

Minorities and the Media in Central and Eastern Europe

A Skills Exchange Workshop
held 4–7 February 1999,
Bratislava, Slovakia



WORKSHOP REPORT

Background

The full participation of members of minority communities in the mainstream media and their capacity to develop their own media outlets are building blocks for multicultural values and for the promotion of minority rights in Central and Eastern Europe. While law should protect and promote minorities' access to the media, the level of access varies between countries. In the same country, different groups may have significantly different degrees and quality of access. Some governments are reluctant to facilitate minority access to the media, either because of narrow political considerations or because of lingering ethnonationalist conceptions of the state. Additional barriers are created when media decision-makers do not prioritize enabling access and/or the coverage of minority issues. Other problems stem from resource constraints, particularly the financing necessary to produce minority programming. Nevertheless, the dynamic nature of this sector means that a combination of effective advocacy, business savvy and high quality media productions have resulted in increased media access in some countries or for some minorities.

To explore these issues, Minority Rights Group International and Foundation Citizen and Democracy/MRG-Slovakia organized a skills exchange workshop in Bratislava, Slovakia, in February 1999. The workshop brought together media and legal professionals, and minority rights activists from Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. Through facilitated

discussion, the group identified major issues, prioritized them for analysis and discussed strategies to address them. Participants examined the legal framework regulating the media in their country and the governmental policies, administrative practices and political interests that shape it. They also discussed increasing minority access through minorities' own media and through participation in the mainstream media, as well as portrayal of minorities in the media. Throughout, they analysed the many practical and political difficulties faced by minorities in the media and shared examples of how these problems are being addressed in their own country. This report summarizes the key points raised in these discussions and describes examples of good practice that exist in the region.

Legal system and governmental framework for access

The past 10 years have brought significant changes in governments' role in the media in Central and Eastern Europe. Under the old systems, the media generally served state interests. Now there is private as well as public media and it is less clear whose interests are served. It is accepted that commercial media seek to make profits for owners. Many believe that the public sector media is still

controlled by the state and that the needs of the public – in all its diversity – are consequently marginalized.

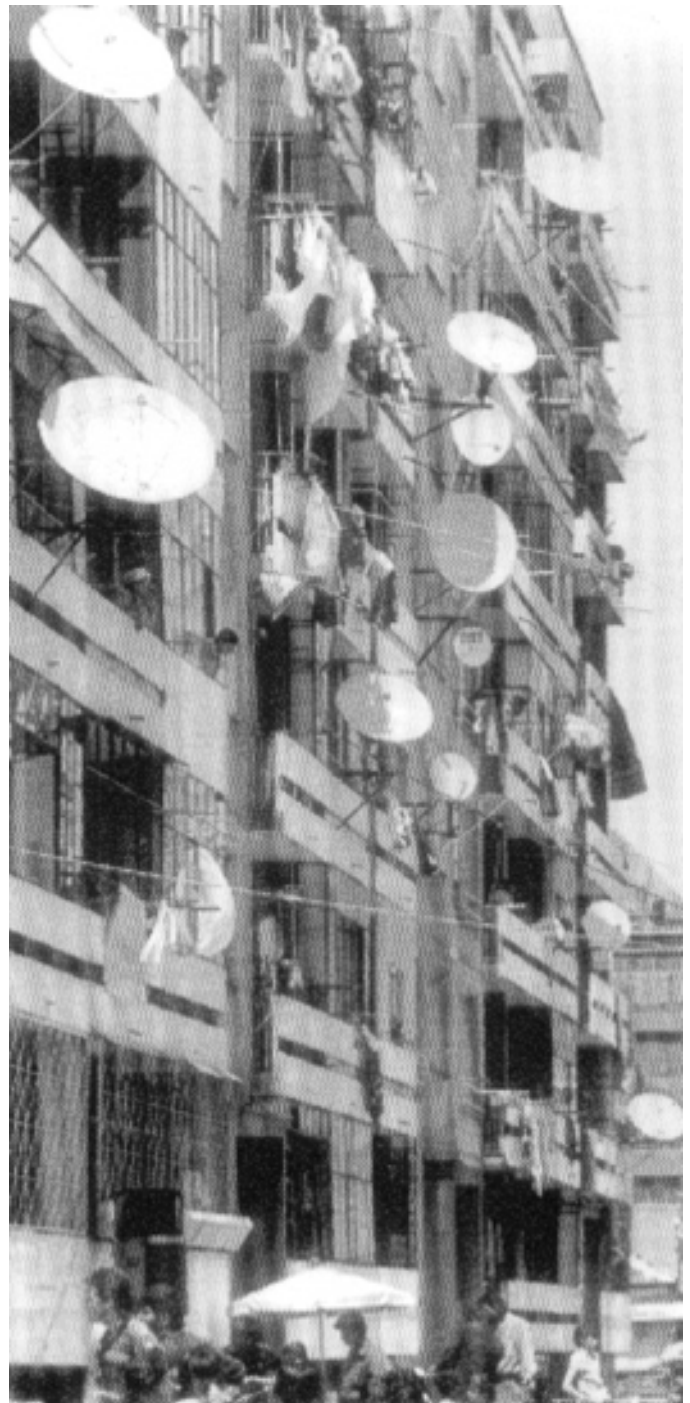
The legal and administrative framework and government policies are critical in shaping how minorities gain access to the media in their country. Most participants favoured legislation to promote minority access, clear criteria for government support and mechanisms to protect minorities from the damaging consequences of xenophobic media. Many also recognized that too much governmental interference could have negative consequences for other rights – especially given the short-term political interests that dominate many governments. This central dilemma was explored in relation to governments' regulatory frameworks and critiques were made of the criteria used for allocating funds and programme time to minorities.

