

first publication

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1 Although the title reads in East Central Europe, I will focus not on the region as a whole, but on three carefully selected countries, namely Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. These three countries were not selected at random. They emerged as the most successful post-communist countries in the process of transition in the region, and have been developing in such a stable way that as early as 1990 they were regarded as fulfilling the criteria for democratic countries. Additionally, the process of media transformation in the three countries seems to have a few common features: reformed media systems have been conditioned by similar external factors, and they have remained fully open to the flow of investment, technology and information. Similarities also come from their acceptance of Western democracy and, within it, building up of free mass media. They therefore provide a good basis for a comparative analysis.

2 Dragomir, Marius: *Fighting Legacy: Media Reform in Post-Communist Europe*. IAtlantic Council of the United States: Senior Fellows Publication 2003, p. 2f.

3 Quid. from *ibid.*, p. 3.

While communism was still an official ideology in the countries of East Central Europe,¹ the mass media, and in particular television, were used as the mouthpiece of the single ruling party. Their usual task was simple and well understood: to serve to glorify the first secretary and *nomenklatura* and their great achievements. The main features of the communist system »were a complete centralization of the media organs, with the communist party and its multi-layered structure at the head of the system«.² E. Mickiewicz, characterizing the old Soviet media type, added a third feature of that system, notably saturation. In their search for absolute penetration of the potential public, the communist leaders were able to approve the news pattern and content, and finally to send it out to entirely dominated media. Moreover, the management positions in television and radio were filled by members and enthusiasts of the communist party appointed by the political leadership from the top.³

However, the ouster of communism meant that the mass media in the region was forced to enter into a new era. The rules changed and their reform followed the model of television and radio in Western Europe. This is a dual media model – based upon two kinds of media; public and commercial.

As early as 1990, post-communist elites started to change their national broadcasting systems, firstly by opening the market up to private players and introducing commercial broadcasting and print media, which simultaneously caused an initial explosion of the new newspapers and magazines, and also an explosion of unlicensed broadcasting outlets.⁴ Further, they transformed previously state-run television and radio (basically by means of creating new media laws or notable amendments to the existing regulations) into public service broadcasters, or at least into something more independent and free.⁵

Clearly, the so-called first media reform⁶ was the linchpin of media democratization and indirectly contributed to the political democratization of East Central Europe. On the other hand, a discrepancy emerged between the declared objectives of the laws and the actual achievements during their implementation. These (vaguely worded) laws have largely been used to intimidate independent mass media. The transformation of former state-controlled means of mass communication has proved controversial not only in the three countries I have been examining but in other nations of the post-Soviet bloc.

Television, a basic component and gauge of democracy, has been extensively affected by the so-called »process of colonization« by the ruling elites.⁷ When writing about television, one must distinguish carefully between its two components (public and private broadcasters). The commercial media (in which the owners themselves decide about the staff) have to a great extent remained independent from political pressure, as well as, political interference in their work. Of course, there have been other means by which the officials overtly want to control the commercial operators. Laws have been created to regulate the media market and the necessary licences are issued by highly politicized national broadcasting regulators. However, another dilemma (with the media) is their desire to achieve commercial success and to have the largest audience possible. In large part, hunting for this public audience was accomplished by providing it with low-quality programming, talk and reality shows, sensationalist stories and so on. This all influences the quality of journalism.⁸

Unlike private stations, public service broadcasting, which is heavily regulated, has faced unprecedented challenges. Its situation has been far worse than private ones – all the attention of the political elites has been focused upon public broadcasters. In the sense that the state is the only shareholder, a majority of such broadcasters are entirely in the hands of the state. Broadcasting regulation has been commonly subject to political pressure and pernicious interference by party politicians, in an effort to promote their own message.

The problem of the politicization of public TV and Radio has appeared with a different intensity, depending wholly upon the stage democracy that has reached. This can be easily investigated at two levels. The first level refers to the boards or councils on public service broadcasting – which are supposed to ensure pluralism, democratic values, and to check if public television is fulfilling its mission and obligations adequately.⁹ Usually, the main broadcasting regulatory bodies are appointed by the political institutions and their representatives, parliament, president, or government (cf. Table 1 in Appendix). As a commonly known



4 For instance, in Poland by early 1993, just two years after the abolition of formal censorship, there existed 57 pirate television stations. Taken from *Television across Europe: Regulation, Policy and Independence. Summary Monitoring Reports 2005*, (Open Society Institute and EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program), p. 35.

