

## ESTABLISHING A PUBLIC SPHERE IN A CROATIAN BORDERLAND

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As an ethnographer of journalistic practice and ideology, I have been exploring contested public imaginings and ethno-national reconceptualizations taking place in a border zone Croatian territory that has been a political flashpoint and the site of military conflicts and occupations. Looking at the everyday working lives of mass media people placed at a key point for their community's consensus-building, this article primarily focuses on the very limited media choices available in the small and impoverished city of Knin, the regional capital of the ethno-nationally contested Krajina region of Croatia, where both Croats and Serbs historically have vied for political, economic, and symbolic dominance.

### **Ethno-national Radio in Disputed Regions**

The Knin broadcast area represents a particular type of media situation that has emerged in the past decade in Croatian territory. *Hrvatski Radio Knin (HRK)* is the one local media institution currently functioning in Knin and it appears to have had, as its over-arching purpose and main functioning, the goal of establishing an ethno-national public sphere in its broadcast area. In doing so, *HRK* thereby plants what I call an "aural flag" that symbolically marks its ethno-national presence in the territory.

In setting out to conduct research in Knin in late winter of 2003, I was expecting to find some kind of explicitly Serb attempt to counteract this Croatian claim by responding to Croat assertions with parallel mass media or by seeking inclusion in this civic community and public sphere. I anticipated a number of objects to be at stake here. Depending on each community's intentionality, possible outcomes of this contest would be the establishment of either exclusive Serb or Croat ethno-national control of the region or the building of a

pluralistic community, a small-scale civil society where state citizenship may overshadow ethnic and national affiliation. In short, I expected to find dichotomy of sorts, with Croats on one side, with media power under a flag firmly planted, and Serbs on the other, without.

### **Mapping the Croatian Mediascape**

In order to understand the emerging Croatian mediascape, I have explored these areas outside of Croatia's main cities and media centers, beyond the mainstream of political and economic power in the country. Border zones have a gravitational pull on these administrative centers and are essential to the national imagining of the Croatian nation and state. As under-settled places of economic depression with unsettled ethno-national issues, Knin and the Krajina are unresolved problems which could potentially undermine the Croatian state's political aspirations vis-à-vis the European Union, NATO, and Western powers in general. As the movement of Croat, Serb and Bosnian populations continues, their state of flux and *de facto* inclusion and exclusion from each other's local civic lives holds Croatia back from normalizing as a modern democracy. Even as Croatia tries to reject its ties to the Balkans and all of the instability and so-called primitiveness and tribalisms associated with the region, the ethno-national questions of the local public sphere of small cities like Knin remain integral to Croatia's future.

This "aural flag" type of radio is one part of the emerging and transitioning Croatian mediascape that I have been mapping during my dissertation research. Through ethnographic research, I have come to know radio stations and other media in less ethno-nationally contested areas of Croatia, namely radio stations in cities understood to be majoritarian "Croat".

As an ethno-nationally contested space, Knin creates a problem for a Croatian journalistic profession that imagines itself and its nation as being in the process of becoming modern. Knin is a sore spot, where the questions of national-statist sovereign drive towards civil society and a so-called free market are far from settled. Instead, Knin's economic and political structures and its visions of itself are bifurcated, dependent on Zagreb or on contradicting foreign sources. Knin has no shared imaginary, its public sphere cannot be a social totality. Working with *Radio Knin* journalists and with people trying to create other forms of media in Knin, I have explored questions of how they see their role in creating and maintaining their ethno-national and/or civic community and the public sphere, how they envision modernity and Croatia's place in the "modern" world, how they see their agency, how they relate to the social systems and institutions within which they work. I have sought to understand how media people in Knin see (or do not see) themselves as territorially planted (as "aural flag"), yet also as part of a globalizing and de-territorializing mass media. I have asked about a range of personal journalistic purposes: is journalism primarily a means to a paycheck? Does journalism mean an ethnic and national duty to one's people? Or is it a public and civic responsibility to all people living in one's broadcast range?

