

## **EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION OF RUTHENIANS IN SERBIA AND CROATIA<sup>1</sup>**

The project is based on the fieldwork conducted during first two weeks of June 2022 in Slavonia and Vojvodina and includes 13 interviews with local representatives of Ruthenian minority. It aims at exploring and evaluating respect and effectuation of the right to effective participation of Ruthenians in Serbia and Croatia in the light of the Article 15 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM). Interpretation of the effective participation is further elaborated in cultural, socio-economic and political spheres. The work is based on two hypotheses: (1) that the rights are not fully effectuated due to inadequate funding (2) that the rights are not fully effectuated due to excessive assimilation causing limited identity awareness, administrative/bureaucratic hurdles and shifted perception of discrimination. The work contributes to academic literature in plenty of ways. Firstly, it applies a bottom-up approach involving interdisciplinary ethnographic and highly empirical research philosophy towards legal analysis on participation of minorities currently dominated by systemic and design discourses. This rather technical way of legal researching is present in FCNM regular reports which mention about “minor issues” of Ruthenian community neglecting many details of the actual situation. Secondly, it contributes to the study on Ruthenian minority in itself as the existing literature lacks the perspective of legal analyses dwarfed by historical and linguistic focus. The work might eventually serve as the role model for small and prone to assimilation minorities across South and Eastern Europe.

*Key words:* Ruthenians in Serbia and Croatia, effective participation, identity, assimilation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

With this paper, I would like to shed the light on new debates within interpretative sphere of the principle of effective participation of national minorities. I believe that the bottom-up approach analysing empirical challenges and concrete needs of the investigated national minority might enrich the current

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academic literature with new valuable perspectives. Referring to my research experiences, I would like to argue that effective participation inscribed into quite abstract and normative system design of legal protections and guarantees very often falls into discrepancy with practical implementation and adherence to principles, at least in the contextual study of the Southeastern Europe (SEE). From my previous studies, this discrepancy has been well observed in the case of law on non-discrimination in Serbia. Despite the existence of very advanced legal provisions on the protection from discrimination often exceeding standards and recommendations set by international and European institutions, limited implementability caused by non-transparent financial and political independence of non-discrimination bodies severely undermined efficiency of these legal provisions, consequently questioning the whole system of non-discrimination. Therefore, my hypothesis on discrepancies between legal provisions and practical effects of the law on protection of national minorities in SEE based on previous experiences encouraged me not only to apply a bottom-up approach but also to merge interdisciplinarity of desk research of legal reports provided by the monitoring body of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) with ethnographic approach involving fieldwork and interviews with concerned individuals. The main reason inspiring me to the application of methodological and scientific interdisciplinarity of this research stems from repetitive use of “relatively good” assessment of the protection and effectuation of minority rights of Ruthenians by FCNM reports disturbed by existence of unspecified “some issues” (FCNM, 2018) (FCNM, 2019).

Since the paper is going to investigate the rights of the national minority of Ruthenians in Croatia and Serbia from a comparative perspective in the sphere of effective participation, I would like to suggest the following **research question**:

*Why the implementation of rights on effective participation of Ruthenians in Croatia and Serbia is impaired despite overall satisfactory legal framework?*

I would like to argue that the existence of “minor issues and challenges” mentioned in FCNM reports is the consequence of two phenomena that are going to serve as two hypotheses leading throughout the paper:

- **Inadequate** application of the positive responsibility from the side of the government to ensure sufficient **economic resources** to effectuate the rights in cultural, social and political spheres impairs effectuation of these rights.

In other words, despite the fact that both Serbian and Croatian governments endeavour to satisfy the responsibility to support national minorities with funding, inadequate design of the system according to which the funds are allocated impairs the effectuation of cultural, social and political rights in practice.

- **Excessive assimilation** of Ruthenians into majority population reduces effectuation of rights due to minor phenomena classified into the categories of: limited awareness of national identity, administrative hurdles and changing perception of discrimination.