Domestic legal framework for media and minority issues

None of the countries represented had legislation specifically covering minority media, although there were provisions for minority programming in the public sector media in most of them. The relevant rules are found in laws either on the media or on minority issues, although constitutional provisions are relevant in some cases. In every country, applicable international standards can be used either to interpret domestic law or to appeal for the development of new legislation.¹

In Bulgaria, the media law restricts the use of minority languages and there is no legislation protecting minority media access. In Hungary, the media laws and the law on minorities provide the legal framework for minorities' access to the media. Hungary has a system of minority 'self-governments' that function in parallel with the mainstream governmental system and can considerably influence policies. Public authorities, including those regulating the media, must consult with the self-governments of any minority groups that would be affected by a new policy or law. The Hungarian media law requires that public service broadcasters offer programmes and information about minority issues, including news from minority self-governments. Commercial and community broadcasters receive preferential consideration of licence applications if they provide minority programmes. In Romania, broadcasting laws contain general provisions regarding minority access. There is no legislative framework for minority issues. Minority programming in public sector media is supported through direct allocations from the state budget and some minority publications are subsidized if they are not commercially viable. Poland's 1992 broadcasting law has some provisions for minority access, which were strengthened by the 1997 Constitution that affirms the state's responsibility to promote minority languages, cultures and traditions. To date, however, the most directive – although variable – protection has been through the provisions on media in Poland's bilateral treaties with neighbouring countries. In Slovakia the media laws include provisions for minority access and permit minority language broadcasting. This goes against the Slovak language law that requires most programmes to be broadcast in Slovak.

Participants affirmed the importance of the legislative framework. Gaining access to the media seems to be much more difficult in countries without formal legislation or policies in this field. In an informal environment, minority media may be limited to groups with sufficient resources to organize and sponsor their own outlets. Nevertheless, there is not always a direct connection between the quality of minority access in practice and the legal provisions. Even in countries where legislation exists to protect minority access to the media, there is still a gap between law and practice. Yet, minorities continue to use legislative strategies to address access problems. No one was aware of a case where domestic judicial procedures had



Satellite dishes in the Turkish-speaking area of Stoliponovo, Plodiv, Bulgaria.

been used to challenge discrimination and force equal treatment by public or private media or regulatory bodies. It was pointed out that well-prepared cases that have lost in domestic courts could be taken to the European Court of Human Rights. Support from international or domestic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) could help to make such a strategy feasible. Others thought that while judicial procedures might be effective, it is often difficult to identify a viable case because institutions are adept at appearing non-discriminatory – even if their practices have discriminatory consequences.