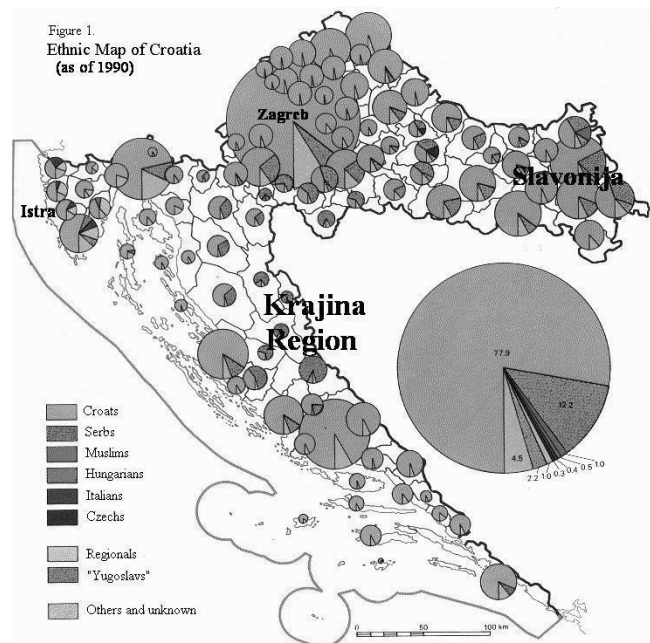
### Background: Knin and Knin's Broadcast Media

The most recent power swing in the Krajina took place in August 1995, when the Croatian Army took the region back from Serb paramilitaries. Within less than twenty-four hours of retaking Knin, Croatian Radio & Television (*HRT*)<sup>1</sup> workers from Split and Zadar established *Hrvatski Radio Knin*, which began broadcasting immediately, such was the perceived importance of having a mass media presence in the region. *HRK* was ostensibly meant to serve its community, mass-mediating a Croatian public sphere. However, *HRK* barely had an audience during its first months of broadcasting as most native Croats had fled from far from the transmission range and had not yet returned. For this reason, the primary *raison d'être* of Croatian radio stations like *HRK* has been as "aural flags" symbolically laying claim to territory.

"Krajina" can be translated loosely as "the border region." Historically under-

populated, Croats have never fully occupied the area, yet they have seen it as theirs. Five hundred years ago, many Serb Orthodox people, displaced by northward Ottoman expansion settled the region and served as a "border guard" for European Christendom against the infidels. Much later, the multi-ethnic Yugoslav state urged more Serb in-migration. Although formally a part of Croatia, it had a majority Serb population.

As the largest city in the Krajina region, Knin had a Serb-run and Serb-language radio



station since the early 1960s. In 1991, as Croatian President Franjo Tuđman was declaring Croatian national independence from what was considered a Serb-controlled Yugoslav government, Krajina Serbs, with Yugoslav army help, made their own breakaway from the breakaway Croatia. Declaring their *Srpska Krajina* an independent state, they made Knin their capital and began broadcasting not just radio, but also television. Croats, who were in the minority, fled the region. Meanwhile, Serbs fleeing the unfriendly climate of other parts of Croatia, as well as Muslim- or Croatian-controlled areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina, came to Knin and the Krajina to occupy abandoned Croat homes.

Serbs controlled the Krajina until 1995, when the Croatian Army took back most of the occupied territories. Krajina Serbs fled into Serb-controlled parts of Bosnia, putting up little

resistance, because they knew that Belgrade, under international pressure from the Dayton Peace Accords, would do nothing to support them.

