

Roma in Serbia after the Collapse of Yugoslavia: Political implications and media silence on racial violence

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Abstract

This paper attempts to clarify the Roma issue in Serbia. Media representations of attacks against Roma are very important. The Roma are marginalized members of Serbian society. They are often the victims of violence and discrimination that are related to stereotypes and prejudice about Roma "otherness". The media paid special attention to the murder of Duško Jovanović in 1997 because it was the first official murder based on racial hatred. This case study shows that the topics of the assassination of the Roma are no more attractive to the media and that the "spiral of silence" occupies an important role.

Keywords: media, media representation, case study, murder of Roma, Roma minority

4. The Roma Issue and Europe

The Roma are the largest ethnic minority in Europe with official estimates up to 12 million (Bereny, 2010). Roma people, the most unique and the oldest non-European minority with origins in India, are widely dispersed throughout Europe. They have endured a long history of nomadic life. As nomads, who emigrated from India, Roma have never expressed state building efforts. In respect to the Roma's historical position two factors must be brought together: the absence of common national consciousness and diffusion of ethnic characteristics. In the 15th century repression started against them. For their entire history Roma have been the targets of racist attacks and police abuse. Roma have been repeatedly criticized for theft, debauchery and witchcraft. They have often been hanged, persecuted across the borders and in the best case their colonies were located in strictly marked places also intended for other marginal people.

On the other hand, in communist countries the state employment programs offered them social integration. The communist governments didn't allow racial discrimination, which Roma have confronted today in almost all parts of Europe (Đordjević & Balić, 2004). Unfortunately, under the pretext of integration, implicit assimilation often occurred. Attempts at limiting their nomadic way of life were just one of the many legal strategies. However, multi-national socialist Yugoslavia was self-managing federation (six republics and two provinces) with significant ethnic diversity. Government replaced the term "national minority" with the term "nationality. A key principle of Yugoslavia, the "brotherhood and unity", guarantee freedom and rights to all "nationalities". Roma people often realize that the best living conditions were under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito, president for life of Yugoslavia. The fall of communism in the 1990's and changes within the welfare state in the Western countries faced a record number of racist attacks on Roma as well as governments' request for forcing Roma people out of host countries without any right to asylum (Cahn & Guild, 2010).

Roma may have equal rights in theory and in human rights law but in reality they are discriminated in almost all aspects of social life. They are the poorest ethnic minority

particularly in former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. They represent the largest number of refugees which seeks asylum from the countries in which they were settled, looking for a better life abroad (Bereny, 2010). The countries of Western Europe try to obstruct their arrival and return them to the country of previous residence. Roma constitute a prominent European case of transnational nonintegrated minority⁵. Of all European ethnic minorities, Roma are the least employed in the national and European institutions. The deficit of Roma participants in European institutions completely involves Roma visibility in Europe and sends very negative signals to Roma people.

5. Roma Minority in Serbia

It is estimated that there are approximately 500 000 to 600 000 Roma in Serbia. From the first race-hate murder 1997 in Serbia, the position of Roma has worsened with the general worsening of the standard of living in the country. After the 5 October 2000 changes, a transitional democratic post-Milosević government was formed. The Roma acquired minority status in 2002. However, there is no evidence yet of real improvement in Roma integration. Dominant social representation about them lost its idealistic romantic base (music, exotic customs, beauty) and became negative. The Belgrade Centre for Human Rights demonstrates that the Roma are the most socially jeopardized ethnic minority that is mostly disposed to discrimination. Recent surveys indicate that discrimination in education and employment are perceived to be a major problem by Roma people (Miladinović, 2008). Roma children do not have full and equal access to education. They are studying in segregated classes or schools. Roma people experience high levels of unemployment. They work mainly in communal service companies. A large part of the Roma minority feels insecure and threatened due to the increasing discrimination and racist attacks. There is no real legal framework to support the official policy of integration.

From 2000 to 2002, the Humanitarian Law Fund has investigated over 250 incidents in which Roma were the victims of police, racist attacks and discrimination.

Two reasons why Roma tolerate discrimination, social exclusion and racial segregation in Serbia have roots in Nazi ideology and in destroying utopian communist picture of “brotherhood and unity”. At the end of 20th century Roma became “collateral damage” in identity confusion and xenophobic nationalism although they have not taken part in former Yugoslavia breakup (Simeunović, 2009). However, there is a third reason for social exclusion: negative and stereotyped portrayal of Roma as well as invisibility in the mainstream media. The Media Council shows that there exists a tendency of professionalism decrease in media from 2005 (when this council was formed) and that main problem of Serbian journalism is a tendency toward sensationalism and political instrumentalization.