International standards

International law lays obligations on states regarding freedom of expression and of the media, as well as the protection of human and minority rights. These are particularly relevant

because the constitutions of the countries represented in this workshop specify that international standards ratified by the country take precedence over domestic legislation. International standards regarding minorities and the media provide only a minimum level of protection and interpretation of the provisions is sometimes disputed. Domestic legislation often provides a more rigorous framework for promoting minority access to the media so many advocate development of strong domestic standards.

One participant identified three basic types of rules found in international law that are relevant to minorities' access to the media. The first is *the prohibition of discrimination*, requiring positive action by states to ensure compliance by both public and private actors. The second is the right to *freedom of expression*. This includes the positive obligation on states to ensure access so that the media sector is pluralistic; it also prohibits governments from interfering in the media. Third, there are a number of *minority rights standards* relating to the media, freedom of expression and minorities' right to their own identity and culture. He argued that these principles imply that the public service media must ensure access by covering minority issues and providing programmes produced by minorities. Governments must not prevent minorities' access to private sector media and should, in fact, encourage it. Where funding is necessary to ensure minority access, governments should provide support. In regulating media structures, governments' role is to ensure the diversity necessary for freedom of expression to flourish. Regulatory bodies should consider minority rights and access issues with regard to issuing licences and in developing the criteria for granting them.

There can be tension between governments' obligation to promote access and the principles of non-interference and independence of the media. While freedom of expression requires that editorial independence be strictly respected, governments are also required to promote a culture of tolerance and prevent xenophobia. Regulatory bodies must be independent from the government; they, in turn, should respect the principle of self-regulation of media professionals. Nevertheless, governments are obliged to prohibit 'hate speech'.² Minimum international standards thus require governments to respect the tension between these principles and exercise appropriate care in regulation.

Although these standards are agreed by the state, there are often gaps in implementation. Political advocacy is important to ensure that they are fulfilled and minority concerns addressed. Such advocacy strategies are strengthened by appeals for legal compliance. Minorities can use monitoring mechanisms available through intergovernmental institutions to put pressure on their government.

Article XIX – The role of international advocacy

Article XIX is an international human rights organization promoting the right to freedom of expression worldwide. In 1997, it analysed Bulgaria's draft media law, which did not fulfil international standards because of insufficient independence of the regulatory system and because it restricted the use of minority languages in the media. Comments on the draft law were given to the Bulgarian government, among others. Criticism by Article XIX and others may have had an impact. Bulgaria's president refused to sign the draft legislation, forcing parliament to modify the law. The final version does not incorporate all of Article XIX's concerns, but is significantly less restrictive than the initial version.

Criteria for minority programming and broadcast licences

A common problem is that legislation does not provide clear criteria for allocation of minority programming in the public sector or for licensing in the private sector, and too much is left administrative discretion. Most participants stressed the need for transparency in the administrative formulas used. One expressed concern that sometimes it appears that arrangements are made on the basis of bilateral relations between the country and the minority's kin-state; thus governments may treat different minorities differently. This can be disadvantageous to groups without a kin-state. Another said that governments offer minority broadcasting in order to demonstrate to the international community that they are complying with standards – irrespective of the quality, quantity and availability of the programmes offered.