Taking back Knin was wildly celebrated throughout Croatia. Then-President Franjo Tuđman spoke about national perseverance and millennial destiny beneath a giant Croatian flag unfurled atop the hilltop fortress in the center of the city. And, even though Knin was virtually a ghost town, a triumphalist *Hrvatski Radio Knin* broadcast in Croatian to the depopulated countryside, a sovereign symbol of the Croatian nation-state. Soon however, domestic Croats resettled the town, some had fled the Serb aggression in 1991, and others were looking for some of the economic benefits the government offered (housing in abandoned Serb houses, tax breaks, etc.). A large number of the new settlers, however, were not domestic Croats, but instead Bosnian Croat refugees, mostly fleeing ethnically cleansed Serb-dominated areas of Bosnia.

*HRK* still broadcasts today and the giant flag still flies above the fortress; these are visual and aural reminders that Knin is a *Croatian* town where *Croats* hold power. At the same time, *HRK* gives voice to Croats, creating at least a semblance of a Croatian public sphere. *HRK*'s music, news and information creates a forum promoting the social imaginary of a Croatian community.

All the while, Serbs are returning to Knin and re-registering their citizenship at municipal offices just down the street from *HRK*. Many only come back for a day or two in order to visit, to set their papers right and to explore the prospects of a resettling, but every month the population grows with Serbs who intend to settle there permanently. Returning Serb refugees are encouraged by Western aid and peacekeeping organizations and are forming their own organizations to facilitate resettlement and the rebuilding of their community.

### **The People of Hrvatski Radio Knin**

While grand speeches in 1995 may have extolled the steadfastness of the Croatian people and Knin's central role to the Croatian nation, most Croats see Knin as an exceptionally undesirable place to live. Indeed, when I told friends from Zagreb that I would be living in Knin, they

would usually grimace, asking incredulously "why?" For all the trouble in re-establishing a Croatian presence in Knin, including *HRK*'s start-up, the town still feels like a place in flux with a population still looking for something for better, but not expecting to find it in Knin.

Like much of Knin's population, many *HRK* personnel are anything but permanent residents. Most came from somewhere else to work in Knin. The only Knin native at *HRK* said she very much missed Zagreb where she had lived as a refugee. Jelena had fled Knin in 1991 but, encouraged by government incentives and seeing the radio work as an opportunity, she enthusiastically returned in 1996. Today her enthusiasm has all but dissipated, as she fears for the future as Serbs return. She will not tell me outwardly that Serbs are dangerous people, but she does not mask her dislike and fear, worrying about her children's prospects if they become a minority in what she sees as *her* homeland, not the Serbs' homeland.

Another *HRK* journalist, Oliva, also spoke contradictorily, emphasizing the importance of the station to Knin and the importance of Knin to Croatia, but expressing a strong personal dislike for the town. Knin's financial advantages helped her, but she described Knin life as deadening and the demographic changes as disturbing. Oliva talked about her work's importance, about creating an objective, yet hopeful, voice in this financially (and psychologically) depressed region, about telling the truth in news reporting, while not letting negatives overwhelm the positives, but she admitted that this was difficult to do.

Two other *HRK* employees, Vanda and Drago, wife and husband, were refugees from northern Bosnia, where they had been part of a Croatian minority. Now they were Croatian citizens, and no longer held refugee status. They were resigned to living in Knin and did not expect to return to their home city. While still angry about being driven out by Serbs, they claimed to harbor no bitterness towards Serbs in general when talking to me. However, other people attributed strong anti-Serb statements to them and their programming choices indicated, if not active disdain for the Serb population, at least a passive non-accommodation of Serbs.

Only one *HRK* person really spoke of Knin as *home*. Ognjen was a young jack-of-all-

trades employee engaged to a Serb woman with a small baby. After his family moved to Knin in 1996 when he was a teenager, Ognjen became involved in *HRK*, helping with music and technical problems, as well as taking on journalistic responsibilities. His situation was particularly interesting because he quietly but steadily opposed most of his colleagues' nationalistic attitudes, holding to a different sense of "objectivity" and "truth" in his everyday approach to his journalistic duties. Despite his nervousness about fatherhood and the Romeo-Juliet context of his relationship with his Serb fiancée, Ognjen sees the future as bright.

