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Minority media build bridges on European Congress of Ethnic Minorities

‘Wir bauen Brücken/Gradimo Mostove’ – ‘We build bridges’ was the motto for minority media representatives from 22 countries gathering last weekend in Ossiach for the European Congress of Ethnic Minorities. The importance of media for minorities was in focus on this year’s conference, held for the 13th time in the Austrian village in the southern region of Carinthia. Even though the conference was mainly focusing on German-speaking minority media, also other examples – especially the case of the Slovene minority living in Carinthia – were discussed. ‘Wir bauen Brücken/Gradimo Mostove’ – ‘We build bridges’ was the motto for minority media representatives from 22 countries gathering last weekend in Ossiach for the European Congress of Ethnic Minorities. The importance of media for minorities was in focus on this year’s conference, held for the 13th time in the Austrian village in the southern region of Carinthia. Even though the conference was mainly focusing on German-speaking minority media, also other examples – especially the case of the Slovene minority living in Carinthia – were discussed.

When looking after standards for minorities, media is often not the first thing to be considered. ‘Article 7 of the Austrian treaty [1955] does not speak at all about the provision of media for minorities. Its importance was mentioned for the first time in the Framework Convention [1998] and the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages [2001], explained Karl Anderwald, Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Carinthian Institute for Ethnic Minorities (CIFEM) in his introduction.

Anderwald discussed protection documents for linguistic minorities, and Romedi Arquint, President of the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), suggested the same for the majorities: ‘We have to protect the monolingual majority, so that they are ‘cured’ from their monolingualism’. Arquint especially criticised the poor media supply for linguistic communities with less than 100,000 speakers.

Especially media presence on local and regional levels is important, stressed Toni Ebner, President of the European Minority Daily

Associations (MIDAS). 'A lot of the big media companies are facing difficult times now,' explained Ebner, who is also Editor-in-Chief of the minority daily 'Dolomiten' in South Tyrol (Italy). 'And at the same time regional and local newspapers together reach a much larger audience than big newspapers like Le Monde, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung or Corriere della Sera.'

Klaus Pekarek, Chairman of the Foundation Council at the Austrian broadcaster ORF, encouraged minority media to 'not look exclusively for public funding, but to also find long-running opportunities to become more independent.'

It was generally agreed that media is the voice of the minorities, but also a valuable asset to keep the language competence among its speakers. 'Media is especially important to preserve the variety of cultures, as this is the distinctive, profound and only heritage in Europe,' said Bojan Brezigar, President of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages (EBLUL).

This goes also in line with Lojze Peterle, representative of the candidate countries at the European Convention, who called attention to the 'small ones' in Europe. Thereby he was not only referring to the different minorities, but also to the smaller states, for example his own country Slovenia. 'In the European Union of the future, borders will break down, but not identities. They only become stronger', said Peterle.

The conference was a cooperation between the European Ethnic Broadcasting Association (EeBA), European journalists, the Carinthian Institute for Ethnic Minorities (CIFEM), Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa) and the bureau for ethnic minorities of Carinthia. (EL)