Speech in the media regarding the ethnic minorities

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Since the start of the 1990s professional scientific knowledge on interethnic relations has reflected reality with increasing accuracy: scholars have been utilizing ever more efficient methodologies, tools, interpretations. The prevailing system of public pronouncement is also changing. This new way of speaking has made it possible to publicly proclaim alternative stands; modes of expression have been liberalized. No longer are there any hidden zones forbidden to researchers. Whereas before 1989 the official discourse concerning the Bulgarian nation represented an open demonstration of the regime's power and ability to exert control over all aspects of life, after that a new situation came about: along with the expression of differences and tensions within and between various opinions, people in the media sought to present truthful realities, pictures, and trends. There has been a striving to achieve an empirically grounded and exact reconstruction of the "historical truth" and of various possible perspectives; moreover, this reconstruction is meant to be non-political and non-ideological. The "Bulgarian ethnic model" is the pluralistic format that allows for all modes of interpreting the problems of ethnic minorities. The confined space of one-sided discourse has been reformatted into a space where all the different ways of thinking about the past and the present are reconciled through the rich, century-old traditions of national Bulgarian culture. There is above all an enormous social capital accumulated here: a tradition of dialogue, tolerance, togetherness, neighbourly relations, solidarity. There is, of course, also tension, opposition, closure within one's own minority. But such phenomena can be overcome through the striving for coherence in life, a coherence formed in the immediate everyday environment in which communication between ethnic groups takes place. That is precisely why the negative tensions that arose in the course of the great ethnic crisis of the 1980s in Bulgaria have drained away in a relatively short time.

For nearly twenty years now we have been talking about the equal positions of ethnic communities, about mutual tolerance between them, about the value of every minority culture. Just as interethnic relations have undergone certain changes, so too should speech in the media not be a monologue, but, instead, cover the whole vista of possibilities, ranging from frankly discriminatory texts to messages affirming the rights of all ethnic groups in Bulgaria. Speech in the media sets the models, patterns, and standards of actual relations and practices – official and non-official, of practical "living together" in the streets, in public transport, in neighborhoods. Speech in the media determines the degree of importance of these problems, including them or excluding them from the public agenda.

A fundamental rule of democracy is that the media should make it possible for "voices" existing in civil society to be heard, with all their different perspectives, and without the obstacles of political or economic considerations, dependencies, or concerns as to how representative the individuals behind these voices are. The hierarchy of voices should not depend on the hierarchy of power in society. The main goal is to make variety visible to the public. Achieving this is a slow process but a serious motive and incitement for the ethnic minorities themselves to mobilize their own resources and work for building their own media, which they need as a natural intermediary, while also participating in the national media. People from minority groups should be present in the broadcasts. This would be the start of a situation where there will be not merely ethnic tolerance, but also co-experiencing of otherness. In this respect the tonality of the media is important in terms of openness to other values, attitudes, beliefs, practices.

However it remains true that the media allow the messages to be addressed to the public in such a way as to leave the impression they are selling the kind of messages the public likes. Hence the messages have a populist overtone, reproducing the widespread expectations of the public and seemingly catering to the dictates of everyday homely reasoning. The lowering of the media "narrative" to this everyday level is connected with an intense presence of stereotypic thinking in media discourse, and these stereotypes are an obstacle to communication between ethnic communities. It is not rare for such thinking to be invoked by all sides as an excuse for the errors they may have inadvertently made; such thinking is also used to conceal fears and complexes. It is often said about the media that "they are to blame for everything", "they are incompetent", "they should do our work", "the money coming from European and international organizations for ethnic minority projects (in particular Roma projects) are distributed but give no results", "the speech about ethnically different people is tedious", "contrived ethnic problems in order to get foreign money."