*HRK* reflects a limited spectrum of attitudes and dispositions, in changing circumstances. Once an "aural flag" proudly displayed by the Croatian government under President Franjo Tudman, *HRK*'s symbolic significance has been devalued, even as its potential importance as a community-builder for Croats remains. Despite the Serb return, *HRK* has remained resolutely Croat. Plans to bring in Serb programming are unclear or at least not on the immediate horizon. *HRK*'s director says she is not opposed to having Serbs join the station, but she has not received any orders concerning this. Nor has she done anything to facilitate it. My questions about Serb inclusion appeared to have been interpreted as almost out-of-line, or out-of-the-question. Some things the ethnographer is not supposed to ask about.

#### ***Hrvatski Radio Knin and the Serb Return***

*HRK*'s purpose is being re-evaluated via competing pressures. On the one hand, the current pro-western Croatian government wants to appease national feeling by holding strong Croatian positions (i.e., support for something like *HRK*), but on the other hand, the government is pressured by Western governments and aid organizations to facilitate the return of Serb refugees and build multi-ethnic civil society in the region. As it is currently composed, *Hrvatski Radio Knin* is an ethnically divisive factor in Knin, and decidedly not a civic unifier. Adding to the mix is the government's economic rationalizing at Croatian Radio & Television in Zagreb: *HRK* is money pit. In economically depressed Knin, no one can pay for advertising and Zagreb almost wholly subsidizes the station.

The burgeoning Serb presence in and around Knin has changed the context in which *HRK* now broadcasts and endeavors to create a Croatian public sphere. The 2000 census put the Serb population in the region at slightly over twenty percent, but very many people with whom I have spoken consider this number to be low. In an ethno-politically charged area where a few years ago one's ethnicity could get one killed, will a Serb always tell the Croatian census taker that he or she is Serb? In any case, even if the 2000 figure was accurate, it is obvious that the number of Serb returnees is growing. This creates tension as they try to reclaim their homes where domestic and Bosnian Croats have now been living for the past seven or eight years. Based on my observations of other ethnographically contested regions of Croatia, I was expecting to find at least some nascent plans underway for a "Serb Radio Knin" with possible support from international donors (i.e., OSCE), who provide support for so-called minority radio.<sup>ii</sup> However, I was only partially correct. I found no embryonic plans for a Serb or a minority radio station during my stay in Knin, but ironically, I did find that some international aid organizations expressed a willingness to help support Serb or minority media there.

#### **An Alternative Proposal: Radio HUK?**

Instead of an explicitly Serb/"minority" media movement, what I found was a non-governmental organization, *Humanosti Urbanost Kultura* (*HUK*, "Humanity, Urbanity, Culture"), founded in the year 2000. *HUK* was actively promoting artistic happenings and awareness of Culture and civic-mindedness amongst youth in the city. The nearest bookstore, music shop, or active theatre was more than an hour and half away from this supposed regional center, but *HUK* members have found some success in filling this void by sponsoring concerts, theatrical events, and workshops and even establishing a library in Knin. As part of a plan (or perhaps dream) of a multi-media center, one of the leading *HUK* members, the driven and uncompromising Igor, has developed an ambitious proposal for a radio station that would serve as an alternative to what *HUK* members saw as the "nationalistic" and "boring" *Hrvatski Radio Knin* and he was applying to various international agencies for support. Igor was from Knin and had a Serb parent and a Croat parent, but had identified as Croat in order to stay in the Croatian city of Split when Knin was

Serb-occupied. He had worked for the *HRT Radio Split* and then came to work for *HRK* when Zagreb's *HRT* was founding the station. However he had become embattled with the *HRK* director and had acrimoniously quit in 1998 (second-handedly, I heard that Igor's obstinacy and other unfavorable characteristics were attributed to his half-Serb parentage at this time).