6. Methodological Framework

This paper presents a case study. The case study is an in-depth study of a particular situation. It is examined in order to try and understand what has happened and why. The

⁵ Finnish President Tarja Halonen named Roma “Pan-European minority”.

researcher used this method when trying to obtain detailed and comprehensive information for one or more specific cases on which he makes conclusions about other instances of the same category.

The case study develops a general theoretical statement and makes the basis for the creation of the typology or set of categories that define the phenomenon. Additionally, it is the basis for generating new hypotheses that can be tested using other data or subsequent techniques. The case study is a specific research framework with great research potential. This method is dedicated to the great role of theory and plurality of methodological perspectives. This is a method of trying to grasp the whole phenomenon. The case study prompts a wider, deeper and more holistic approach to the issue, and includes a wide range of different indicators (Branković, 2009).

The selection of cases is determined by many social conditions. When running a case study it is important to analyze the case itself - what is happening - and the context of the case – where it is happening, and under what conditions it occurs. It is necessary to analyze how the case differs from one another and to what extent the findings from some studies are suitable for wider application. Perhaps the researcher would want to re-analyze the same case later (Brophy, 2007). Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the whole context.

The advantages of a case study are: it covers the whole subject, the results can be reached in a shorter period, and it gives the applicable knowledge for practical interventions. (Biličić, 2005:217-228). Also, the case study will give some indications and allow further necessary elaboration. However, the case study in greater variability of cases leaves doubt in the reliability of results. Also, this method does not sufficiently remove the subjectivity of the researcher who needs great experience in determining and carrying out research. I will try to use the advantages of this method.

7. Case Study: The Murder of Roma boy Branko Jovanović

When a thirteen-year old Roma boy, Duško Jovanović was killed in 1997, the reaction of media institutions, citizens and government representatives was very strong. The Roma boy was officially the first victim of racial hatred in Serbia. He was killed by skinheads. By that time most people thought that this cannot happen in Serbia. In March 1998, the perpetrators of this cruel murder were sentenced to ten years and sent to serve their sentence in juvenile prison. They had their sentences reduced by four years at District Court in Belgrade. In 2007 Serbia commemorated the tenth anniversary of the murder and the media were again involved in this event.

A seventeen year-old Roma boy Branko Jovanović (Nikolić) from Boljevac was killed on 25th January 2007. He was tortured and murdered by three teenage boys and one girl (according to statements from the media, they beat him with a baton and dropped off his body in a ditch). The media dedicated very little space to this cruel murder. The fact that the media were not interested in this event can be first attributed to unchecked information regarding the name of the victim. In fact, some media reported that the boy was named Branko Nikolić, and some that he was named Branko Jovanović. Because the name Branko Jovanović is mentioned in the report of the Center for Minority Rights, I will use it in this paper.

I have chosen to analyze online editions of print media that started out in the late 90's of 20th century or at the beginning of 21st century: "Blic", "Kurir", "Glas javnosti", "Danas". Because these daily newspapers do not have such a long tradition of publishing such as, for example, "Politika" or "Večernje novosti", they were selected to determine how the social changes that occurred during this period reflected in the reporting of violence against Roma. B92 television website is also selected as modern and pro-European. It is supposed that this television reported on this event².

In the period from 25 January to 5 February there were only eight articles on the murder of the Roma boy: in the online edition of "Glas javnosti" two, in the "Kurir" two, in the "Blic" two, in the "Danas" one and on the television website one. The first articles appeared three days after the murder, on 28th January in "Glas javnosti" ("They gouged out his eyes", feature- Chronicle) and in "Kurir" ("They gouged out his eyes", feature-Black Chronicle). Titles of both texts are identical. The statement in the title is not proven: it is not known whether his eyes were gouged out or were injured while he was beaten. However, the style of this news story is more dramatic according to the tabloid structure. The cruelty is reinforced in the first place, including in the title, because it attracts the attention of the reader. There is a combination of text and one photo in both (the only difference is that the "Kurir" cropped the rest of the photo which also featured two girls, and "Glasjavnosti" left the whole picture).

The content of the texts are very similar and put in focus the mother's lament as well as the fact that one of the killers was singing in a church choir:

- „To your eye, my son, their eyes will mother gouge out! My son, what have they done to you? My son, my mother's fiance, why they killed you?“ („Kurir“).

- „Seventeen year old Z. J. lived just a few houses away from Branko. He was an excellent student and he was singing in a church choir“

- „My son, what have these criminals done to you? How can they be allowed to live in this country being so nasty?“ (“Glas javnosti”).

- „Seventeen year old Z. J. lived just a few houses away from Branko. He was an excellent student and he was singing in a church choir“ (“Glas javnosti”).

Legislation in Serbia strictly prohibits that a person has committed an offence before he or she can be found guilty. Here it is not respected. The tabloids insist especially on the humanization of media contents and focus on emotions because this arises empathy. In this way, it seems that the publishing of unchecked information that the killer was a good student, that he was singing in the church choir and that his grandfather was a churchman reduces his guilt.

