

## **Journalistic standards and democratisation of the mass media in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic**

### ***Abstract***

*The mass media are often considered one of the most influential 'tools' in the process of transformation from an authoritarian regime to democracy. In 1989, when communism started to collapse in East Central Europe, the mass media were challenged both politically (being freed from state control) and economically (as they entered a new competitive environment). In other words, the paper tries to describe shortly the phenomenon of the media autonomization, in which the mediums of mass communication have increasingly become independent upon politics, business, culture, etc. This article examines the positive and negative elements of this process and, in particular, the impacts on journalistic standards and professionalism. Also, it deals with the so-called process of the 'Italianisation of the mass media, i.e. the media are closely connected with politics. Its characteristics such as state control over the mass media, practised on a larger scale political intervenes in media content or a lack of universally accepted media ethics, can easily be found in the discussed countries.*

**Keywords:** *mass media Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, journalism, civil society, dual media model, media war, 'Italianisation of the mass media', 'Berlusconisation of the mass media', journalistic professionalisation, media autonomy, media law*

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As an integral force of civil society, the mass media are expected to

play a central role in reporting the activities of parliament, the government and the judiciary, in investigating whether private companies and financial interests respect the law, sounding the alarm if the environment is polluted, and engaging in conflict prevention and resolution (Leigh 2003: 2). It is argued they have a dual responsibility for:

- giving a full and fair account of the news and
- passing critical comment and thoughtful judgment on public affairs (Budge, Newton et al. 1997: 14).

Without free and balanced political communication, democratic institutions will become corrupt; without the provision of relevant business information, the free economy will collapse; without information about new trends in art, fashion and music, the world of culture will not progress (Reljic 2003: 1).

It is difficult to be specific about the extent of indirect or direct impact of the media on political behaviour and the decision-making process (especially in post-communist countries undergoing transition). However, it is certain that the mass media make a contribution of vital importance to the field of social communication. These opportunities for the media have obviously emerged as a result of the collapsing role of political parties as intermediaries between state elites and the citizens.

The political transformation in the late the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s in East Central Europe brought about the liberation of the mass media, both print and broadcast, from the control and the information monopoly of the communist parties. There was a significant shift from the overwhelming presence of the state (or rather communist party) in the media, and its interventions became more limited. It is essential to note that during the communist period the media were considered dependent upon the authoritarian state in terms of content, access, ownership, financing, production and distribution (Gulyas 2001:2).

### **Problems of media regulation**

Dismantling the old system is one matter, but setting up a framework for a new media system is another. It is not enough to leave the media to the mercy of either free market or political forces and hope that these will produce the desired effect. The problem of regulation of the media in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic has thrown up a number of vital questions (a lot of them still remain open) concerning the safeguarding the independence of the media against the control and power held both by politicians and by private industry. For instance:

- What are the rights and duties of the free media?
- How should they be regulated and by whom?
- What steps should be taken to prevent private media monopolies and oligopolies?
- Should commercial and public radio and television exist?
- Should newspapers be subsidised by the state?
- What should be the limits of foreign ownership?
- Should the old leaders/managers of the communist media be prevented by means of the so-called vetting process (Wyka: 2001: 64) from playing a role in the new mass media (Budge, Newton et al. op cit: 148)?

The post-communist elites in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic were aware of the significance of these challenges. However,

they have been reluctant to provide the new criteria needed to create independent means of mass communication. Moreover, it was difficult for them to shake off entrenched standards whereby rulers (members of the communist parties) were publicly untouchable, and propaganda was considered a major and legitimate force of social transformation (Bajomi-Lazar and Sukosd 2003: 13).

The first years of democratic consolidation in East Central Europe showed that the new political elites could be highly creative when it came to exerting pressure on the media (ibid: 13). For example, some heads of state and other prominent political leaders in the region have very often used their position of authority and their influence, over both public and commercial media, to present themselves as uncorrupted and as standing above the political institutions and other political elites (Andreev 2002: 5).

### **Spread of foreign ownership**

Although the situation relating to freedom of the media in East Central Europe has seemed to be rapidly improving, because of the need to harmonise media law with that of the European Union (this was one of the conditions for Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to become full members on 1 May 2004) as well as the political influence exercised by a large number of international monitoring agencies, a high percentage of the printed and broadcast

media are in the hands of foreign owners.