Many participants advocated the *proportionality principle* to develop formulas based on the size of the group in relation to the total population to allocate broadcasting time and finance. Others countered that there must also be guaranteed minimum access to these resources so that small groups, whose culture and traditions may be especially vulnerable, are also protected. In addition to questioning the basis of government decisions for allocating time on public broadcast stations, there is also some controversy about the criteria used to approve broadcast licences. Several participants gave examples where state regulators had rejected licence applications from private, minority-language broadcasters, indicating that there is a need to 'regulate the regulators'.

Budget allocations

Several participants reflected on the politicization of the allocation process of government funds. The problems can be either party-political or more generally ideological, based on ethnonationalism. Some claimed that public subsidies for minority media were used to support pro-government media outlets while suppressing critical ones. Others thought that some governments have a general, covert objective of restricting the development of minority-language media but claim publicly that there are insufficient funds to support them. Others worried that in times of economic crisis minority media may be especially vulnerable to budget cuts. Some participants argued the need for legislation guaranteeing funds for minority media each year; others thought this might not be realistic.

Many argued that governments should equally provide for all citizens' needs, including providing subsidies to minority media, as appropriate. In countries where state funding is available for minority media, participants observed that there are no clear allocation criteria. There was a consensus that transparency in funding decisions must be introduced.

Media regulation: governmental mechanisms vs. professional self-regulation

International standards recognize governmental responsibility for regulating the structure of the broadcast system by allocating television and radio frequencies based on established licensing processes. The print media sector, however, is granted more independence. Governments should not regulate the content of the media, with the exception of 'hate speech'. Positive actions by governments against discrimination can help address the problem.

Given the politicization of the media – both private and public – and the history of its promoting ethnonationalism, many voiced their concern that there should be some means of regulating the content of the media. Some participants argued that while a voluntary, professional code of ethics is important, there should

also be legal sanctions against journalists or media organizations that consistently violate standards. Others pointed out that this could threaten the right to freedom of expression and lead to political interference. They argued that better long-term results can be achieved by strategies based on education, training and professional self-regulation. Others agreed, but worried about how to prevent short-term harm. They argued that legal standards, particularly regarding 'hate speech', must be upheld to send a clear signal about what is acceptable in a tolerant, multicultural society governed by the rule of law. Some advocated complaints procedures administered by regulatory bodies but there was scepticism regarding the transparency of these processes and the members' own interpretation of the public interest.

Many media professionals are apparently unfamiliar with professional codes of ethics and may violate them unknowingly, while some who are aware of them may not take them seriously because they are not legally binding. If self-regulation is to be effective, ethics must be a core component of professional training and the basis of editorial decision-making. Professional associations, especially those that are members of international federations, could be asked to provide support or institute their own sanctioning procedures.

Minorities' own media

Participants agreed on the importance of minority communities maintaining their own media to help sustain a dynamic, contemporary group identity. One participant thought that the fundamental distinction is between private and public sector media; minorities, as constituent parts of the public, are equal to other members of society as stakeholders in the public media. Referring to 'minority' versus 'mainstream' media risks 'ghettoizing' minorities. Other participants accepted these points but advocated the concept of 'minority media', defined as media where the concerns and perspectives of a minority group are dominant. It exists either as programmes produced by minorities primarily for minorities, or through the ownership of a media outlet (newspaper, radio station, etc.). These can usefully be called the 'minority media' without implying that the public sector media is 'owned' by the majority. Similarly, while the 'mainstream' is often dominated by the majoritarian society, minorities must be able to participate in it directly.

Minority-language media

Minority-language media are essential for keeping a language alive and developing its modern usage. Most argued that with sufficient financial support and legal protection, minority-language media could flourish. Many believed, however, that states generally do not support the cultural development of minorities. Numerically small minorities may be officially recognized by the state but, without support, are at risk of assimilation. Participants argued that governments should therefore create the conditions so minorities themselves can provide the outlets they need.

