

The Media and Democratic Consolidation in Post-Communist Eastern Europe

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1. Introduction

It is not insignificant that the role of mass media is today analysed alongside that of such major institutions as parliaments, executives, political parties and elections. This is so probably because, besides its main function to inform and shape public opinion, media has been quite influential in determining the type of political regime and, in particular, during the transition to and consolidation of democracy. Since the early 1970s, the importance not only of broadcast but also of printed media has been growing continuously.¹ Although it is difficult to be specific about how large the direct impact of media on political behaviour and decision-making is, it is nevertheless certain that media fills some important gaps in the field of social communication. These opportunities for the media have appeared predominantly as a result of the declining role of political parties as intermediaries between state elites and the citizens, as well as following the increasing influence of international factors on the domestic political arena.²

2. Varieties of Media, and Possible Ways of Controlling It

Two of the basic distinctions between the various kinds of media systems are between (a) public and private and between (b) printed and broadcast media. Until not long

¹ **Rogers, E. (1976)**; "Communication and Development: The Passing of a Dominant Paradigm", *Communication Research*, No. 3 (1976), pp. 213-40; **Rosen, J. (1992)**; "Politics, Vision, and the Press: Toward a Public Agenda for Journalism", in *The New News vs. The Old News*, J. Rosen and P. Taylor (eds.), (NY: Twentieth Century Fund Press), pp. 3-33; and **Fallows, J. (1994)**; "Did you have a good week?", *The Atlantic Monthly*, 274 (6), pp. 32-33.

² **Blumler, J. (1983)**; *Communicating to Voters*, (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publication); **Blumler, J. and Gurevitch, M. (1995)**; *The Crisis of Public Communication*, (London: Routledge Publishers, 1995); and **McQuail, D. (1996)**; *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction*, third edition, (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE, 1996).

ago, one of the crucial criteria determining the relative independence of media was its being private, i.e. not being in the hands of state agencies. This seemed to be a valid argument at the time, especially against the background of a well-recorded experience of domination of the media by *nomenklatura* organisations and authoritarian regime's appointees in communist Eastern Europe and in other parts of the world. Nowadays, international bodies that monitor the freedom of media have pointed out that new, subtler methods have been devised by autocratic rulers to silence independent and alternative sources of information.³

First, media can be a private monopoly, i.e. in the hands of people close to the political regime or individuals who do not necessarily have the ambition of improving the performance of democracy, but are primarily profit-driven and, hence, have other more prosaic and commercial ideas in mind.⁴ Secondly, it has been almost a trend in autocratic and semi-autocratic regimes that political elites have attempted to establish a governmental or private-based monopoly on broadcast media, namely, on television and radio, and, occasionally, on the internet too. Currently, countries with similar, rather comprehensive restrictions on the media are the Republic of China, Singapore, Saudia Arabia and Iran. Thirdly, there has been a different category political leaders that have been willing to control the flow of information, but have been less inclined to impose explicit restrictions on the media or to control free access to it completely because of substantial domestic and international pressure.⁵ The best-known examples of this phenomenon in post-communist Eastern Europe have been Tudjman's Croatia, Milosevic's Yugoslavia, Shevernadze's Georgia, Meciar's Slovakia and Berisha's Albania (especially at the end of his mandate). These more intricate methods of censorship have been reinforced by the close contacts of the people in power with representatives of the business elite that kept a virtual monopoly on advertisement both in broadcast and printed media in post-communist Eastern Europe and in other

³ See among others the annual reports on media freedom of the *Freedom House*, *Journalistes sans Frontiers*, *European Media Institute (EMI)*, as well as The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the Transparency International (TI) regular reports on the free access to and diffusion of different kinds of public information in Eastern Europe.

⁴ **Jamieson, K.H. and Campbell, K. (1992);** The Interplay of Influence: Advertising, Politics, and the Mass Media, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth).