For the sake of clarity, the paper is going to follow the subsequent order. Next sections will be devoted to literature review explaining at the same time the motivation for a specific selection of case study and comparative structure of the work, methodology and theoretical framework suggesting my own model of effectuation of rights on participation in cases of small and exposed to assimilation minorities. Then, my hypotheses will be analysed on the ground of empirical material I have gathered during the fieldwork and structured accordingly to the theoretical model.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Majority of the academic literature analysing the aspect of effective participation of national minorities reduces the interpretation of participatory concept to the political sphere inscribed into efficient design of the legal system expressed with the respect for human rights (Verstichel, 2005), (Pejic, 1997) or conflict prevention and resolution (Marko & Constantin, 2019), (Bieber, 2001). Other area of research focusing on specific legal basis underpinned by European standards on protection of national minorities in the context of effective participation, let it be the article 15 of FCNM (Weller, 2003) or OSCE Lund Recommendations from 1999 (Henrard, 2005) usually prioritises the aspect of effective participation in political life or overall public affairs neglecting alternative expressions of effective participation such as the cultural or social dimension. Consequently, academic literature on effective participation of national minorities incorporates foundational legal framework into political theorisation as: effects for voting rights and electorate phenomena (Nurumov & Vashchanka, 2019), (Reynolds, 2007) representation (Palermo & Woelk, 2003) or self-determination and autonomy (Marko, 2008), (Suksi, 2005).

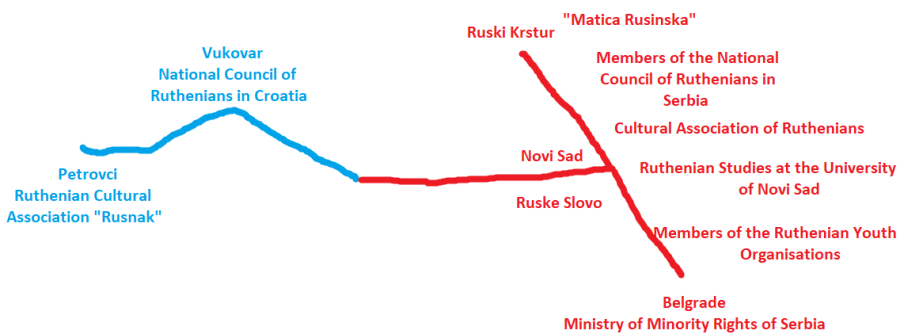
Alternatively, Tove Malloy suggests more diversified interpretation of the effective participation understood in terms of the article 15 of FCNM which is perceived as the overarching effectuation of participatory rights involving as well language, media or education rights (Malloy, 2018). Drawing upon theoretical fundamentals outlined by Malloy, I would like to justify the use of Ruthenian minority as the case study of a community whose status of a historically well-integrated minority deprived of the leverage of kin-state, security threat to majority population and state structure, and representation by a very small number of members. In other words, given contextualisation of the Ruthenian minority offers an interesting empirical ground reducing the importance of classic claims on effective political representation due to more relevant non-territorial and cultural aspects of effective participation. Hence, I believe that the case of Ruthenian minority might serve as an interesting contribution to the study of positive obligation to ensure effective participation not only due to very small number of people expressing themselves as Ruthenians which makes such aspects as territorial autonomy or state-level representation pretty irrelevant but also with reference to excessive assimilation. Speaking about small minorities vulnerable to partial or complete assimilation into majority population in SEE including Vlachs and Aromanians (Ebert, 2013), Gorani (Steinke, 2016) or RAE (Visoka, 2008) opens a new research area on effective participation which might require a redefinition of positive obligation of a state to effectuate participation easily confronted with “shifting blame” as if it was the fault of the “passive” and “ungrateful” minority lingering or refusing to enjoy provided rights.

