

## Minority media in Slovakia: A Good Example?

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Media play an important role in shaping and consolidating minority identity in Central and Eastern Europe. But by definition, minority media have as their target audience a relatively small group. The possibilities to compete for sales and advertising (as a means to ensure their financial viability) on the open market are therefore also reduced. In order to provide minorities with a voice in the media, external support may be necessary to compensate for the smaller audience. However, such support, particularly from the State can compromise the independence of the media. Yet even where the size and character of a minority group create conditions conducive to an independent minority media, external support may be a "necessary evil."

This situation can be illustrated by the Hungarian minority media in Slovakia, where media serving minority populations have a long history. Such media have existed in some form since the first Czechoslovakia was established in 1918, and majority-minority relations have played a role in regional affairs from an even earlier period. Nevertheless, conceptions of minority rights continue to evolve, and the position of minority media also must adapt to the situation of the group it serves.

Slovakia became independent when it separated from the Czech Republic in 1993. In the first years of Slovak independence, relations between majority and minority groups deteriorated, culminating in 1996 with the passage of a restrictive language law that gave primacy to the Slovak language. [1] During this period, State support for minority culture was minimal. The 1996 language law was declared unconstitutional a year after its adoption and a new law was enacted in 1999, as Slovakia took steps to better integrate its minorities in order to meet the political criteria for EU membership. [2]

The Hungarian minority comprises some 9.7 percent of the total population of Slovakia according to recent statistics. [3] The political influence of this substantial minority has been enhanced further by a strong sense of social coherence, which bridges other ideological differences among the group. Since Slovak independence, Hungarian voters have identified most strongly not along left/right or liberal/conservative lines, but based on their identity as Hungarians. This trend was demonstrated in the 1994 elections, with the unification of three very different parties, which were based on very different political platforms, yet which united on the basis that they represent Hungarians. Following the most recent national elections in 1998 the Hungarian Coalition Party became part of the Slovak Government, and the SMK also currently holds the important position of Deputy Prime Minister for Human Rights, Minorities and Regional Development.

This sense of social and political coherence is reflected in the media targeting the Slovak Hungarian population. These media, in the Hungarian language, present a view of life from the perspective of a national minority, with less emphasis on any particular political ideology. This formula has been successful for some media outlets, but the market alone still does not provide adequate support even for the most vital of these media.

Broadcast media in Hungarian quite limited; only programming from Slovak National Television has any minority-language component, and this programming is required by law. [4] The gap in audio-visual media is generally filled with the broadcasts from Hungary, as most Hungarians living in southern Slovakia can receive some of the Hungarian free-to-air television stations -- in many cases these stations are also part of the local Slovak cable network. However, these stations have mainly a commercial character and are directed at an audience within Hungary. The exception is Duna TV, a Hungarian-language satellite station, which is focused on Hungarians outside of Hungary, including Hungarian minorities in neighbouring States.

The only radio broadcast in Hungarian is Radio Patria, a service of the Slovak State radio, which reaches the whole Hungarian-speaking population of Slovakia. Nevertheless, Radio Patria was reported to have just 132,000 listeners in March 2003. [5] This is far too small an audience to generate any interest from commercial media in producing a Hungarian-language broadcast, and without State support this option would almost certainly cease to exist. At present the Hungarian minority has the most options in the print media. There is a daily newspaper, *Uj Szó*, which is the main informative source about the Slovak political life in the Hungarian language. The weekly *Vasarnap* is a supplement to *Uj Szó* and focuses on general social and political life. In addition, there is a monthly magazine for farmers, *Jo Gazda*, the magazine *Ifi* for youth, and a magazine aimed at pre-school children, *Tucsok*. *Uj Szó* is well established, as it was the only Hungarian-language daily newspaper in Czechoslovakia under socialist rule. It is now published by the private Petit Press. *Uj Szó* and *Vasarnap* draw a substantial percentage of their

income from sales and advertising. *Uj Szó* also maximises its appeal through its perspective of the Hungarian minority generally, rather than from a standpoint of one particular political view. According to recent research, *Uj Szó* is fifth best-selling newspaper in Slovakia, reaching 4.6 percent of the population, ahead of Slovak-language newspapers such as *Narodna Obroda* or *Hospodarske Noviny*. [6] Nevertheless, the private Illes Foundation supports both the newspaper and magazine, which have a circulation of 500,000 readers. There have been attempts to establish a second Hungarian-language daily newspaper in Slovakia, but these have not been successful and *Uj Szó* remains unchallenged as the daily newspaper for the Hungarian minority. Its companion *Vasarnap*, a weekly magazine about politics, social life, and culture publishes 40,000 copies each week, [7] which is approximately half the print run of major Slovak-language weeklies.