Sometimes minorities are discouraged from using their language in the media for fear of arousing mainstream suspicion and possible penalties. For example, in Poland the long tradition of anti-Semitism has meant that the main Jewish magazine is published in Polish instead of Yiddish, so as not to risk increasing public mistrust. This situation is especially difficult for groups where the government is suspicious of their privately run media, questioning whether the intention is to provide a vehicle for mobilizing minority insurrectionist movements. Such publications can experience official and unofficial harassment – even if the issues covered are quite

mundane. Nevertheless, participants agreed that minority-language media is a right and must be claimed as such.

Financing – a barrier to media pluralism?

Some of the political difficulties associated with state sector funding of minority media have been discussed above. Some minority-developed and operated broadcasts may be more feasible in the private sector, where programmes can be commercially viable. However, much minority programming is unlikely to be commercially viable, and provisions must be made in the public sector. Many sponsors limit their funding to private enterprises. Still, there remain a range of funding constraints in private or community sector media. In general, minorities find it easier to create their own print media than to develop their own broadcast media. This is both because of the lower production costs and the potential revenue sources offered by subscriptions and advertising. However, even print media can be extremely difficult to finance. Between broadcast mediums, radio stations or programmes tend to be more feasible than television production.

Lack of funds can inhibit freedom of expression by limiting the range of minority media outlets and therefore limiting expression of the whole range of minorities' political and social views. Even where they exist, government subsidies for minority media do not necessarily enable expression of this diversity. New technologies may offer potential to create a pluralistic minority media. Low-power radio transmitters, satellite, cable and digital technology could make it financially feasible to reach smaller, targeted audiences. One participant pointed to the potential of community broadcasting. This has been particularly useful in radio and in cable television, where minorities have been able to own and operate their own channels or programmes, not for commercial gain but to serve community needs.

Role of the 'kin-state' in minority media

There can be significant benefits from the free flow of media across frontiers and this flow is protected by international law. Many participants, however, expressed their ambivalence toward importing media from states where their ethnic group forms the majority. Such media can provide important educational resources and help maintain and develop the group's culture, but they can also stifle development of the minority group's own media, and are rarely capable of covering issues from the perspective of the minority community.

The Hungarian community in Romania has access to well-financed media from Hungary, which can discourage local production. The Bulgarian government limits minority-language broadcasts, believing that this encourages minorities to integrate into the mainstream. This has had the paradoxical effect of encouraging Turkish-speakers to rely upon the media of the kin-state, thus risking greater social polarization. Media can also originate from minority communities and flow into the kin-state. *Niwa*, the journal of the Belarussian community in Poland, is mailed to subscribing organizations in Belarus thus helping to expand the range of information and analysis available in that country.

Trans-frontier media dynamics can spark either tension or cooperation between states. Duna TV, a channel based in Hungary, has been accused by both the Romanian and Slovakian governments of encouraging secessionist aspirations of Hungarian minorities. But there are also possibilities for bi- and multilateral cooperation: sometimes, the 'kin-state' has provided financial assistance for producing minority media programmes. There are other useful ways to cooperate: for example, public television producers from Poland and Ukraine are exploring the potential for the exchange of programmes.

Access to ‘mainstream’ media

In addition to operating their own media, participants agreed on the importance of minorities’ access to the mainstream media in both the public and private sectors. Participants identified two aspects to the access question. First is ‘thematic access’ and relates to the coverage of issues of concern to minorities and the portrayal of minority groups. Second is ‘direct access’ and covers minorities’ direct participation in the media through employment, minority media company productions, or programming covering minority issues from the perspectives of minorities themselves.

Thematic access: Coverage of issues important to minorities

Participants stressed the need for the mainstream media to cover issues of concern to minorities and to integrate minorities into their range of programming to provide constructive and balanced coverage. This would ensure that minorities are seen as being an integral part of society and would help to develop intercultural understanding. Yet, the mainstream media may fail to represent minority concerns adequately. Editors often treat minorities as a cultural curiosity rather than as a contemporary social group. Another dimension of this problem in the commercial media is that some outlets have made financial gains out of xenophobic coverage. In the print media especially, some publishers have found that they sell more copies with sensationalist coverage, giving them a vested interest in maintaining it. Many participants expressed concern that media professionals from the majority tend to dominate the mainstream, and thus choose the groups and issues covered and shape the images used to portray them. In this sense, the majority community retains the ‘privileged voice’ in the mainstream media.