The cause of equal opportunities for ethnic communities is still not prestigious in the media; it remains a merely formal norm. In practice, however, anything connected with violence, with negative or scandalous events, can be sold more easily in the media than other material. Overall, ethnic

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issues remain unattractive for the Bulgarian media, ethnic programmes are not the leading ones in terms of rating, and it is hard for these programmes to change established public attitudes. Not that efforts in this field are not being made, not that organizations, texts, or public events related to ethnic issues are lacking. The problem is that the voices and messages produced in this connection are pushed to the margin by a different kind of authoritative speech. As a result the ethnic minority communities have no influence over the agenda of the media. These minority groups are present in the media mostly in connection with information about government policies on poverty, unemployment, education, crime. What is lacking is serious debate in which minorities are presented through their own views on the solution of social problems; there is a shortage of analytic texts and journalistic investigations.

Moreover civic associations focusing their activity on ethnic issues do not produce an image of sustainable achievements before the public; instead they provoke opinions that their activities are "project"-based and oriented only to what is best remunerated. This increases mistrust and suspicion with regard to everything occurring in these communities (and especially with regard to various NGO initiatives).

This lack of serious presence of ethnic issues is due to the specific features of present-day Bulgarian media: their inability to find their way among the numerous problems, their ignorance of the particularities of minority cultures, of the functional interaction within the framework of the national culture. We must also take into account the competition in the media market: the p.r. of political and economic elites is particularly aggressive. Ethnic minorities find it hard to obtain access to the media. It is hard to realize communication between media and ethnic minorities, for it is hard for such issues to become news in the context of media reality; what communication there is does not amount to visible, tangible results that one can indentify with. Very often the messages are not related to the scenario of human living in general; they do not suggest that minorities have anything to do with us, and that we should be interested in them. There is a lack of human stories told in the first person; the media are interested in events that are happening just now, and such events are usually negative, of the kind that, unfortunately, appeals to mass tastes.

The media are in need of authoritative individual voices, and this kind of voices is easiest to find among politicians. Hence media discussions on ethnic relations are predominantly political debates, not talks between experts. Political speech predominates so strongly that, very often, it seems there are no, and never will be any, professional discussions about ethnicity in Bulgarian public space. In public space, especially in media space, sociologists and ethnologists appear only in cases when they are expected to give scholarly weight to a given political thesis, to certain political decisions. Very rare are the cases when specialists present the contents of non-political usages, when professionals comment on problems pertaining to an authentic research sphere, stating opinions, outlining the basic parameters of a problem that is being discussed in public space. This in itself increases the public trust in the media, enhances the authority of the media, and boosts their rating. And this is particularly necessary when the issues concerned are very alarming ones for society, such as: "Is it possible to foment ethnic tension in our country to a degree where a dangerous and uncontrollable situation may be provoked?"; "Is there a demographic crisis in our country and is it really possible that the proportion of ethnic Bulgarians will decrease irreparably in the Republic of Bulgaria?"; "Is it possible that the interaction between political elites that are mutually suspicious, wary, inclined to present one another in a distorted way, may eventually break down Bulgarian interethnic tolerance?", etc.

But in both cases it is not the professionals who are now setting the agenda of the debate on interethnic relationships. The agenda is set by those who are invariably considered to be the experts, because they know what is politically correct. The political dimension holds the lead when responses are given to the important questions: what is occurring in the media with regard to minority ethnic communities, what are the images being built there, who is building them, how are the messages to society being formulated, what are these messages, which results of scientific research are being disseminated in the media, why is the fear of minorities so often being emphasized, why is the topic of defending ourselves not infrequently prevalent in discussions, etc.? It is even possible to discern hidden political messages in announcements and broadcasts, in negative speech about ethnicity, and this has an impact on the public comprehension as to the limits of personal rights and freedoms, especially in the ethnic aspect. In such cases the media may potentially create hostility between ethnic minoritie, with far-reaching consequences. Against such a backdrop, very often politicians wielding populist rhetoric appear in the media, seeking to gain advantages from a concrete situation. But the new responsibility of the political elite has entirely different dimensions: not to construct an imaginary community after the nation-state model dating back two centuries, but to act as intermediaries between different ethnic communities and moderate their possible discussions.