Research on effective participation of Ruthenians contributes also to the exploration of the minority rights from the sole perspective of Ruthenians. Interest about Ruthenians within legal aspects in international academic literature is severely limited in contrast to other Vojvodinian regional communities (Ilić, 2002), (Beretka, 2014) including Slovaks (Marušiak & Zlatanović, 2020), Hungarians (Petsinis, 2008) or Romanians (Maran & Cinc, 2011), whose research is usually funded from kin-state educational institutions motivated by revisionist national interests. Consequently, majority of the research on Ruthenian minority centres upon assimilation question from identity or historical aspects (Fejsa, 2017), (Hardi, 2012) that is further peripheralised due to Serbian/Croatian or Ruthenian language of publications. Introducing comparative perspective into the research might open additional insights regarding effective participation due to contextual nature of Serbo-Croatian borderlands. Therefore, (1) it is not only the comparison of legal frameworks of Croatia and Serbia perceived by EU/non-EU

belonging but also (2) comparison of the rights additionally effectuated by autonomous status of Vojvodina in contrast to unitary administrative nature of Slavonian provinces in Croatia, (3) juxtaposition of different contexts of wars between Zagreb and Belgrade from 1991-1992 and impacts on relations with majoritarian population, (4) different geopolitical positions of Croatia and Serbia towards ongoing war in Ukraine with regard to relations between Ruthenians and Ukrainians or (5) a sole aspect of contrasting numbers between almost 2 thousand of Ruthenians in Croatia and 14 thousand in Serbia impacting various levels of institutionalisation. I believe that these five aspects provide a well-funded and justified comparative background that might render the analysis even more precise.

## METHODOLOGY

As I have mentioned in the introductory paragraph, I had decided to apply the bottom-up approach for this paper incorporating ethnographic elements of the research in order to observe and generate new empirical information for the heuristic value of my work. Therefore, during first eleven days of June 2022, I organised a fieldwork and conducted 13 semi-structured interviews (4 on Croatian side and 9 on the Serbian one). A detailed auxiliary map portraying my route is provided below:

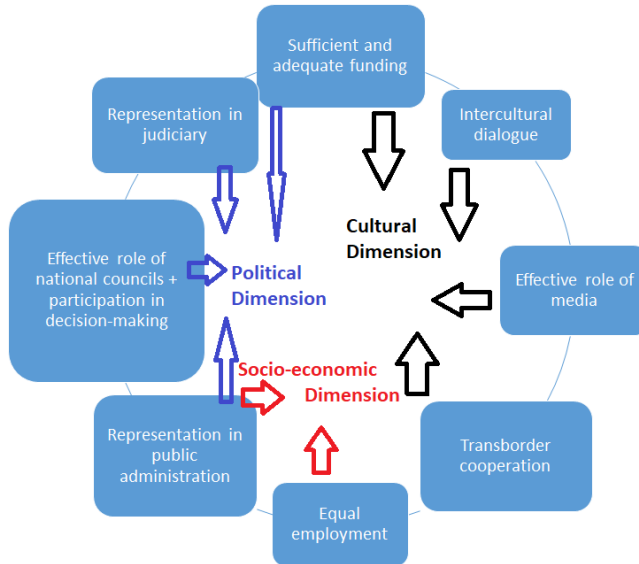


Taking into consideration different institutionalisation of Ruthenian cultural, social and political structures as well as various polarisations over identity interpretations, I have endeavoured to select highly diverse spectrum of

representatives. I believe that semi-structured nature of interviews allowed me to receive direct answers to the most poignant issues articulated by FCNM reports simultaneously opening the way to discovering and sharing new minority protection-related aspects and experiences. In the empirical section below the theoretical framework, for the sake of a clear navigation of the paper, I am going to address the source of information by equivalent Roman number (I – XIII) relating to the conducted interview including, namely, representatives of the Ruthenian cultural association in Petrovci “Rusnak” (I and II), political representatives of the National Council (Savez) of Ruthenians in Croatia (III and IV), representative of the cultural association of Ruthenians in Novi Sad (V), representative of the biggest independent Ruthenian media *Ruske Slovo* (VI), members of the National Council of Ruthenians in Serbia interviewed in *Ruski Krstur* (VII and VIII), representative of Ruthenian language association *Matica Rusinska* (IX), academic representative of the Ruthenian Studies at the University of Novi Sad (X), Ruthenian representative in the Ministry of Minority Rights of Serbia (XI), youth representative of Ruthenians in Novi Sad (XII), Ruthenian representative of independent media in Serbia (XIII).