⁵ **Wasburn, P.C. (1995);** "Democracy and Media Ownership: Comparison of Commercial, Public and Government Broadcast News", *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 17 (1995), pp. 647-76; **Hoffmann-Reim, W. (1996);** Regulating Media: The Licensing and Supervision of Broadcasting in Six Countries, (NY: the Guilford Press, 1996).

parts of the world. At the same time, the news outlets of the opposition parties have been systematically barred from reaching their respective audiences, or at least severely obstructed, by virtue of imposing ‘softer’ legal and economic restrictions on granting broadcasting licences and intervening in the operation of the distribution networks of printed media. During the last couple of decades, this was the predominant mode of suppressing critical and politically divergent media opinions in large parts of the world.⁶ The immediate effect of the above-mentioned acts of intolerance towards alternative political viewpoints and the diversification of the available means of information cannot be assessed fully, much less measured empirically, because of the frequent absence of verifiable sources of information. Jean Blondel is, however, quite correct to posit about similar types of political and economic oppression against the media, that “it would seem inconceivable, especially in the long run, ... that it should not affect markedly the views of citizens about the actions of government and the reaction of the opposition: indeed, the citizens may not even come to know what are the standpoints of the opposition parties”.⁷

3. The Media and the Democratic Process

Although competitive and private media may not always be at ease with the democratic process, nevertheless, most authors recognise that media can indeed contribute to the consolidation of democracy. It may also play the role of a ‘Fourth Estate’ among the other state institutions of governance, but it can perform this function only if it is endowed with several key characteristics and is able to satisfy certain societal needs.⁸

Most importantly, it should:

⁶ **Halloran, J. (ed.) (1970); *The Effects of Television*, (London: Panther Books, 1970); and Kellner, D. (1991); *Television and the Crisis of Democracy*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991).** On Internet surveillance and restrictions see **Freedom House, (1996, 1997);** “Journalists as Pariah” and “Press Law Epidemic: A Year of Restrictions”, *Press Freedom Report*, (NY: Freedom House).

⁷ **Blondel, J. (1999);** “The Role of Parties and Party Systems in the Democratization Process,” in *Democracy, Governance and Economic Performance. East and Southeast Asia*, Marsh, I., Blondel, J. and Inoguchi, T. (eds.), (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1999), p. 30.

⁸ **King, A. (ed.) (1987); *Power of Communication*, (Illinois: Waveland Press, 1987); Keane, J. (ed.) (1991); *Media and Democracy*, (NY: Polity Press, 1991); and Humphreys, P. J. (1996); *Mass Media and Media Policy in Western Europe*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).**

- be pluralistic and free of excessive governmental or private ownership control and censorship;
- provide citizens with electoral and other kinds of social choices related to the provision of information about political candidates and events;
- be vigilant against corruption practices and tendencies.

While it should also:

- keep public figures accountable in the public realm;
- scan information and set the agenda for politicians and citizens in the domestic and international arena;
- open communication channels and organise a dialogue among the various elements of society concerning everyday problems, chiefly with respect to the protection of ethnic and minority rights.

It is still a matter of debate whether the media in post-communist countries of Eastern Europe is able to live up to the above multiple challenges, especially in the short and medium run. In all countries undergoing transition to and consolidation of democracy there are many factors, both *intrinsic* to the creation of independent media and *extrinsic* to the development of such a process. They influence the general type of media regime and the behaviour of media actors. For instance, the absence of certain institutional guarantees present in mature democracies, such as laws regulating the media market and protecting journalists from interference in their work, have a negative influence on the media sector undergoing major transformation.⁹ Moreover, constitutional and other legal requirements reserving programme time for minority group broadcasts and stipulating the percentage of cultural and sports programmes and advertisement slots are much needed specifications for the operation of democratic media.¹⁰ At the level of public communication between social actors and

⁹ **Sussman, L. (1993)**; “The Year of Press Law Debates: Much Talk, Little Progress as Officials and Journalists in Eurasia and Eastern Europe Try to Define Press Freedom”, *Editor and Publisher*, January 2: p. 28; and **Stoyanova, L. (1994)**; “The New Legislation”, *Balkan Media*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 38-9.