Municipalities fund some regional Hungarian media, such as the weekly bilingual newspaper *Komaromi Lapok/Komarnanske Listy*. As the main local newspaper serving a largely bilingual community this publication has the potential to support itself; however, the municipality remains its main source of revenue and its content generally reflects the views of the local administration. Because of the paper's regional character, local residents look to it as an information source about their region, and it seldom rises above a community circular with limited journalistic aspirations.

To create media and a demand for media, intellectual potential is vital. Efforts are being made to ensure the existence of a Hungarian-language readership in the future, through the publication of magazines for kindergarten and first-grade students, and for teenagers. Both are produced by private publishers, but they receive support from governmental institutions (both Slovak and Hungarian) and other foundations.

However, an engaged audience is not sufficient to guarantee that minority media will survive. Journalists, announcers, editors, and other staff are needed to maintain a thriving minority media, and therefore a minority educational system also plays a crucial role in the existence of successful and high-quality minority media.

In Slovakia, a lack of higher education opportunities in the Hungarian language can be seen as a serious challenge for the continued existence of minority media. At present there is no Hungarian-language university in Slovakia, and no journalism programme is planned at the Hungarian-language faculty expected to open in autumn 2004. [8] Thus, the only way to study journalism in Slovakia is in the Slovak language.

While there are opportunities for Slovak Hungarians to study journalism at universities in Hungary, students miss out on the context of minority media in Slovakia, and in many cases choose to remain in Hungary to practice their profession after graduation. In the mid-1990s, the Hungarian Association of Journalists offered courses for Slovak Hungarians in order to give them a basic knowledge of the profession, but such limited measures are insufficient to provide high quality journalism skills. Both Hungary and Slovakia are expected to become EU member States in May 2004, which may assist in cross-border education exchange, although the potential that those who study in Hungary will choose to stay there may also increase after accession.

For the existence of a sustainable and successful minority media, circumstances of the minority itself are important factors. A minority group that is too small, too fragmented, or economically disadvantaged to present a viable market cannot attract commercial media to take the costly step of establishing a dedicated media outlet. External support, whether from the State or private donors has been the mainstay of minority media, even where circumstances are largely in its favour, as in Slovakia. A lack of economic independence can have a negative impact on editorial independence, and reduce the quality of minority media and the services it provides to the minority community. In order to stay as independent as possible, minority media must look for support that makes the least demands upon its independence, such as non-political foundations rather than State or local government funding. As a relatively large, cohesive, politically engaged group, the Hungarian minority in Slovakia is a strong base for media targeting their needs and interests. By providing a service of value to its audience, and pursuing the maximum economic and editorial independence, the Hungarian community in Slovakia can set an example for what can be achieved in minority media.

## Footnotes

[1] For more discussion of this period, see F. Daftary and K. Gál, "The New Slovak Language Law: Internal or External Politics?" *ECMI Working Paper No. 8*, pp. 19-24, available here: [http://www.ecmi.de/doc/download/working\\_paper\\_8.pdf](http://www.ecmi.de/doc/download/working_paper_8.pdf).

[2] See *Commission Opinion on Slovakia's Application for Membership of the European Union*, pp. 13-23, p. 130, available here: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/dwn/opinions/slovakia/sk-op-en.pdf>.

[3] Details available here: <http://www.statistics.sk/webdata/slov/scitanie/tab/zu.htm>.

[4] Act of the Slovak National Council No. 254/1991 Coll. on Slovak Television, as amended.

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[6] Id.

[7] Id.

[8] See "Hungarian University to be Set Up in Slovakia," *RFE/RL Newline*, 22 August 2003, available here: <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2003/08/3-cee/cee-220803.asp>.