Participants highlighted the need for cooperation between the minority and mainstream media. There is a risk of polarization between the world portrayed in the minority media and that

represented in the mainstream. Others pointed out that it is not only a matter of cleavages between minority and mainstream media. There are important distinctions within mainstream media, between liberal and ethnonationalist political and social orientations. Because public understanding of minority concerns can help create a political climate open to minority rights, it was generally agreed that there is a political dimension to the access question. Several stressed the need for minorities to be more proactive in their relations with the mainstream media.

Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (DAHR)

DAHR is both an umbrella organization for Hungarian institutions in Romania and the political party representing Hungarian interests. Its aims and objectives are sometimes misrepresented in the mainstream press. DAHR therefore initiated a daily press release in Romanian to 120 media outlets describing its activities and views on political developments. It also holds weekly press conferences. Information is sent in English to foreign embassies and intergovernmental institutions. Because DAHR’s publications carefully document their sources, many see them as reliable. Distortion of DAHR’s views continues in the more nationalist media, but DAHR’s own terminology for ethnic Hungarian political activity in the country has slowly been adopted, helping to tone down sensationalist language. In 1996, DAHR ran a candidate for president, to take their message directly to the Romanian public. This strategy was a success and contributed to the public confidence building that made it possible for DAHR to join the ruling coalition government.

Some minority communities may need support to get their concerns and perspectives represented in the media. Several participants discussed the role of training and technical assistance to develop the public relations capacity of minority organizations.



LIBA TAYLOR/PANOS PICTURES

Bosnian refugees, Ruzomberok, Slovakia.

'Let Us Know About You' programme for the Czech minority in Slovakia

With the separation of Czechoslovakia, Czechs have become the newest minority in Slovakia. While they may not experience the same depth of prejudice as some other groups, significant misconceptions can stimulate intolerance and discrimination. *Cesky spolok* ('Czech Association') worked with rural Czech organizations to increase their ability to ensure their perspectives are represented in the media. They concentrated on improving such skills as organizing press conferences, contacting local media organizations, writing press releases and articles, and communicating clearly. At first, many participants were uncertain of the relevance of these skills. After they began using them, however, they realized that good communication with the media could help to counter the problems of prejudice.

A number of participants discussed the often negative and stereotyped portrayal of Roma in the mainstream media. Some argued that journalists' own prejudices interfere with their professionalism in covering issues in Roma communities. For example, crimes are uncritically attributed to Roma suspects without examining the facts of the case – consider the contradictions in the common journalistic phrase 'an unknown Roma suspect' – yet retractions are not issued when these assumptions are proved inaccurate. Thus, Roma are frequently blamed for actions not committed by community members.

The European Broadcasting Union advises journalists to identify ethnic origin and colour only when it is directly relevant to the story; a principle also evident in the ruling by Hungary's Ombudsman for National Minorities, that it is unacceptable to report an ethnicity if a suspect has not been identified.

A related issue is the coverage of controversial issues within the minority community by the minority media. One participant said that it is often hard for minority journalists to investigate difficult topics, such as corruption or extremism, in their community, as such reports might be exploited by nationalist elements in the mainstream to attack the minority group. An element of 'self-censorship' may thus exist in minority journalism.



Street newspaper seller, Sofia, Bulgaria.

Direct access

A number of participants were concerned with the under-representation of minorities at all levels of the media system. In most countries, minorities are not adequately represented in the programming or regulatory councils overseeing the public broadcast sector. Programmes about minorities are sometimes produced by people from the majority community without input from minorities, and so often fail to represent the community's concerns and perspectives. Minorities may also be overlooked as audiences for programmes, and their needs ignored. Participants reported that frequently there is only a very brief time slot allocated to minority-language broadcasts, which can be moved around unpredictably in the schedule or is broadcast at inconvenient times. The usual justification is the assumption that these programmes would not be of interest to the majority of their audience.