This affects the independence of the mass media. Nevertheless, some political rulers, having received a democratic mandate from the nation, have increasingly supported different authoritarian tendencies and practices, especially in the public broadcast media. When preparing new bills concerning the mass media, legislators responsible for them very often used 'the public service television' and 'the state television' as equivalent terms, in particular in Poland. They have tended to assume that the public media should continue to act as their mouthpiece, or that they could appoint politically friendly personalities to media boards.

For instance, in Poland the president had the right to appoint the National Broadcasting Council chairman until 1995 when the law was amended. Political pressure is also exercised against the commercial media: for example, legal actions against inconvenient journalists and publishers, special taxes and regulations (the so-called Rywingate in Poland, concerning media concentration). Selective state-sponsored advertising has been among government actions aimed at ensuring pro-government coverage in newspapers and creating pro-government segments in some countries' press markets (Bajomi-Lazar and Sukosd op cit: 14).

However, legislators were forced to pass their respective broadcasting acts to encourage foreign investment -- a precondition for the modernisation of the media sector. In addition, the newly passed broadcasting act, at least according to their preambles, also aimed at protecting media freedom and improving the plurality of views; for instance, the Hungarian Act I of 1996 on Radio and Television Broadcasting was created ‘in the interest of free and independent radio and television broadcasting, the freedom of expressing opinion’ ([www.net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/getdoc.cgi](http://www.net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/getdoc.cgi)).

### **Reforming the media**

The media regulation passed in the first part of the 1990s, in fact, created a new legal and institutional structure to regulate the media in the new democracies. This, the so-called first wave of media reform (Bajomi-Lazar and Sukosd op cit: 14), had two major effects: firstly, the previously state controlled media were transformed into public services and funds to finance public service broadcasting were established. Second, it became possible to demonopolise the sector by introducing commercial broadcasting. The first country that passed a new media law, in 1991, was Czechoslovakia. This remained in force until 2001, when the Czech parliament adopted the new Broadcasting Act 2001 on Radio and Television Broadcasting Operation following a national protest against the dependence of the mass media on the political elite.

The Polish Broadcasting Act was passed in 1992 and modified three years later. Since 1995 there have been a number of the attempts to change the law. Of the countries discussed in this paper, Hungary was the last one -- it passed the new media law in 1996 (Act No.1 of 1996 on Radio and Television Service).

It would be no exaggeration to say that the first wave of broadcasting reform played a historic role in media democratisation (ibid: 14) and indirectly contributed to the political democratisation of East Central Europe. At the same time, a discrepancy emerged between the declared objectives of the laws and the actual achievements during their implementation.

### **The emergence of media autonomy**

According to what K. Jakubowicz (1995) has described as the fundamental prerequisites of media change (a process of gathering autonomy), the cumulative effects of the development of a free market in the mass media in terms of the political, economic, social, mediatic, technological and professional dimensions in Central and Eastern Europe should be: 'demonopolisation, differentiation, professionalisation of journalists and democratisation'.

Demonopolisation (denationalisation) has been described in depth

by Spilchal (1998:10). In essence, this model assumes the existence of a private media sector operating in the public interest and respecting the law, with journalistic ethics set out by independent broadcasting authorities. The so-called European way of organising the new media system postulates the existence of the public service media as “autonomous state organisations” (World Development Report 2002: 186).

Parts of the broadcasting systems were, at least at the beginning, renationalised and put under the control of the leading political parties. Spilchal calls this process the “Italianisation” of the media (Spilchal op cit; see also Goban-Klas 1997; Mancini 1991) because it is a mirror image of what happened in Italy during the 1990s. The most important characteristics of this system are:

- indirect state control over the broadcasting and direct state control over the print media;
- high media dependence on the political parties -- the party intervenes in personnel and editorial matters (the party influences the media personnel and programmes);
- a high level of integration between media and the political elites;
- a lack of consolidation and deep ethical divisions within the journalistic community itself.

### **The new danger of 'Italianisation'**

Reljic goes further and identifies the next stage of Italianisation as a new danger for the countries of Eastern Europe, namely "the Berlusconiisation" of the media. This phenomenon relates to the persistence of government control over TV, private monopolies in the broadcasting industry, strong and stealthy collusion between business interests and media ownership, blatant partisanship in the media and other flaws (Reljic 2003: 14). The worst examples of political fighting over television took place both in Hungary and the Czech Republic, as well as in Poland (but on a smaller scale). For instance, the struggle for control of radio and television in Hungary led to the so-called "media war" (see Downing 1995; Spilchal op cit; Ociepka 2003) at two levels (Bajomi-Lazar 2002: 14).