Igor's radio station plan reflects his and *HUK*'s vision of good radio – “modern, urban, open, objective, young, multi-cultural”, in other words, “everything that *Radio Knin* is not”. Significantly, *Radio HUK* proponents envision their would-be station as opposite to *HRK*, but not in the sense of being an opposing minority. That is, it would not be Serb minority *vs.* Croatian majority. Instead, it would point toward the multi-ethnic backgrounds of some *HUK* members as well as the frustrations of many young people with their *opterećenje* (burdened) parents' generation, “burdened” that is, with ethnicity.

*Radio HUK* as it was initially proposed did not so much purposefully downplay ethnicity, as much as deny its central relevance. Unfortunately, this has not been understood very well by the international aid community, which seems only able to recognize the need for minority media, that is Serb media, in Knin. For this reason, a resistant Igor has been pressured to alter *HUK*'s application strategy to foreground how their station would emphasize (Serb) minority voices. This has not been easy because some *HUK* members fear that *Radio HUK* will be immediately labeled as a Serb station. This, they say would be divisive and would implicitly exclude Croat participation in the station. In other words, following international aid community diktats could potentially turn *Radio HUK* into exclusivist ethno-national radio like *Hrvatski Radio Knin*. Instead, *HUK* members want their station to be inclusive of all young people in the Knin community. Unfortunately, the wants and needs of the international aid bureaucracies often have to be met before the wants and needs of the communities that they are mandated to serve.

### **Not Two, But Three Peoples**

Part of the problem in understanding Knin and its (still-forming) public sphere(s) is that its population is not made up of a simple Croat *vs.*

Serb dichotomy. Instead, three distinct populations must be recognized. First, domestic Croats, people originally from Knin who returned after 1995 or economic or military migrants seeking better opportunities within Croatia. The second group consists of Serbs, who are slowly but steadily returning. They collectively have a bad name throughout most of Croatia, but the militants and provocateurs of the war years are not amongst the returnees because of the particularly unwelcoming atmosphere (including war crimes indictments in some cases). Many returning Serbs show a mixture of contrition, as well as sadness and anger about what both Serb and Croat militants did to their community.

A third distinct community often overlooked by outsiders consists of Bosnian Croats who fled Serb-occupied parts of Bosnia during the war. Few of them are still considered refugees, however, since they have become Croatian citizens. Some have been able to return to their Bosnian villages and rebuild their houses there, yet legally live in Knin too, very often in the houses that Serbs abandoned in 1995. One domestic Croat described Bosnian Croats with strong resentment: “they're a tribe that doesn't care about Knin” because they stick together doing their “black market trade, collecting welfare, and use their reconstructed village houses in Bosnia as summer homes”. Some people have pointed out that domestic Croats and Serbs get along better with each other than either group does with Bosnian Croats. This might be made more understandable by considering that that domestic Croats and returning Serbs are in their homeland, but the Bosnian Croats still feel like expellees who were victimized by Serbs.

Members of these three groups live throughout Knin. The social borders between them are by no means impermeable, but markers of distinction do exist. For example, certain café-bars are understood to be Bosnian Croat or Serb and their patrons conform to this designation. The ethnic gap, however, is also a generation gap. That is, the older people keep to their kind more, while the younger people, teens and twenty-somethings, are more likely to have Serb, domestic Croat and Bosnian Croat friends. A fairly young high school teacher said that this situation should not be idealized as perfectly peaceful, but that he found this to be the trend. The parents were *opterećenje* (burdened), while the kids were much less so.

### Media in Knin, in the Past, in the Future

*HRK*, in this way, has played to the older generation of Croats, who are of a more rural and provincial mindset. The proponents of the would-be *Radio HUK* meanwhile believe that Knin's younger population is not served by any media. Private Zagreb-based radio and television stations, which supposedly broadcast to the whole of Croatia do not have signals that Knin antennae can pick up, so Knin is served by only stodgy state broadcasting (*HRT*) from Zagreb and Split aside from the tilted and stilted *HRK*. In a conversation with one young woman, I was trying to sum up her negative description of *HRK* and asked, "Are you saying *Radio Knin* is about the past?" and she answered, "Yes, and our *HUK* radio would be for the future."

