in a special class? Yes No
13. What would you want your kids to be when grown-up?

QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT THE COMMUNITY DOES FOR GYPSIES

14. Do you know there is a Gypsy World Union? Yes No I heard of it
15. Do you know there is a Society of Gypsy language & Literature in Vojvodina? Yes No I heard of it
16. Do you know there is a magazine on Romologija? Yes No I heard of it
17. Do you know there is a program about Gypsies on Novi Sad Radio? Yes No I heard of it
18. Do you ever listen to it? Yes No Sometimes
19. What do you think of it?
20. Do you know there is a TV program on Gypsies? Yes No I heard of it
21. Do you watch it? Yes No Sometimes
22. What do you think of it?

QUESTIONS ON FAITH AND SCRIPT

23. Do you know that there is church service in Romany? Yes No I heard of it
24. Do you go to church? Yes No Sometimes

25. Which one is it?
 26. How many times a year do you go?
 27. Which faith do Gypsies confess?
 28. And Novi Sad Gypsies?
 29. And you, what confession are you?
 30. Can you write?
 31. Do you know both scripts, Latin and Cyrillic? Yes No
 32. Which one is easier to you? Latin Cyrillic
 33. Would you like to have Romany Schools?
 34. Has any book in Romany been printed in Yugoslavia? Yes No
 Do you know which?
 35. Which language do you speak with your kids at home? Romany Serb

QUESTIONS ON CHARACTERISTICS OF GYPSIES

36. Which of those features would you ascribe to Gypsies?
- | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-----|----|-----------------|-----|----|
| musical | yes | no | quarrelsome | yes | no |
| merry | yes | no | unstable | yes | no |
| temperamental | yes | no | aggressive | yes | no |
| untidy | yes | no | chauvinistic | yes | no |
| boisterous | yes | no | thrifty | yes | no |
| dirty | yes | no | well organized | yes | no |
| rash | yes | no | blood-thirsty | yes | no |
| prone to stealing | yes | no | rude | yes | no |
| resourceful | yes | no | stingy | yes | no |
| lazy | yes | no | uncommunicative | yes | no |
| united | yes | no | inhospitable | yes | no |
| great talkers | yes | no | | | |

37. Which features would you ascribe to Gypsies?

NOTE: Would you like to add anything?

APPENDIX 2

THE FEATURES USUALLY ASCRIBED TO GYPSIES

	by Serbs Kuzmanović (1992)	by Gypsies Mitro (1993)
	%	%
with a sense of music	85	100
merry	77	100
temperamental	74	90

untidy	70	20
lazy	50	10
boisterous	57	43
prone to stealing	54	20
resourceful	53	93
united	49	80
great talkers	48	70
quarrelsome	45	50
unstable	43	40

THE FEATURES RARELY ASCRIBED TO GYPSIES

	by Serbs	by Gypsies
	%	%
aggressive	4	40
chauvinistic	4	7
thrifty	4	23
good organizers	2	53
blood thirsty	2	3

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