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 Forum -- claimed that most means of mass communication, in particular the national broadcasting media, were under the control of the previous regime elites. In turn, 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 criticised by the SzDSz).

In December 2000, the director of the national TV station (Ceska televize) was fired and replaced with new one with political connections. The nomination of Jiri Hodac provoked a strike amongst the journalists who barricaded themselves in the newsroom and broadcast their own unauthorised news programmes. In addition, they demanded guarantees against political interferences and the depoliticisation of the Czech public broadcasters. The journalists and the media, enjoying the high level of the public trust, were supported by hundreds of thousands of Czechs who took in the streets of Prague. The demonstrations, protests and public pressure led to the amendment of the media law passed in 1991. Significantly the new Broadcasting Act 2001 guarantees wide autonomy for journalists, as well diminishing the power of the political elites over the media (see Ociepka 2003; Dobek-Ostrowska 2002).

The second aspect of denationalisation of the communication sphere is represented by privatisation and mainly by the setting up of new, privately owned and commercially oriented radio and television. As Spilchal notes, the licensing process for a new broadcasting station was more often a party-political decision than the result of identifying the needs and interests of the public.

The third tendency in the denationalisation process is transnationalism (Spilchal op cit). This tendency can be described in the following way. The transnational corporations (e.g. Murdoch, Time-Warner, Bertelsmann, Springer) have tried to force state broadcasting authorities to make more channels available and give way to private and foreign broadcasters. The goal is to ensure high profits from broadcasting entertainment programming and thereby make more and more dependent on the influence of the big global media networks.

### **The need for professionalisation**

In addition to the already presented stages (demonopolisation, decentralisation and internationalisation/transnationalism) of media autonomisation, the next stage of Jakubowicz's suggestions for changing the media scenery of East Central Europe includes new media legislation and signs of journalistic professionalisation in new private media. The third stage assumes not only the consolidation of media legislation, professionalisation and democratisation, but also the beginnings of media concentration and the influence of foreign media capital (Jakubowicz 1995; Downing 1996).

The level of professionalisation of the journalists varies greatly. The media laws have attempted to establish such norms of journalistic performance as impartiality, objectivity and balance. However,

widely known and approved professional norms have not crystallised so far (Bajomi-Lazar and Sukosd op cit: 18). There is a lack of professional ethos within the journalistic environment in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. There are no formal nor informal rules regulating the relationship between journalists and politicians to safeguard the former from interference in their work. This has a negative influence on the media sector, especially when the politicians serve as a major source of information (Andreev op cit: 4).

The journalists themselves, of course, are aware of their role in creating a democracy, but they consider the existing conditions of journalistic performance poor. While some journalists believe that it is their job to provide critical coverage of the politicians, others are convinced they should be loyal to democratically elected governments. Self-censorship is still practised; it is driven by political considerations in public service broadcasters and by economic interests in the private media. A large proportion of the journalistic community is politicised and divided along political cleavages. The tradition of partisan, involved journalism remains strong, especially in the formerly government controlled electronic media and in the press.

Some media make no secret of their political orientation. In commercial broadcasting media news coverage, objectivity, balanced

journalism have become the norm. However, in order to increase their profits, the privately-owned media carry programmes with the highest viewing ratings, for instance talk-shows, reality shows, and sensational information, but these programmes are not necessarily of high quality. Some journalists employed in the commercial media are paid 'by piece', which makes them focus on quantity instead of quality. Investigative journalism when the journalists act in the interest of the public good and reveal misdeeds, unfair activities, corruption of the 'mighty and the wealthy' (Reljic: op cit: 15), is weak in the region, except for Poland (Ociepka op cit: 129; Bajomi-Lazar 1999: 18; Wyka 2003: 78). It consists of a very small group of journalists who encounter considerable problems due to bureaucracies' reluctance to implement freedom of information laws. There is strong evidence that some of the investigative reporters have been intimidated, especially in Poland. Public journalism does not yet exist.

### **Conclusions**

The political divisions of the journalistic environment and the weak professional background and ethical norms of many journalists make them 'easy targets' for the political and business establishment. The journalistic associations are not sufficiently well developed to protect their members and to ensure media autonomy. Without this support, journalists cannot be good and reliable watchdogs of democracy.

The only way to change the present situation within the community of journalists itself is the reform of editorial and journalistic practices and journalism education. Only well-educated, professionally sound and responsible journalists will be in a position to increase the respect in which the free means of mass communication are held as democratic institutions.

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