When politicians and the media are the ones initiating the debate, the essence of the discussion is often lost, i.e. it is not clear what the issue is precisely. Many people suddenly appear to be knowledgeable about it, many know the whole background of an event, the newspapers resound with big headlines, but the suspicion remains that the problem is not really understood. Without relying on a sufficiently solid basis of expertise, these speakers tend to lightheadedly predict an optimistic or pessimistic future for interethnic relations.

Apart from such external 'experts' who are allowed to appear in the media, the task of a competent and objective coverage of events is in the hands of the journalists themselves. But there seems to be a deep crisis in this circle. It is

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temptingly easy to construct your story without leaving the editorial office, merely by using countless Internet or other media sources, at most having some talks over the telephone: this opportunity for simplification of a reporter's task leaves its mark. Nor can we overlook the economic pressure exerted over the media, the widespread practice for businesspersons, lawyers, proof-readers, and librarians to hold positions of leadership in the media, and the technology itself of producing a piece of news: there is no need to utter lies, it is enough to hold back one part of the facts, to adorn another part, and to intentionally present just enough to suggest an 'information leakage'.

A certain part of the media is definitely not favourable to serious investigators who can be expected not to allow a debate to be reduced to elementary interpretations, without different opinions being heard, and to remain without a solid basis in scientific research. At least for now, journalistic practice hardly makes room for serious theoretical-methodological debate. The element of scandal holds priority, and truths are uttered from a position of 'highest authority'.

It has often been found and asserted that topics related to the integration of the Roma ethnic group are frequently presented one-sidedly and superficially in the media, with no attempt made at deeper analysis, and without a search for public consensus on the solution of the problems.

In this context we should indicate the so-called 'hidden negative messages'. In a brief overview of the Internet version of the newspaper *Ataka* for the month of December 2008 alone, we find the following titles and positions in leading reports:

"The howling of imams shuts down the schools in Kardjali and the Ludogorie region" (9.12.2008);

"Whoever enters a mosque will be saved, whoever enters a church will be butchered". Such threats had been addressed by activists of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms towards Bulgarians in Shumen, stated the district coordinator and municipal councilor from ATAKA (8.12.2008).

"MRF displayed unparalleled cynicism during the session of the council of chairpersons, offering a deal to the rest of the parties: we will vote for amendments in the Constitution regarding the date of elections under the condition that the rule of settled residence will be dropped. This is what Pavel Shopov, vice chairman of the Parliamentary Group ATAKA, announced (5.12.2008).

The occasion for the meeting was the scandalous demand of the Head Mufti Office for building a Muslim centre and mosque on the territory of the 27 decares bought in the Malinova Dolina district near Students' City. Dikov promised no construction work would begin until the truth is brought to light concerning the Muslim centre and the second mosque in the capital. He showed documents to Siderov and Shopov (3.12.2008).

Ahmed Dogan now has his own television. This became a fact when New Bulgarian Media Group, behind which is MRF, bought Television TV7 and the daily newspaper Express. The two media were the property of Lyubomir Pavlov, better known as Lyubo the Pimple, formerly head of Municipal Bank. The formal owner of New Bulgarian Media Group is Irena Krysteva, considered to be close to the leader of MRF (1.12.2008).

Valeri Simeonov from ATAKA, head of the Municipal Council of Burgas, will hand in his resignation from this position. The cause for this was the decision of the GERB-dominated Council to grant a building site for a new mosque in the place of a recently pulled down illegal construction in Meden Rudnik, the largest neighbourhood of the city. His decision will become a fact on January 22, 2009. "I have the feeling I'm head of the municipality of Bursa, not Burgas. That is why I cannot remain in my post any longer", explained Simeonov to journalists (23.12.2008).

Emel Etem came up with 20 005 leva for renovating the roof of the mosque in Djebel. This sum is more than the money received by 47 families in Breznik and the village of Slakovtsi whose homes were swept away by rains and hailstorm (15.12.2008).

Gotse goes to get instructions from his masters… President Gotse is leaving for Turkey on Tuesday, this information is being kept secret for now (13.12.2008), etc.