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Referring to Malloy’s analysis of the key elements of cultural, socio-political and political participation, FCNM interpretation of effective participation, my desk research and categorisation of issues outlined by collected empirical material, I would like to suggest the following theoretical model of different dimensions of effective participation:



This diagram is going to serve as the model for the subsequent analysis of the paper. At the same time, I believe it can be used as the role guideline investigating small, well-integrated and prone to assimilation minorities, at least in the area of SEE where states are pressured by conditionality standards of international institutions to introduce advanced legal frameworks but whose implementability and control of positive obligations remains questionable. Comparatively speaking, in contrast to substantial by the number of members Hungarian minority in Vojvodina whose rights are ensured and effectuated by proportional quotas, minorities in Kosovo or North Macedonia whose post-conflict participation is to be determined by autonomous power-sharing or Roma minority prioritising socio-economic inclusivity, the role model of small, well-integrated and prone to assimilation minorities assumes the following aspects. Firstly, cultural participation as the key expression of distinctiveness is to be ensured by the number of positive obligations of the state including adequate allocations of funds, fostering intercultural dialogue between other minorities as well as the majority population in order to underpin awareness raising, supporting effective role of media and transborder cooperation with kin communities. Secondly, socio-economic participation of well-integrated communities supposedly ensures equal access to state resources and services but might be exposed to discrimination practices in employment. Thirdly, political participation aims to ensure legitimacy of all consulting bodies including national councils and provision that minority members are part of the decision-making process, especially on the local level.

## SUFFICIENT AND ADEQUATE FUNDING

This section is presumably the most essential one when it comes to effective cultural participation, however, sufficient and adequate funding is also indispensable ensuring socio-economic as well as political participation. Referring to the first hypothesis of the paper, despite Croatian and Serbian governments attempt to fulfil this positive obligation and provide the Ruthenian community with funds essential for cultural participation, the way how the allocation proceeds is far from desired expectations. The key difference between allocation of funds between Croatia and Serbia regards the fact that whereas in Croatia state ministry and local administration unit of Vukovarsko-srijemska županija and several obćinas (smallest administration units) where Ruthenians live allocate the funds according to various grant schemes (III), in Serbia a big part of the financial support is transferred to national councils from the state budget of Serbia and autonomous budget of Vojvodina following proportional principle (VII). Such systemic design of fund allocation does not satisfy anyone. *“We in Serbia do not receive enough money due to proportional principle since there is not many of us but we want to retain our activities preserved and institutionally continued since Yugoslav times which are as professional and developed as the ones of Hungarians or Slovaks. Ruthenians in Croatia do not have enough people in order to take advantage of all available funds because it is difficult to write all grant applications successfully when lacking competent human resources”* (VIII). This statement summarises quite accurately the major challenge of the allocation scheme.

Whereas my interviewees on the Croatian side in Petrovci mentioned that the state offers enough funds for anything including publication of a new book, printing of journals or organising cultural festivals (I) some initiatives involving new actors are more challenging since the grant scheme assumes that 20% of funds might be allocated before realisation of the project and remaining 80% is transferred only when the project reaches visible finalisation, let it be the concert being organised or a book printed. Therefore, new actors representing private sector might feel discouraged from participation in minority activities in Croatia since their contribution cannot be covered in advance and depends on a successful realisation of a given project. Nonetheless, an alternative view (IV) summarised that the grant scheme procedure motivates Ruthenian and other small minorities in Slavonia to actively participate in cultural life which in case of constant financial inflows would have had a discouraging effect. Everyone



however shares the opinion that the ongoing brain-drain of young and educated Ruthenians to Zagreb or abroad leading to the dramatic rise of an average age within the community exceeding 60 years in 2011 (III) poses a challenge to deal with all bureaucratic aspects of grant schemes.