Telenovyny: Ukrainian programme on Poland's public television

In the past, Polish television concentrated on folkloric representations of the Ukrainian community, or on episodes of history where Ukrainians were portrayed as the enemy. Today, Polish public television has one Ukrainian-language programme produced by a team of four media professionals from the Ukrainian minority. They were determined to create a contemporary programme with wide appeal. The programme is broadcast in Ukrainian with Polish subtitles so everyone can understand it. They invite guests who demonstrate the diversity of the Ukrainian community, along with well-known figures from other communities, to debate issues in Poland and abroad. They use contemporary Ukrainian music to give exposure to the living culture and generally try to demonstrate the modernity and range of Ukrainian culture in Poland.

Roma programme on Bulgarian commercial radio station

Bulgaria does not have minority-run programmes in its public broadcast media. Some private radio stations, however, do sponsor programmes. One of these is a weekly 2-hour programme which started as a component of a Roma media project in which 25 Roma journalists from different regions of Bulgaria received training and prepared reports from their area. The programme attracted a wide range of listeners. When the funding ran out, the station decided to continue the programme in a magazine format – unfortunately without the regional reports, which were expensive to produce. The host is popular with listeners, some of whom were surprised to learn that she is Roma. The programme addresses mainstream social and political issues, as well as issues of special concern to Roma, and highlights the multicultural nature of Bulgarian society.

Role of media professionals

Employment of professionals from minority communities in the mainstream media is a key aspect of minorities' access. In most countries, however, members of minority groups are

under-represented in media employment. There may be a shortage of trained media professionals from a minority community but participants also pointed to a bias against appointing members of minority communities to key editorial positions, as some managers assume this could generate conflict. These problems are sometimes part of a systemic pattern of discrimination throughout the media system. Most participants argued that the absence of minority media professionals results in programming that does not include minority views and prevents them helping to shape public understanding of the range of societal issues.

Another difficulty experienced by minority media professionals is how they represent their identity as a member of a minority community and the degree to which their perspectives as minorities are silenced. One participant was asked by a mainstream daily to cover Roma issues, yet many of his articles were rejected because they did not conform to the usual biased view. Others reported that if they produced reports critical of mainstream institutions and attitudes, they had to soften their observations to get them accepted by the editors. They argued that journalists from majority communities were not under the same pressure to ‘sanitize’ well-founded critiques. Minority media professionals can also be criticized by their own community when their individual views are seen as not reflecting ‘genuine’ minority perspectives. Yet, many believed that minority media professionals can serve as role models for their community and present positive images of the community for the majority and other minorities.

A number of factors influence cooperation between minority and mainstream media professionals. In Romania, some minority journalists have their own associations that have little formal interaction with the mainstream journalists’ association. Some argued that although lack of interaction may accentuate polarization, minority journalists’ associations are supportive for the members in a way the mainstream ones might not be. There were also examples of journalists from the minority media developing positive working relationships with journalists and editors from the mainstream press. In Slovakia, Hungarian and Slovak journalists maintain ties and seek to encourage publication of each others’ work in their papers. In Bulgaria, the weekly *Tolerance* involves journalists from a variety of minority communities as well as ethnic Bulgarians. Its coverage of a range of minority concerns has helped to foster positive attitudinal changes amongst readers and build bridges between communities.

Some pointed to the need for professional training on the history and situation of minorities. Media professionals, like most members of a society, may have a distorted understanding of these issues. Their reports or programmes then reproduce and reinforce that bias. This points to the need for bias-awareness training in journalism schools and in continuing professional education programmes.