There is no doubt that an intolerant tone of "speech" prevails in the newspaper ATAKA regarding the Turks and Turkishness. This directly raises the issue of the limits of tolerance. We have to define these limits, says Umberto Eco, in order to know what must not be tolerated. This requirement holds true especially with regard to ethnic minority issues and their place in the world of the media, with regard to the messages contained in announcements found in the mass information media. There is no doubt that the media messages, addressed to a wide audience, cover the full range, starting from overemphasis on minority rights and spanning to complete denial of their rights and even appeals for outright discrimination. The possibilities existing within this field have on various occasions all been realized in the Bulgarian media to various degrees according to the currently prevailing political, economic or other interests; but they all meet at the borderline that defines how far democracy may extend, i.e. may freedom of speech cross the line where it becomes a speech of hatred, of discrimination, of intolerance. We seem to be confronted with a dilemma here: either to limit democracy or to seek resources for counteracting the kind of hate speech in which the other, otherness, is not that through which we come to know ourselves, but is our enemy. ("Hell is the others." in Sartre's words).

Undoubtedly such a resource exists, and, again, it consists in speech, but the speech of solidarity, of tolerance, in which difference and the quality of stranger is not a dividing line distancing us from one another, but something that unites us. Tolerance is a complex mode of social existence. It exists both as a trend in the actual restructuring of social matter and as a constructive idea with reference to which certain realities are shaped. Thus, co-existing within

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tolerance are facts, norms, actual realities, and perspectives. It represents a co-existence-in-otherness, and it requires and imposes not a unified model of life, but a network of different cultures and varying life ethos, an organic connection of modern reflexivity, a neighbourhood of different symbolic representations, different unique cultural semantics, united by dialogue. Tolerance is at the basis of globalization with solidarity, in which universal human rights are respected, the rights of all citizens from all nations, in which care is taken of the environment, and democratic international systems and institutions are maintained, devoted to social solidarity, equality, and the sovereignty of nations. With some paraphrasing, we may reassert what Jacques Attali said in the conclusion of his book *Fraternities*: today we stand only at the threshold of tolerance as a co-experiencing-of-otherness, and we must implement it both in the modest sphere of everyday life and as a great ideal (Attali 2003). What presents an obstacle to the implementation of this ideal is precisely hate speech, which forms an ideological basis for repressions. There are numerous historical illustrations of this, ranging from the idea of a chosen people, a chosen race, to invoked fears that the unity or future of the fatherland is endangered, to persecutions and mass murder. Examples of this are abundant in European history. Suffice it to point out the mythology of the Aryan race and the death camps, in which millions perished.

That is why the words that kill must be criminalized; the speech that generates hatred, spreads intolerance and discrimination, should be penalized through legislation.

But here there is a problem directly connected with media speech on ethnic problems. It concerns the hidden, unobvious messages that provoke intolerance. These are the soft, skillfully coded messages, the latent meanings which, once they fall in the mind of a person exhausted by the daily struggle for survival, are awakened to produce aggression and hatred.

On the basis of actual European practice, a discussion has commenced about the so-called muted, implicit forms of racism. Teun A. van Dijk introduced a relevant term in his study entitled *New(s) Racism.* Though it is true that today it is considered inadmissible to speak of a person as a representative of an inferior race, this does not mean an end has been put to the speech that emphasizes ethnic differences in a negative way, shaping a special mentality in society and reproducing racism through discourse. Due to its symbol form, this new racism, reproduced through the written word, imposes far more refinedly the domination of the majority and a "shy" discrimination of the minority. Thus the "new racism" (Tabakova, 2008) intensifies a certain ethnocentrism and increases ethnic distances. And while this is generally characteristic for the developed European countries, it assumes particularly strong and distinct forms in Bulgaria, the EU member state with the lowest standard of living.

As formulated by the Council of Europe, hate speech means "all forms of expression, written, verbal, visual, which disseminate, incite, encourage or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including intolerance in the form of aggressive nationalism and egocentrism, of discrimination and hostility towards minorities, immigrants, and their descendents." Here a special emphasis is laid upon the media, for the preaching of intolerance and hate through the mass media has a particularly dangerous and harmful impact. The mass media have a responsibility for the formation of a culture of tolerance, which must exclude hate speech.