¹⁰ **Petev, T. (1994)**; “Transitive Democratization of the Bulgarian Press: Postponed Victories”, in Nikolai Genov (ed.) *Sociology in a Society in Transition*, (Sofia: Bulgarian Sociological Association, 1994); and **Orcutt, A. (1993)**; “Optimism, Pessimism, and Paradox: Broadcast Press Freedom in

representatives of the media, it is also useful to exist certain formal (as well as informal, of course) rules regulating the relationship between journalists and politicians, for instance, when the latter serve as a major source of information for media professionals.¹¹

4. The Media and the Prospect of Consolidating Democracies

Despite the progress achieved in many countries of the former Communist Bloc, the present picture of media reform is not the most optimistic, and the difficult social and political conditions are not altogether conducive to consolidation of democracy.¹² The general impression is that media freedom frequently becomes a target of abuse and, at the same time, represents the most common means in the hands of autocratic rulers to vilify political opponents and manipulate public opinion. These practices provide certain politicians, especially those of the former Soviet Union and Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, with the means of preserving their positions as ‘untouchables’ and ‘sacred cows’ of the transition from communism. Some Heads of State and other prominent political leaders in Eastern Europe have often used their position of authority and their influence over the public media to portray themselves as uncorrupted and as standing above the political institutions and other political elites.¹³ As a consequence of the uncritical and even sometimes passive attitude of public media in these countries, substantial political advantages have been gained by unaccountable leaders such as Lukashenka, Yeltsin, Shevernadze and the Presidents of most Central Asian republics. In East-Central Europe, where the situation with media liberties seems to be rapidly improving, not least because of the vast help

Slovakia”, in Al Hester and Kristina White (eds.), Creating Free Press in Eastern Europe, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), pp. 311-39.

¹¹ **Johnson, O.V. (1993)**; “Whose Voice? Freedom of Speech and the Media in Central Europe”, in Al Hester and Kristina White (eds.), Creating Free Press in Eastern Europe, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), pp. 153-87; and **Ognianova, E. and Scott, B. (1997)**; “Milton’s Paradox. The Market-Place of Ideas in Post-Communist Bulgaria”, *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 369-90.

¹² **Freedom House (1995-99)**; “Press Freedom in the World”, *Freedom House Surveys*, (reports on Eastern Europe and CIS media freedom under the supervision of Leonard N. Sussman), Freedom House.

¹³ **Shalnev, A. (1993)**; “On to Yegas - Glasnost for Russian Press”, *Media Studies Journal*, (Autumn: 1993); pp. 81-86; **Radojkovic, M. (1994)**; “Mass Media Between State Monopoly and Individual Freedom: Media Restructuring and Restriction in Former Yugoslavia”, *European Journal of Communications*, No. 9(1994): pp. 137-48; and **Johnson, O.V. (1995)**; “East Central and Southeastern Europe, Russia, and the Newly Independent States”, in John C. Merrill (ed.) Global Journalism: Survey of International Communication, third edition, (Whyte Plains, NY: Longman, 1995), pp. 153-87.

provided by the EU and many Western media organisations as well as the political pressure exercised by a large number of international monitoring agencies,¹⁴ a great percentage of the printed and broadcast media is in the hands of independent foreign or local private owners.¹⁵ Nevertheless, some political rulers, having received a democratic mandate from the population, have increasingly supported different authoritarian tendencies and practices especially in the public media. Namely, they have tended to assume that state media should continue to act as their mouthpiece, or that they could appoint 'politically friendly' personalities on media boards and broadcast commissions to serve their interests. This has happened in most if not all countries in the region, occasionally resulting in bitter 'media wars' between TV and printed media directors, on the one hand, and politicians, on the other.¹⁶

It should be mentioned, however, that the impact of mass media may actually be reinforced (or diminished) in the cases when it operates as an element of political life and in conjunction with other institutions or institutional arrangements. The role of media at election times is crucial.¹⁷ It has been estimated that in Eastern Europe television has overshadowed the political parties as a means of intermediation between the governing elites and the citizens. From here the so-called 'media parties' have emerged – small in numbers but relying on the charisma of the political leadership of their parties. In the early days of transition to democracy in the region, the presidential elections in several countries, like in Poland in December 1990 and in Bulgaria in January 1992, brought relative success to maverick politicians, such as the 'self-made' Western businessmen Stanislaw Tyminski and George Gantchev. These political leaders relied chiefly on populist tactics and on the media effect to win potential voters.