On the 29th of January three articles were published: "A 17th year-old boy buried on his birthday" ("Blic", feature-Chronicle), "A victim of juvenile criminals buried" ("Glas javnosti", feature-Chronicle), "They will revenge" ("Kurir", feature-Black Chronicle).

² The reason for this approach to research is the tendency of the population to read more online editions of newspapers. More and more users stopped buying printed editions, and spent their time reading news from online editions. The Internet tends to become a major source of information. In 2008 Internet usage in Serbia rose to 30 percent of the population. Half of this population is daily users. 82 percent of the population had home access to the Internet, while 55 percent use the Internet to read news. "New Technologies and Media Survey" (had the research objectives to ascertain media consumption habits of Serbian citizens, attitudes of general population towards new technologies and new forms and types of informing), 2008, http://www.irex.rs/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=45&Itemid=77

In the manner of causing panic, "Kurir" published mobilizing title "They will revenge" where the singular form is replaced by the plural (from the text only the brother of the murdered boy wants revenge):

-“Mother Silvana couldn't stop crying at the funeral of her younger son while her older son said that he will judge the murderers later” (“Kurir”).

The swearing ritual here is linked to the oath made to a dead person. This swearing ritual transforms him into an instrument of revenge (similar to the epic and dramatic poetry).

On the 30th of January on the website of television B92 an article was published "Why was the Roma boy killed?" B92 is the first media company that has launched a blog on its website and introduced a converged content strategy (fundamental news for all three platforms - TV, radio programs, and news on the site - is written only once). Actually, on this blog ordinary people were the only ones who have suggested that something must be done about the crimes, but that's not enough to help the Roma minority.

On the 31st of January "Blic" published an article "The suspects include a 15-year-old girl" in the column Chronicle. On the 1st of February only "Danas" published a very brief article in the Chronicle column: "Treatment of the Roma is indicator of society fascization" (superscript headline, "Helsinki Committee for Human Rights strongly condemned brutal murder of the boy Branko Nikolić").

Is the media indifferent to the killing of Roma? Why?

There are several facts that suggest that this event is very suitable for the analysis of the media and the government's treatment of the Roma population.

First, on the 21st of January Parliamentary elections were held in Serbia and all the media attention was focused in that direction. Even the issue of the Kosovo conflict had been somewhat marginalized: It is interesting that the most common pre-election issue was what might be called political combinatory about possible post-election coalitions and political opponents (19% of articles), then the topic of health and social policy (18%), and the economy and corruption (16%), foreign policy and integration (15%). Only the fifth found the texts with the Kosovo theme - only 10 percent - even though just the future of Kosovo has become the dominant theme of the first post-election bargaining (The report of the Press Council for January 2007).

We have come to the conclusion that the media are a major field of political struggle. The media agenda is formed in this case by the selection of more profitable, more commercial and more attractive themes. The media agenda was in line with the actualization of political events, because political representatives have greater access to media. Therefore, it is formed media images that the elections were the most important part of social and political reality. Political representatives are making efforts to bring to its political priorities in the selection of media as only understandable and logical. In this way, the topic of minority groups has been marginalized.

Next, this murder is not the first, a few homicides after 1997 were motivated by racial hatred too. According to a well-known journalistic principle "when a dog bites a man, that is not news, but if a man bites a dog, that is news" - this event is not so interesting to journalists. If we imagine this situation: four Roma juveniles killed the Serbian boy. Would this be news? I'm sure that this news would have much more attention even during the parliamentary elections and the parliamentary crisis that occurred in the next few months.

This leads us to an obvious conclusion that the Roma minority becomes even more marginalized. The question is whether, after ten years from the first murder motivated by racial hatred, the entire Serbia plunged into some kind of an overall lethargy and the Roma boy's murder appears as something quite normal. The Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's "spiral of silence" occupies an important role. It seems that conformity and fear of isolation won.

The church was silent, all government officials were silent, and all the professionals of culture were silent. The media did not make an effort to learn more about this case from non-governmental organizations. This does not happen the first time, as the Minority Rights Center publishes almost daily news of some form of discrimination against the Roma, so we have the impression that the media discredits NGOs for spreading the idea of a high degree of discrimination against the Roma.

8. Conclusion

With regard to very frequent attacks and violence against Roma by skinheads and other young people the government did nothing in the past ten years. It seems that even the public sphere has "fallen asleep" occasionally on the difficult position of the Roma minority. The laws that exist are not respected enough, and the anti-discrimination law passed in 2009. Recalling the words of Bella Hamvas- "if something does not get the name, it sinks into the dark"- I can conclude that violence against Roma, even after a decade, is not called by its proper name. This brutal murder points to the necessity of a more serious attitude of the government, the enactment of new laws and the effective implementation of already adopted legal measures.

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