However, the analysis of hate speech does not simply imply that this should be rejected, waived aside, and eliminated. This speech opens a field for debate that is essential for a "healthy" media speech about ethnic groups. In this respect three vectors of enquiry can be drawn. The first refers to the scale of hate speech and its possible negative consequences. The second is whether the free practice of hate speech is useful or not for the public debate. The third vector is the question whether there should be a special state policy to compensate for the damages caused by hate speech and intolerance to a given ethnic community. This last is especially important for the integration policy aimed at the Roma ethnic community, given that it is impossible to quickly solve the problems of this community even in priority fields like education, housing policy, health care. These difficulties generate tensions coming both from the Roma minority and from the majority, and hate speech – in political discourse and in media coverage – is one of the visible signs of these tensions.

Is it possible for media speech reproducing the so-called 'discoursive racism' (Tabakova, 2008) to become transformed into a language of tolerance? Unfortunately the strong influence of politics, and especially the entry into complicated situations involving an intense presence of propaganda formats in media reality, will obviously entail the use of increasingly covert forms of negative media speech about ethnic relations. Let us hope the so-called 'ethnic model' will continue to hold out against political aggressiveness.

In order to remove the grounds for such experiments, actors in the media space must be aware that, in democratic countries, the uniqueness of ethnic cultures should be approached with an emphasis on the citizen as part of a nation state, a citizen with the right to speak in his/her mother tongue, to develop and preserve his/her specific cultural definedness within the framework of the national definedness, to be different, particular, while respecting and understanding the other person's truth even though he/she may disagree with it; this would be an authentic negation of aggressive types of behaviour towards otherness.

The media formats should involve an understanding of the democratic process as directed toward the restoration of the full value of the individual and of equality; this would promote the exchange of cultural values not only with regard to the new migration movements, but also between the ethnic communities within the nation state. The mutual inter-

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penetration of cultures in the age of globalization combines several important aspects of human existence defined in terms of understanding of the **Other**: the awareness of our mutual dependence, the right of access to the public space for people who are different, their road to independence and to a decent life; the respect for the equal standing of different cultural communities, each of which strives to, and should, obtain recognition by the others (Taylor 1999: 48, 78).

Such voices should be heard in the space of the media, voices that speak about the different cultures as unifying, not dividing factors, not as a source of opposition and conflicts, but as containing a rich variety of links between people and as giving meaning to life, giving significance to acquaintance, to friendship, to solidarity between human beings, cultures as overcoming the complete alienation and atomization of the individual.

There should be a place in radio and television broadcasts for the rules of modern democratic states that guararantee for every citizen the right to grow up with his/her own cultural heritage and to raise his/her children without being subjected to discrimination. Under the conditions of a reflexive culture, the only traditions and forms of life that can survive are those that bind the members of that culture but are subjected to critical examination and offer the next generations the freedom of choice to draw from other traditions as well, or even to move on to other shores and settle there (Habermass, 1999: 143).

Abstract

Even though for the last twenty years the Bulgarian media has separated itself from the one-sided discourse practiced before 1989 many problems can still be found regarding the portrayal of the ethnic minorities. Issues such as ignorance regarding particular minority cultures and competition in the media market have resulted in a lack of communication between media and the minority representatives. A way to improve this situation would be the presence of specialist such as sociologists in the public space, knowing the power that media has in molding behaviors, but the debates are being taken over by politicians who many times have a superficial view of the problem. As a result the journalists themselves are responsible for an accurate and objective coverage of events. Unfortunately some of the Bulgarian journalists seem to adopt a speech that contains traces of intolerance and so we are confronted with a more severe problem that regards democracy itself: is there a need to reduce the freedom of speech or should we rethink the way we perceive the other?

Key words

Ethnic minority, media, Bulgaria, minority cultures, journalism.

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