5 The BBC (*British Broadcasting Corporation*) and its German offspring, the Consortium of public-law broadcasting institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany – ARD (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*), served as models for reformed television and radio systems in most countries of the region. However, the BBC's ideal has never been achieved by the Central Eastern European young democracies.

6 This term was used by two Hungarian media researchers: Bajomi-Lázár, Peter/Sükösd, Miklós: *The Second Wave of Media Reform in East Central Europe*. In: Bajomi-Lazar, P./Sukosd, M. (Eds.): *Reinventing Media: Media Policy Reform in East Central Europe*. Budapest: Central European UP 2003, pp. 13-27.

7 Dobek-Ostrowska, Bogusława: *Media masowe i aktorzy polityczni w świetle studiów nad komunikowaniem politycznym* [Mass Media and Political Actors in the Light of Studies on Political Communication]. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego 2004, p. 178.

8 I have written widely on the problems of commercialization of the mass media in the region. Cf. for instance Wyka, Angelika: *Good and Reliable Watchdogs of Democracy? Ethics and Journalism: Case Studies from Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic* (2005). In: <http://www.eumap.org/journal/submitted/wyka.pdf>; Wyka, A.: *What Are Journalists For in Central Eastern Europe?* (2006) presentation made to the Conference *Inclusion/Exclusion* at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, London, February 16-18, 2006.

9 Public service broadcasters are required not only in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic but in most of the countries to do the following: (1) to broadcast independent, accurate, impartial, balanced, objective news and information; (2) to ensure diversity of programming and viewpoints; (3) to broadcast a certain proportion of news, cultural, artistic, educational, minority, religious, children's and entertainment programming; (4) to promote local culture and values; (5)

fact, their nomination is based upon the criterion of membership of a political party and/or political sympathy. The councils of public service broadcasting, in turn, appoint the General Director of radio or television, who then selects her/his management. The state (ruling elites) plays the role of an »occult manager«,¹⁰ a mixture of parliamentary intervention, government action, and union behaviour, closely controlling the public service broadcasters. Thus, the transformation of State-run Television and Radio into Public Service entities – is more formal than substantial.

The second level of politicization refers to the media content and the control of political messages. This is gained by appointing the key staff of the media organizations directly by the broadcasting councils, and indirectly by the politicians. The process undertaken in Poland is an interesting example of this. Under the *Broadcasting Act*, the *National Broadcasting Council* (*Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji* – KRRiT) members are supposed to be chosen »from persons with a distinguished record of knowledge and experience in mass media«, and members are commonly obliged to refrain from being active in any political party.¹¹ However, in reality, the *National Broadcasting Council* has not been appointed on the basis of expert qualifications or experience, but rather of their political affiliation to the party (parties) that controls the Parliament, the Senate (the upper chamber of the Parliament) and the Presidency.¹²

In Hungary (a country where there has been a bitter media war between political elites and the journalistic community¹³) the transformation of state-owned television into a public service has constantly been disrupted by political interference. According to data provided by the NGO *Freedom House*, media freedom was far more frequently challenged in this country than in any of the other post-communist countries.¹⁴ B. Ociepa, a Polish media expert, in her comparative analysis of Polish, Czech and Hungarian public service broadcasters, noted that although in Hungary a proper legal framework came into force, the practice of the management of broadcasting is closer to a state than a public model.¹⁵

The Czech Republic, too, has been broadly affected by the phenomenon of politicization. The situation here is even worse, because public television is not only too politicized but is also plagued by serious financial problems.¹⁶ The Czech political elites, headed by W. Klaus and M. Zeman, accused the media of being profoundly partial, and called journalists (who were not afraid to »stand out from the crowd« and aired their own opinions) »the worst enemies of mankind«. Zeman also called Czech journalists »manure and scum, amateurs and graduates of school for retarded people«. ¹⁶

Even a very cursory look at the situation in the mass media shows that they have remained under governmental supervision and have been dependent upon the parties and ruling elites. I will go further and dare to put forward the following thesis: the mass media themselves, in particular public service broadcasters, have principally been under threat. Instead, the media of mass communication should be the sound and reliable watchdogs of democracy controlling the government and business interests as well as »caring about« the public.