Proportional allocation of funds in Serbia from autonomous and state budgets to national councils responsible for further distribution raises a number of minor challenges. Firstly, majority of my interviewees complained about the lack of transparency and clear principles according to which funds are allocated (VI, X, XI, XIII). They mentioned that widespread cronyism serving as the key prerequisite deepens internal divisions over identity interpretation as the majority of Ruthenian institutions is unofficially labelled as being either pro-Ruthenian or pro-Ukrainian. Therefore, conflicting issue regarding interpretation of ethnic origin of Ruthenians and their relation with the contemporary state of Ukraine on individual level affects decision-making process of financial allocations. Secondly, unequal distribution of funds argued by the members of the council as generally insufficient due to proportional principle (VII) leads to such critical aspects as the annual budget of Matica Rusinska amounted to 255 EUR annually allowing the members to solely cover phone bills (IX) or refusal of the University proposal to organise stipends for students of Ruthenian studies who cannot afford a place in a dormitory in Novi Sad (X) which often decreases the number of first year students of Ruthenian studies to absolute zero. Thirdly, some institutions experienced as well drastic budgetary cuts with the most prominent example of the Ruthenian theatre whose annual budget was reduced in 2011 from 25000 EUR to 2500 EUR rendering professional realisation of performances pretty impossible (X). Fourthly, some minorities including the Egyptian community attempt to abuse access to proportional funds allocated by the autonomous budget of Vojvodina and register their national councils on the territory of Vojvodina despite having neither the minority representatives nor historical connection with the autonomous province of Vojvodina which eventually reduces proportional allocation of funds provided for traditional Vojvodinian minorities including Ruthenians (XI). Fifthly, the sector of minority rights has been the only one which did not receive inflation readjustments in the past decade, nonetheless, after minority rights were separated from the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government and inscribed into newly established Ministry of Human and Minority Rights in 2020, the pressure on authorities to grant more financial resources has been more effective (XI). One of the positive signals of this reform was the avoidance of Covid related cuts. In conclusion, with reference to the first hypothesis, the cases

of Croatia and Serbia demonstrate that the allocation of funds cannot meet all demands to cover effective cultural participation while the lack of transparency makes the situation in Serbia more alarming.

### FOSTERING INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

One of the crucial aspects of the effective cultural participation regards also the issue of intercultural dialogue. In practice, the state as well as the minority shall make sure that the outreach of its cultural activity is not reduced solely to its closed community but leaves an impact on the whole multicultural neighbourhood and fosters relations with majoritarian population and other minorities. Positive obligation to ensure intercultural dialogue is expected to raise awareness about the existence of other minorities, enhance social cohesion and prevent emergence of discriminatory behaviour. Representatives of Croatian Ruthenians acknowledged that the awareness about Ruthenians in Slavonia among Croats is more than satisfactory (I, IV), however certain nationalisms and memory of the civil war from 1991-1992 sporadically increase interethnic tensions. Presumably, the most poignant issue regards the use of Ruthenian alphabet called “azbuka” in public space which very closely resembles Serbian Cyrillic. Due to ongoing controversy over the use of Serbian alphabet in public space, Ruthenian “azbuka” managed to fall victim on numerous occasions to Croatian nationalists who damaged information boards or festival promotion materials wrongly identifying “azbuka” with Serbian Cyrillic (I). A similar issue regarded as well the distribution of the Ruthenian journal “Nova Dumka” by Croatian post office whose workers confused alphabets of the cover page and periodically hampered delivery of journal editions. Supposedly, packaging every journal into blank envelopes solved the trouble and since then all issues are delivered on time (II), however, the alphabet controversy clearly indicates how ethnic cleavages between Croats and Serbs might affect other minority groups. Moreover, controversies around the use of problematic alphabet encouraged a handful of Ruthenian activists to advocate for shifting the alphabet into the Latin one to resemble Croatian standard, however, the proposal was highly criticised within Ruthenian community and condemned for evoking unnecessary internal divisions that stay in contrary to Ruthenian language traditions (IV). Beyond the aspect of the alphabet, Croatian Ruthenians do not experience other major challenges and attempt to foster intercultural dialogue through educational means. Ruthenian language classes opened in the primary school Jankovci attract as well Croatian and Serbian children serving as a great platform for intercultural exchange whereas summer

school for Ruthenian language offers places for other nationalities (II). Eventually, manners of a “decent host” suggest to invite representatives of other minorities for cultural festivals to make sure the cooperation with other seven minorities registered in Vukovar continues to foster intercultural dialogue (III).