¹⁴ See footnote 3.

¹⁵ **Merritt, R. (1994)**; "Normalizing the East German Media", *Political Communication*, Number 11, pp. 49-66; **Dimitrov, R. (1996)**; "Borbata za Chetvurtata Vlast v Iztochna Evropa. 7: Kude sme Nie?" (The Struggle for the Fourth Estate in Eastern Europe. Part 7: Where are We?), *Kontinent* 5, April, p. 11.

¹⁶ **Hankiss, E. (1993)**; "The Hungarian Media's War of Independence", Analysis of the Centre for Social Studies, Budapest, Hungary; and **Kramer, E.M. (1993)**; "Reversal of Fortunes: Rehabilitations and Counterpurgues in Bulgaria", in Al Hester and Kristina White (eds.), *Creating Free Press in Eastern Europe*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), pp. 161-90.

¹⁷ **Semetko, H., Blumer, J.C., Gurevitch, M. and Weaver, D.H. (1991)**; *The Formation of Campaign Agendas*, (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum).

The situation, when the media is adapting itself to the rising expectation of the population is even further complicated by various factors linked to the political transition in Eastern Europe. There are, for instance, lingering fears about the effect of liberalised media on the future of the political system. Civil society leaders, political party activists and business community members struggle not only to gain access to various media resources and create a favourable public image of themselves, but also to influence and gain control of broadcasting as much as they can in order to turn it to serve their particular interests. Unfortunately, public opinion in most of post-communist Eastern Europe has very little impact on these processes affecting the distribution of media resources. Instead, it tends typically to follow a path of compliance with the powerful liberal market mechanisms guiding news media. Moreover, those people who have already fallen into passive acceptance may begin to consider the ongoing transformation of the political system as an ‘entertainment’ where personal appearance and extravagant behaviour portrayed by the media matters more than political ideals and affiliations to social or political groups.¹⁸

5. The Future of Media in Eastern Europe – Facing the Free Market and International Media Standards

With deregulation of the media market, the role of market forces and institutions driving liberal economics has also been increasing in importance. On the one hand, numerous publications and television and radio programmes which appeared during the hey day of early democracy in the transition period 1989-91 turned out not to be economically viable and simply could not live up to growing expectations of more objective and versatile media. On the other hand, with the survival and consolidation of some large Eastern European press and broadcasting companies and the arrival of even larger Western ones, there are still lingering fears that the tyranny of the state may easily be substituted by the tyranny of the market. For example, the absence of traditional ‘defence mechanisms’ against subtle advertisement techniques and aggressive media messages in local audiences may occasionally lead to conflict when publications or transmissions are scandalous and pornographic. Moreover, the

¹⁸ **Balcerowicz, L. (1995); *Socialism, Capitalism, Transformation*, (Budapest: CEU Press, 1995), pp. 152-53, referring to a “visibility effect” of broadcast media, esp. p. 153; and **Laitila, T. (1995);****

obvious weakness of some other important intermediaries of public communication in consolidated democracies, such as the political parties, interest groups and social movements, allows the media to play a relatively more powerful role in filling the information gaps in the political sphere than in already established democracies.¹⁹

It is a recognised fact that politically frustrated and entertainment-driven audiences, desiring more high drama and TV shows, are an important driving force behind the transformation of the media sector in the entire region. For example, the rapid and uncontrolled privatisation of most media resources in Russia during the mid-1990s led to the penetration of former *nomenklatura* and new *oligarchy* interests into public radio and television. This has provided various nationalistic and populist leaders to voice their propaganda with the help of the recently-privatised broadcast companies.²⁰ In other places in Eastern Europe, the arrival of foreign capital and the growing consumerism of the population, fuelled by powerful advertising campaigns, have influenced media policy to such an extent that virtually from the beginning of its free existence news media has been obliged to follow rigid market principles of economic survival and profit maximisation reminiscent of the era of wild capitalism.