Knin's public sphere, as understood as broadcasting or press concept, is decidedly Croatian-dominated. Domestic and Bosnian Croats are still the majority population and, by virtue of their being part of the Croatian Republic, the state provides the city with *Hrvatski Radio Knin*. No other print or electronic alternatives exist. With an impermanent population with relatively shallow or recently deracinated roots, however, separate public spheres exist more in Habermas' sense of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century cafés (i.e., Serbs have their cafés, Bosnian Croats have theirs...). Knin remains socially still inchoate, divided yet evolving, all within a Croatian framework. Whether its public sphere/s development is taking place within (a necessarily Croatian) ethno-national framework or statist civil society framework, remains a question.

*HRK*, at this writing, continues as Croatian media. It is not rabidly nationalist; it has apparently toned down its rhetoric and its Croatian journalists occasionally host Serb guests. However, it is definitely not a comfortable place for Serbs, nor is it a radio station that a Serb or for that matter any one under thirty or forty is likely to regularly tune into to. Zagreb's *HRT* has sent some subtle signals indicating changes may be in the offing for *HRK*, but Zagreb's bureaucratic pace does not promise rapid results (also, 2003/2004 elections may see a reversion to a moderate Tudmanist ethno-political landscape again).

The would-be *Radio HUK* should only be spoken about with the uncertainty of the

conditional. At this point the impoverished city of Knin could not support a private radio station in so-called free market conditions, so the only chance for *HUK* would be through international funding. However, donors have been pulling up stakes all over Croatia. The bulk of aid money first moved on to Kosovo, then Serbia, and now further east, to Afghanistan and Iraq, so *HUK* may be asking for too much, too late. Additionally, the few donor agencies that do still exist in Knin are enthusiastic to support Serb minority media, but cannot grasp *HUK*'s attempts to fulfill Knin's greater media needs. One suggestion generated by an international aid office in Knin has been to fund minority programming on *HRK*, but this reflects the office's unawareness of local media realities: first, that *HRK* would be somewhat hostile to this proposal; second, *HUK* members, led by the former *HRK*-employee Igor, would reciprocate this animosity; and third, *HUK* sees a need not for ethnic minority media, but for non-ethnically identified media for a younger generation completely separate from the staid and stolid *HRT* bureaucracy.

### By Way of Inclusion

This research shows us the usefulness of ethnographic participant observation and the need to contextualize seemingly straightforward issues in history, economics and interpersonal relationships. Knin is an economically depressed city in a poor region that has seen war completely destroy its industry and prompt wholesale population changes. Knin is divided, but not along simplistic ethno-national lines. Therefore simplistic solutions (i.e., international aid community mandates) could exacerbate tensions more than resolve them. As it stands now, *HRK* and its journalists largely work against this, supporting an exclusivist Croatian position and doing little to attract younger listeners. The proposal for *Radio HUK* looks to address these community needs, but this is still only an idea on paper that may never be realized because of a lack of funding, as well as obdurate personalities. While finding whole community consensus is chimerical, it is surely important to envision a public sphere that unites people into a social imaginary, and that is inclusive of Croats, domestic, Bosnian, and Serb, young and old.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> A note on the abbreviations and names I am using: Hrvatski Radio Knin is "Croatian Radio Knin" which is part of the state-run network Hrvatski Radio i Televizija (HRT, or "Croatian Radio and Television"). I am usually referring to the station simply as Radio Knin except when I am trying to emphasize the fact that Hrvatski, "Croatian", is used in the station's name, thus clearly marking the station's ethno-national orientation.

<sup>ii</sup> That is, minority radio in Knin's situation would mean an international donor would support Serbs who are, at this point, still a minority in the region. This would be a bitter paradox for some Croats because they were the minority who were driven out in 1991

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and now are afraid of becoming minority  
again as Serbs, who had fled in 1995 return.