Ruthenians in Serbia are not exposed to similar alphabet challenges as the Croatian Ruthenians. Similarly, they enjoy high level of recognition being commonly classified as a traditional Vojvodinian community along Hungarians, Slovaks and Romanians (XII). Some of the interviewees pointed out the alarming phenomenon as if systemic design of the activity of national councils disregarded intercultural dialogue contributing to the so-called “ghettoization” of minorities locked in small communities since the model of fund allocations prevents the control to ensure cultural participation fostering intercultural dialogue (XIII). Older members of the Ruthenian community recall the Yugoslav times when intercultural education of learning each other languages was a common practice, nowadays perceived solely as the right of minorities to preserve own identity and traditions and not as something to be shared with majoritarian or other minority populations (XI). Speaking about education, ideas to open Serbian classes in Ruthenian schools for the sake of enhancing intercultural dialogue failed completely as during past 20 years they led to gradual closures of Ruthenian classes and strengthened assimilation tendencies (XI). Today, the only school with full instruction in Ruthenian in Ruski Krstur serves as the bone of contention with local authorities in Kula. Supposedly, current president of the local council known for nationalist stances exerts pressure on Serbian minority or simply people having Serbian surnames in Ruski Krstur in order to request establishment of the Serbian class in the school (XI). Such activities are greatly feared by local Ruthenians worried about the fact that opening Serbian division will replicate scenarios experienced in other educational facilities and could lead to ultimate closure of Ruthenian education in Vojvodina (XI). Other small aspect regards the fact that despite Vojvodinian minorities are well-integrated in local multicultural society there is utterly no interaction with non-Vojvodinian minorities especially coming from southern Serbia (XI). Similarly to the case of Slavonia, multicultural participation to cultural festivals is a common practice across Vojvodina.



*Hungarian representation at the Ruthenian culinary festival*

### EFFECTIVE ROLE OF MEDIA

Another aspect of effective cultural participation regards the way how media facilitate the access to information and support social cohesion. “*When watching broadcasts about us in the local media we feel like a ZOO, as if Ruthenians would only dance and eat*” (III). This view is shared equally by Croatian and Serbian Ruthenians. “*Folklorisation*” prevailing in TV and radio programmes on minorities cannot contribute to enhanced social cohesion as majority population receives highly distorted picture of the daily life of Ruthenians (V). Autonomous Vojvodinian broadcaster RTV attempted in early 2010’ to offer quite a vanguard approach towards produced materials including as well the focus on modern and alternative cultural aspects of the life of minorities that even dragged the interest of non-Vojvodinian audience, however, political changes in 2012 brought about the return to traditional folk focus (XIII). Interestingly enough, state RTS does not have a single broadcast that would be devoted to the aspect of minorities despite 20% of Serbian population being comprised of minorities. The only opportunity for Ruthenians to appear on RTS are culinary shows where “*folk distortion*” continues. In the prism of ministerial intervention in the RTS office to change the attitude towards minorities, RTS crew produced a rather irrelevant material of children cycling to their school in Ruski Krstur completely disregarding the minority aspect of the visited place and mocking the reason for ministerial intervention (XI). A positive note however is inscribed to the

introduction of subtitles to all broadcasts at RTV so that users of other languages can follow minority programmes (XIII).

### TRANSBORDER COOPERATION BETWEEN SERBIAN AND CROATIAN RUTHENIANS

Looking into the details of effective cultural participation, I believe that quite significant aspect concerns as well the way how cultural participation is being affected by the fact of Ruthenians living on both sides of Danube serving nowadays as the state border between Croatia and Serbia. Despite the prevailing discourse of a common origin of Ruthenians coming from the same place of Ruski Krstur expressed today with a number of family relations (IX), some aspects have negative effects that hinder transborder cooperation. Firstly, the war of 1991-1992 left a vivid trail taking into consideration the fact that popular mobilisation of Serbian and Croatian divisions incorporated to a great extent local minorities which paradoxically contraposed Ruthenians on two adversary sides of the armed conflict (I). Despite minorities did everything possible to prevent bloodshed within own national communities divided by newly erected boundary, devastating effects leading to the loss of 3% of Croatian Ruthenians (IV) antagonised the sense of shared lands and considerably limited transborder contacts. Secondly, Croatia joining the EU is often portrayed by Serbian Ruthenians as entering irreconcilable legal framework which precludes the organisation of transborder initiatives, however, this argument is often utilised as an excuse to avoid cooperating with the Croatian side (VII). On the other hand, a positive aspect regards the implementation of the “Dunav nas spaja” (Danube connects us) project supported by the EU which is interpreted as a political pressure on Croatia to support EU candidates with cultural transborder cooperation. Interestingly enough, Zagreb reinterpreting the aim of the project by concentrating on transborder cooperation of Hungarians and Ruthenians so that financial support for Belgrade could have been considerably limited satisfies both the EU and transborder minorities being key recipients of the project (I).