It might eventually be supposed that after the collapse of communism the Eastern European audiences, having less time for politics and being increasingly driven by sensationalism and corruption scandals, would probably start to demand more truthful and complete information about political events. But more truthful information does not always mean 'quick and easy to obtain' information.²¹ The logic of diverse social processes unfolding simultaneously and the constraints of simple public legality require time to produce concrete results and, hence, information. The fast transmission of information is, however, not incompatible with objective reporting by journalists. This is exactly one of the main goals that almost all news publication and

"Journalistic Codes of Ethics in Europe", *European Journal of Communications*, 10(4), pp. 527-44.

¹⁹ Seymour-Ure, C. (1974); *The Political Impact of Mass Media*, (Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications); Entman, R.M. (1989); *Democracy Without Citizens*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Balcerowicz, L. (1995); *Socialism, Capitalism, Transformation*, op. cit..

²⁰ McNair, B. (1994); "Media in Post-Soviet Russia", *European Journal of Communication*, No. 9 : pp. 115-35.

²¹ Schlesinger, P. (1977); "Newsmen and Their Time Machine", *British journal of Sociology*, No. 28, pp. 336-50; and Patterson, T. E. (1998); "Time and News: The Media's Limitations as an Instrument of Democracy", *IPSA Journal*, (London: SAGE), Vol. 19, No. 1 (January 1998).

broadcast agencies in advanced Western democracies pursue.²² Nevertheless, even in some of the best-known media companies specialised in instant reporting commit errors. For instance, during the 2001 American presidential elections, the public was misled about the final outcome of the elections several times thanks to the premature results announced by some news agencies. The situation with media reporting in post-communist Europe is difficult to summarise (particularly during transition times), although it is obvious that international media standards have been rigorously pursued, especially in East-Central Europe and in the candidate states for EU membership.

6. Conclusion

It might be presumed that, as in pos-communist Eastern Europe, media is increasingly important for the consolidation of neo-democracies around the world. The path to democratisation is a unique phenomenon, depending both on time, the geographical position and the specific functional capabilities of individual countries. In Eastern Europe, the impact of international and local media at the beginning of the political transformation was primarily geared towards media *pluralism* and the *privatisation* of the state information outlets and media resources. Nowadays, the stress is put on the *institutionalisation* of the different kinds of media. This is generally achieved by creating media boards and licensing commissions, combined with the improvement of the legal basis for the operation of the various media actors.

Finally, with the rapid professionalisation of and exposure to foreign know-how and capital, both the printed and broadcast media in post-communist Europe has shifted its attention from the public needs of the population in transition to the strict requirements of the global media market. Although it is difficult, even in established Western societies, to combine the public with the market element in the content of the media programmes, it is nevertheless crucial to aim towards this goal if one is to maintain a high-quality democratic regime. Moreover, it should be born in mind as well, that many of the Eastern European societies are not only ‘post-transition’, but also ‘post-conflict’ societies, hence, political ethics and minority issues should be

²² Owen, D.M. (1991); Media Messages in American Presidential Elections, (Westport, CT: Greenwood).

given greater consideration and promoted (even sometimes deliberately) by domestic and external sources of support to the media.

This study of constitutional processes in thirteen post-communist states is one of three books prepared within the Project on Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe. The project has been sponsored by the European University Institute in Florence and its Research Council. The two other volumes in the series deal with (a) international and transnational factors involved in democratic consolidation, and (b) civil society and democratic orientations within Eastern Europe. The aim of the project is to contrast a set of democracy theories with empirical evidence accumulated in Eastern Europe over time. Although competitive and private media may not always be at ease with the democratic process, nevertheless, most authors recognise that media can indeed contribute to the consolidation of democracy. It may also play the role of a "Fourth Estate" among the other state institutions of governance, but it can perform this function only if it is endowed with several key characteristics and is able to satisfy certain societal needs.⁸ It is still a matter of debate whether the media in post-communist countries of Eastern Europe is able to live up to the above multiple challenges, especially in the short and medium run.