It is often said that the politicization of the mass media in post-Soviet Europe has been one of the major obstacles making the consolidation of democracy more challenging. Some media researchers describe the media system emerging in East Central Europe as a »pluralistic system of a party-oriented mass media promoting a set of political interests or views«. ¹⁷

This is nothing less than the so-called *Italianization of the mass media*. This kind of media system is associated with Italy because it reflects what happened in the country during the 1990s. The phenomenon of Italianization of the mass media has been described in depth by the Italian researcher, P. Mancini. Its main characteristics are as follows:

- (1) strong state control of mass media exists;
- (2) the degree of mass media partisanship is also strong (cf. Table 2 in Appendix);
- (3) equally strong is the degree of media-political elites integration, and the mediums of mass communication overtly support the politicians at the different levels, i.e. organizational, economic, professional, ideological, etc.;
- (4) the absence of a consolidated and shared independent professional ethics.¹⁸

Slavko Splichal, a Ljubljana-based media researcher, taking his idea from Mancini, came to the conclusion that Central Eastern European media have been developing along Italian lines.¹⁹ In addition, he wrote that post-socialist media are in a similar position to those in Italy in the 1980s because of the instability of political systems, which represent a kind of »coalitional



to produce and broadcast programs relevant for all the regions in the country; (6) to provide free of charge airtime for public interest announcements, such as healthcare, road safety and urgent messages of state authorities. Taken from *Television across Europe*, p. 57. Compare also: *Act I of 1996 on Radio and Television Broadcasting* in Hungary, available online at <http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen> and also 2002.XX law modifying the *Law on Radio and Television 1996* (two copies in my possession); *Broadcasting Act 2001 on Radio and Television Broadcasting Operation and on Changes of other Acts* in the Czech Republic, available online at http://www.rrtv.cz/zakony_en/broadcasting_act2001.htm, a copy in my possession; *Broadcasting Act of 29 December 1992*; *Broadcasting Act of 2001*, also available online at <http://www.krrit.gov.pl/stronykrrit/angielska>. Both copies in my possession.

10 This term was used by Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina: *State into Public: The Failed Reform of State TV in East Central Europe*. The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Working Paper Series, Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government YEAR?, p. 19.

11 Cf. *Broadcasting Act*, art. 7 (1).

12 This remains highly visible even now after 15 years of political democratization. *Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość)*, a political party in Poland, before the October elections openly called for the de-politicization of public service television. Yet, after the election had been won, the party drastically changed its policy towards this medium. At the moment, Law and Justice, following the previous practice, has been conducting a hot discussion and backstage deals with the other parties to appoint politically friendly personalities to media boards and broadcast commissions to serve their interests. Cf. Wyka, Angelika W.: *PiS Tries to Impose its Views on Mass Media*. In: *Oxford Analytica – Daily Brief Service*, 03.05.2006. Article available online at: <http://www.oxan.com>

13 The media landscape in Hungary has primarily been described as the major front of a »media war«. The media war took place at two levels. The first level related to the political warfare about the power over the free mass media. The nationalist and conservative *Hungarian Democratic Forum – Magyar Demokrata Fórum* – claimed that most means of mass communication, in particular the national broadcasting media, were under the control of the previous regime elites. In turn,

complex« consisting of a large number of parliamentary parties or single »great coalitions«. Unlike in Italy, the media landscape in East Central Europe is much less differentiated and pluralistic, and the commercial – particularly broadcast – sector is far less developed, which is related both to the transitional nature of the ruling political coalitions and to the general economic crisis.²⁰ Suffice it to mention that a similar conclusion was reached by two British media experts, Colin Sparks and Anna Reading.²¹ Strictly speaking, the Italianization of the mass media means close ties between politics and the media. Further, the next stage of Italianization as a new danger for the countries of East Central Europe, namely *Berlusconization*, has been identified as well. The godfather of Berlusconization is the former Italy's Prime Minister and media magnate (*Mediaset*), and the dominant force in Italian broadcasting simultaneously, Silvio Berlusconi. At this point, it seems reasonable to add that Italy is a special case of controversial involvement of politicians in the regulation of broadcasting, and particularly in the state-owned broadcaster RAI (*Radiotelevisione Italiana*). For Berlusconi, ownership of media outlets was clearly of great political value. In the beginning of the 1990s, commercial television helped him move to political power (Berlusconi's party *Forza Italia* won the 1993 parliamentary elections). He has enjoyed a degree of power over both commercial and public service television in recent years that has no precedent in any developed democracy. The power Berlusconi has had is a result of the duopoly of RAI and *Mediaset* created by the alliance between politics and the media.²² The negative phenomenon of Berlusconization is largely characterized by providing the audience with mainly sensational information and low-quality programs such as obscene soap operas, talk shows, private monopolies in the broadcasting industry, as well as permanent control over the media and blatant partisanship in the media.²³ More to the point, the Berlusconization process of the media means that the mass media are monopolized by politicians and businessmen and used for their personal, political or business purposes exclusively.