### EQUAL EMPLOYMENT

Moving to the aspect of socio-economic participation, one of the few aspects that might be relevant for the case of Ruthenians regards equal employment opportunities and representation of minority quotas in public sector where applicable. Despite no major issues expressed on both sides of the border,

Serbian Ruthenians sometimes pointed to common nepotism that might be understood as derivative form of discrimination since there is no “Ruthenian tycoons” on the market whereas the Serbian ones tend to select only “own people” (VI). Two interesting issues were observed however. Firstly, Croatian regulation on employment preference of children of homeland defenders sometimes collides with minority quotas established by state legislation as deciding actors unlawfully prioritise the claim of regulatory preference to employ children of homeland defenders instead of members of national minorities (I). Secondly, minority quotas are sometimes abused in Serbia as in the case of the Pedagogical Institute in Novi Sad where all minority quotas are filled by Hungarians despite presence of other minorities in the city (X).

### REPRESENTATION IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Public administration is another essential aspect for effective participation which at the same time affects cultural, socio-economic and political dimensions having a significant connection with the aspect of language rights. On both sides of the border administrative hurdles regard the challenge to receive documents in Ruthenian which is the reference to the second hypothesis of this paper concerning excessive assimilation. *“When you go to the office and ask someone for the documents in Ruthenian they will tell you anything possible to discourage you explaining the complex procedure that will take months whereas Serbian documents can be received within days”* (XI). *“We wanted to get our IDs in Ruthenian but the procedure was very long, administration sent us documents with spelling mistakes a couple of times and then we had to send them back, getting documents in Ruthenian is like playing ping-pong, less than ten people in Croatia dared to get their IDs in Ruthenian”* (II). *“In Sombor they told me I cannot get my ID in Ruthenian because there is no Ruthenian translator. In Kula they said the procedure is too complex because they have to proceed this through Sombor”* (V). These experiences portray very accurately the absurdity of administrative hurdles and the lack of implementability of one of the key guarantees written in legal frameworks. Eventually, excessive assimilation discourages the majority of Ruthenians from enjoying this particular right as the administrative argument of *“why do you need to complicate, Ruthenian and Serbian are almost identical”* prevails and reassures that the use of own language in public administration is nothing more than creating redundant effort (VII). This goes even further as one of my interviewees reported that a doctor in Vrbas hospital refused to talk in Ruthenian later explaining it: *“I did not want to disturb*

*my Serbian colleagues*” (X). Other aspects include deliberate spelling mistakes so that Ruthenian names are written in the same way as Serbian ones (X), lack of translators with the most critical example of Vrbas that even refused to inform the Ministry about knowledge of minority languages in administration offices (XI) or blatant mistakes on Ruthenian information boards and traffic signs (XI). Interestingly enough, numerous constraints of Ruthenian language limiting participation in public administration are not interpreted as discrimination practices unless state services prevent Ruthenians from economic exclusion or physical violence (XII) being another consequence of excessive assimilation. This phenomenon was coined as the “self-colonisation” (XIII) triggered by the fear of exposing to unnecessary curiosity and potential loss of hitherto ensured rights.