Minority-based production companies in the mainstream

Some participants described the value of minority-based, independent production companies that develop programmes and articles that are sold to either public or private sector media companies. This can be an effective way to gain access to the mainstream media. Well-produced pieces are attractive to media organizations because they save on production costs and increase the quality and diversity of their offerings. Independent production companies can be vulnerable however. In Hungary the budget for public broadcasting was recently cut, resulting in decreased funds for purchasing independent productions and putting independent companies under considerable commercial pressure.

Roma Press Center, Hungary

The Roma Press Center (RPC) is a non-profit news agency established in 1995 to provide balanced coverage of Roma issues to the mainstream print media in Hungary and provides the first Roma wire service in Europe. Its goal is to increase public awareness of issues and problems of the community and to influence public discourse. RPC is now the primary news source on Roma issues in Hungary, with standing orders from the biggest newspapers. RPC also provides professional education for journalists on issues affecting Roma communities and runs a one-year training programme for young Roma journalists. Trainees receive over 30 hours per week of training, attend monthly workshops on political issues and Hungarian and European institutions, and are offered internships in the newsrooms of print and broadcast media. These internships have positively influenced the newsrooms, where Roma trainees are consulted on issues affecting Roma. Many have been hired upon completing their internships. RPC also offers training to Roma NGOs on media relations, in tandem with training for local, mainstream media on covering minority issues – and brings them together to discuss ways to improve working relations. Roma in several neighbouring countries are exploring how they can set up similar centres and they are forming a network of correspondents reporting on Roma issues in the region.

Preventing political manipulation

Media coverage can be used to support a particular political interest. One journalist recommended that the best strategy to prevent political manipulation is not to attack specific positions and interests directly, but instead to feature a more in-depth exploration to raise public understanding. Others pointed to the underlying need to foster critical thinking in the public and increase critical objectivity amongst journalists. All agreed on the need to inoculate public opinion against uncritical acceptance of media messages.

Academia Catavencu and the Media Monitoring Agency in Romania

Academia Catavencu (roughly translated as ‘Demagogues Academy’) was founded in 1991 as a non-profit, cultural organization dedicated to fighting misinformation in Romania. It publishes a satirical magazine, now the most popular weekly in the country. It also runs projects to combat the impact of political manipulation in the media. One of them, the Media Monitoring Agency, analyses the press to identify nationalist and communist-style rhetoric or tactics in news articles and provides critical feedback to journalists on the professionalism of their work. It also produces reports on special topics; in *Nationalism in the Print Media*, ten dailies were monitored for their portrayal of minority issues, particularly those pertaining to the Hungarian and Roma communities. This research led to a programme to strengthen the professional responsibility of Romanian journalists in reporting on minorities, including seminars for leading editors and journalists to discuss nationalism and minority rights. Together with the Ministry of Education, they have developed educational materials – on advertising and political manipulation, for example – to increase critical analysis of the media among school children.

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Notes

- 1 This was thought to be more difficult in Bulgaria and Poland where, at the time of the workshop, the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities – an instrument with explicit provisions on minority access to the media – had not been ratified. Bulgaria has since ratified the Convention.
- 2 See UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 20, paras 1 and 2; UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Article 4(a).

Minority Rights Group International

Minority Rights Group International (MRG) is a non-governmental organization working to secure rights for ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities worldwide, and to promote cooperation and understanding between communities.

We publish readable, concise and accurate Reports on the issues facing oppressed groups around the world. We also produce books, education and training materials, and MRG's 800-page *World Directory of Minorities*.

We work with the United Nations, among other international bodies, to increase awareness of minority rights, often in conjunction with our partner organizations. We also coordinate training on minority rights internationally and work with different communities to counter racism and prejudice.

MRG is funded by contributions from individuals and institutional donors, and from the sales of its Reports and other publications. However, we need further financial support if we are to continue to develop our important work of monitoring and informing on minority rights.

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Cover photo: (left) Bosnian refugees, Ruzomberok, Slovakia LIBA TAYLOR/PANOS PICTURES
(Right): Street newspaper seller, Sofia, Bulgaria.

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