It is beyond doubt that, in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Romania, as well as the other countries of East Central Europe, the characteristics mentioned above can easily be found.

To illustrate the truth of this, one can recall *Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość)*, a political party in Poland, before the 2005 elections openly called for the depoliticization of public service television. Yet, after the election had been won, the party drastically changed its policy towards this medium. Now, the *National Broadcasting Council* and consequently the public television and radio management are fully filled by the people closely related to PiS and its allies, notably *Samoobrona (Self-Defence)* and *Liga Polskich Rodzin (the League of Polish Families)*. Politicization of public broadcasters, appointing the media management without any competition, overwhelming presence of the ruling party, political pressure on journalists have become common practice, among other things. According to the report on the public broadcasting situation prepared recently by *Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform)*, (an oppositional party), the *National Broadcasting Council* has remained the most politicized since the fall of communism. The apparent politicization of the Council has simultaneously caused the politicization of the *Board of Trustees* of public media. Mechanisms of party membership, social and family connections have been the only criteria of the staffing of public broadcasters. For instance, Marcin Wolski was appointed the director of *Public Radio (Polskie Radio)*. However, he had previously served in an electoral committee of Lech Kaczynski when the former had run for presidency. This appointment (reward?) prompts the question as to his priority when making decisions.

To take another example: the staffing of Czech media by political parties caused the Television crisis that took place at the end of 2000 and the beginning of 2001. Shortly, when the *Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting (Rada pro rozhlasové a televizní vysílání – RRTV)*, appointed by the Czech parliament, appointed a general manager, Jiří Hodač, with apparent links to political elites, the journalists working on the national TV station (*Česká televize*) barricaded themselves in the newsroom, went on strike, and broadcast their own unauthorized news programs. They demanded guarantees against political interference and the depoliticization of Czech public broadcasting. This strike was the first such event in the region and, essentially, influenced societies who fully opted for freedom of the mass media and, thus, journalists. Given that, Czech media researchers have clearly pointed to the process of »Berlusconization« of the media in the country. Of the features that encompass this phenomenon, they have, *inter alia*, specified media loyalty towards the different politicians and low quality of media content.

the liberal *Alliance of Free Democrats – Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége* – accused the MDF of wanting to use the media for the election campaigns. The second level related to the debate on maintaining the Hungarian national identity in the media, in order to protect Hungarian culture against foreign investments (this was supported by the MDF and criticized by the SzDSZ). Wyka, Angelika: Journalistic Standards and Democratisation of the Mass Media in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. In: *Ethical Space – The International Journal of Communication Ethics* 2 (2005), pp. 13-17. The concept of war was chosen in order to indicate the intensity of the conflict – for more cf. *Television across Europe*, p. 797.

14 For more cf. Annual Freedom House, Annual Survey of Press Freedom – Rankings 1994-2002, available online at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/ratings>. XLS.

15 Ociepka, Beata: Dla kogo telewizja publiczna? Model publiczny w postkomunistycznej Europie Srodkowej [Who is Television for? The Model of Public Service Broadcasters in Post-communist Central Europe]. Wroclaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wroclawskiego 2003, p. 238.

16 Cf. Culik, Jan: Czech Republic. Press Freedom under Threat YEAR?. A copy in my Possession. To find out more on the media crisis in the Czech Republic, cf. for instance Dragomir 2003, pp. 68-71 (Annex); Ociepka 2003, pp. 107-126.

17 Jakubowicz, Karol: The Role of Broadcasters Is to Serve the Public not the State (1999), presentation made to the Zagreb Conference on *Reforming Broadcasting*. A copy in my possession.

18 Mancini, Paolo: Il sistema fragile. I mass media in Italia tra politica e mercato, Roma: Carocci Editore 2000; cf. also Spilchal, S.: *Media beyond Socialism: Theory and Practice in East-Central Europe*. Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Pr. 1994, pp. 137-154.

19 Spilchal, Slavko: *Media beyond Socialism: Theory and Practice in East-Central Europe*. San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Pr. 1994.