*Traffic sign of the city of Begeč written with Macedonian "r" instead of Ruthenian "r"*

## EFFECTIVE ROLE OF NATIONAL COUNCILS

The final aspect of this paper takes into consideration political participation in inclusive decision-making processes. On the Croatian side, my interviewees mentioned that the law enables Ruthenians to establish advisory councils to Vukovarsko-srijemska županija (over 500 minority representatives required) and concerned občinas (over 150 minority representatives required) which effectively consult implementation of local regulations (III, IV). A point of criticism has been directed towards several politicians who concealed their Ruthenian identity when running in županija level elections, however, Ruthenian background did not preclude one candidate winning council elections in Croatian majoritarian town of Jankovci becoming vice- and then key governor for the period of 12 years (I). National councils supposed to effectuate the role of political

representation in Serbia are coming under rising criticism. Despite previous governments endeavoured not to interfere into elections to national councils, there is a considerable pressure from the side of ruling SNS attempting to control the Ruthenian National Council and introduce own party members manipulating Ruthenian electorate by inviting to abundant dinners or organising trips to monasteries (XI). At the same time, previous elections noted a number of alarming issues such as excessive turnout in the town of Đurđevo (X) that eventually delegitimises the role of national councils and discourages Ruthenians from political participation. Knowing the context of rising authoritarianism in Serbia, ruling SNS attempting to extend control to small national councils of minorities demonstrates that inclusive political participation is under serious threat.

### REPRESENTATION IN JUDICIARY

No major issues were observed when it comes to the representation in judiciary as small number of Ruthenians does not require complete representation. Interestingly enough, one of my interviewees mentioned that some people abuse the right and demand the conduct of proceedings in Ruthenian in order to extend the time of the whole procedure (X) whereas 2 Ruthenian judges across whole Serbia cannot handle all proceedings being realised in Ruthenian (XI).

### CONCLUSION

In summary, this paper attempted to use a bottom-up approach in order to offer an alternative interpretation of effective participation analysed from the perspective of Ruthenian minority providing a vast empirical material to the literature on small, well-integrated and assimilated minorities in SEE. With reference to the research question and two hypotheses, the following conclusions might be observed:

- [1] Inadequate allocation of funds, lack of transparency and controlling mechanisms as well as politicised decision-making process impacted by cronyism all impair effectuation of cultural participation of Ruthenians otherwise ensured by legal frameworks of Croatian grant schemes and Serbian national councils;
- [2] “Folklorisation” of media, unrealised potential of Vojvodinian multiculturalism and limited effect of transborder cooperation



additionally negatively impact effectuation of cultural participation of Ruthenians;

- [3] Excessive assimilation discourages Ruthenians to enjoy language rights to effectuate participation on the level of public administration whereas preference mechanisms or common stigmatisation motivates some to hide Ruthenian identity impairing effective participation in socio-economic and political dimensions;
- [4] A negative trend of rising governmental influence on the National Council of Ruthenians in Serbia poses a threat to effective political participation.

Јакуб Степањук

#### ЕФЕКТИВНО УЧЕШЋЕ РУСИНА У СРБИЈИ И ХРВАТСКОЈ

Пројекат је заснован на теренском раду током прве две недеље јуна 2022. године у Славонији и Војводини и обухвата тринаест интервјуа са локалним представницима русинске националне мањине. Има за циљ истраживање и евалуацију поштовања и остваривања права на ефективно учешће Русина у Србији и Хрватској у светлу члана 15 Оквирне конвенције за заштиту националних мањина (ОКНМ). Тумачење ефективног учешћа даље је представљена у културној, социо-економској и политичкој сфери. Рад је заснован на две хипотезе: (1) да права нису у потпуности остварена због неадекватног финансирања (2) да права нису у потпуности остварена због прекомерне асимилације која узрокује ограничену свест о идентитету, административне/ бирократске препреке и измењена перцепција дискриминације. Рад доприноси академској литератури на много начина. Као прво, примењује приступ одоздо према горе, који укључује интердисциплинарну етнографску и високо емпиријску истраживачку филозофију ка правној анализи учешћа мањина у којој тренутно доминирају системски и дизајнерски дискурси. Овај прилично технички начин правног истраживања присутан је у ОКНМ извештајима у којима се помињу „мањи проблеми“ русинске заједнице занемарујући многе детаље актуелне ситуације. Као друго, овај рад доприноси проучавању русинске мањине јер у постојећој литератури недостаје перспектива правних анализа које су замућене историјским и лингвистичким фокусима. Рад би на крају могао послужити као модел за истраживање малих и асимилацији склоних мањина широм Јужне и Источне Европе.

*Кључне речи:* Русини, ефективно учешће, национална мањина, идентитет, асимилација.

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