20 Spilchal, S.: *Between State Control and Commercialisation: Media after the Fall of Communism*. In: Glenn, Phillip J./Soltys, Otakar (Eds.): *Media '95. Experience and Expectations – Five Years After*. Prague: Karolinum Charles UP 1996, p. 161f.

What conclusion can be drawn from all this?

Great progress in transforming the media in many countries of the former communist bloc has certainly been achieved. The media, more or less, broke free from political control. However, the present panorama of the media (in particular public television and radio) is quite far from optimistic. The general impression is that the media have, at regular intervals, become a target of abuses and stealthy collusion between political and business interests. It seems then that the problem of politicization is a result of immature political elites and governments' tendency (inherited from the past) to control the media. The parties and individuals who have entered office tend to seek dominance in the media. Some, after having been elected, increasingly support authoritarian tendencies and practices. Politicization of the media is also a sort of evidence of inadequately developed political culture and political awareness among the societies and media staff, who largely say »yes« to these developments.

The mass media, instead of keeping a close watch on the political establishment (effectively affecting different decisions taken by the officials, and thus becoming truly democracy-building institutions) are at political actors' disposal. The mass media, in other words, are not the watchdogs of democracy as it has been expected. Rather, they are the tools of the elite few to spread the message (political viewpoints) of those in control of the media outlets. This limits the articulation of various social opinions, and thus weakens the quality of democracy. Unfortunately, nothing suggests that this situation will change soon.

Country	Name	Official Status	No. of mem- bers on board	Who appoints them	Who can dismiss them	Tenure	No. of terms	Funding
Czech Republic	Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting	Independent administrative authorities	13	Nominated by the Chamber deputies and appointed by the Prime Minister	Prime Minister based on a proposal of the Chamber	6 (not staggered)	max. 2	State budget
Hungary	National Radio and Television Commission	Independent entity under the supervision of the Parliament	at least 5	President of the Republic and Prime Minister jointly (chair), elected by the Parliament, acting on proposals from parliamentary fractions of political parties (rest of the members)	They cannot be recalled	4	not lim. (staggered)	State budget
Poland	National Broadcasting Council	State institution	9	Chamber of Deputies (4), Senate (2), President of the Republic (3)	By the institution that appointed them	6	only 1	State budget

Table 1: Overview of broadcasting regulators

Source: *Television across Europe – Regulation, Policy and Independence, Monitoring Reports 2005*, Open Society Institute and EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program, Network Media Program, pp. 139 -144.



21 Sparks, Colin/Reading, Anna: *Communism, Capitalism and the Mass Media*. London, New Dehli: SAGE 1998, pp. 177-179.

22 In 2004, the *Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe* approved two resolutions deploring the »concentration of political, commercial and media power in Italy in the hands of one person«. Also, the resolutions stressed the dearth of independence of national public service television and expressed serious concern about the freedom of expression and media pluralism. Cf. *Television across Europe...*, p. 34 and pp. 866-954: Croteau, David/Hoynes, William: *Media/Society. Industries, Images, and Audiences*. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Pine Forge Press 1997; Dobek-Ostrowska 2004, pp. 179-182; Dobek-Ostrowska, B.: *Transformacja systemów medialnych w krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej po 1989* [The Transformation of Media Systems in East Central Europe after 1989]. Wrocław: Wrocław UP 2002, p. 31f.

23 Relijc, Dušan: *Civil Society, Mass Media and Democracy in Post-Communist Countries*. Paper delivered to the *Civil Society Building Project in Russia (CSBP)* 2003 in Moscow, Russia, September 2003. A copy in my possession.

Czech Republic	Czech Television's journalists do not experience direct, serious interventions of politicians or management into their work, but accuse MPs of indirect ressure when they openly condemn investigative reports.
Hungary	Political bias is more significant in public service television than in the commercial media. However, the pro-Governmental slant of Hungarian public service television has not had a big impact on the political affinities of the general public.
Poland	TVP's [National Polish Television, AW] journalists were subject to direct manipulation by the station's management, who re-fused to pay journalists or removed their pro-grams from the schedule if they did not conform to various political demands of the station's management.

Table 2: Survey of editorial independence in public service broadcasters

Source: *Television across Europe – Regulation, Policy and Independence, Monitoring Reports 2005*, Open Society Institute and EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program, Network Media Program, p. 65.

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