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MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN SLOVAKIA

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INTRODUCTION

There is an almost universal agreement among political and social scientists that media play a vital and defining role in democracy everywhere it exists.¹ However, the role and function of mass media in a democracy has not been settled or precisely defined yet and only few studies have focused on the relationship of mass media and democracy in democratising countries. In spite of the lack of academic attention, there is a widely accepted general consensus that democracy requires informed citizens to make informed choices at the ballot box. Therefore, the mass media in a democratic society are to provide all the necessary information for citizens to facilitate their informed decision-making and participation in the democratic process. It is critical that the information provided by mass media be objective, in-depth and prompt.

However, mass media in any country are very vulnerable to manipulation, either by political authorities motivated by ideological zeal or crude self-interest or by economic forces. The relationship between media and democracy in Slovakia has been even more vulnerable, because the country has been going through a radical process of political transition to democracy and economic transition to market economy. The processes of democratisation and strengthening of democratic institutions have not been fully concluded yet. Moreover, the political culture in post-communist countries has not yet developed to the level of the established Western democracies. Thus, the relationship between media and democracy in Slovakia is more unstable compared with countries that have had a long-lasting experience of democracy.

The first, theoretical part of the dissertation discusses general implications of the relationship between mass media and democracy/democratisation and looks at the differences between Western democracies and post-communist democratising countries. Despite the generally accepted assumption that mass media play an important role in the construction of democracy, their role might be beneficial or detrimental to the cause of democracy in any country.

The second, empirical part of the dissertation examines the relationship between media and democracy in particular, transitional conditions of Slovakia. The focus is on the exploration of the commitment and effectiveness of the Slovak electronic mass media

¹ Everette E. Dennis and Robert W. Snyder, *Introduction*, in Everette E. Dennis and Robert W. Snyder, eds., *Media and Democracy* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998), p. xv.; Patrick H. O'Neil, *Democratization and Mass Communication: What Is the Link*, in Patrick H. O'Neil, ed., *Communicating Democracy: The Media & Political Transitions* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), p. 1.

(television and radio) in achieving the task of being the fourth estate or watchdog of the government. To discover whether the media behave as a watchdog of the government, and more widely of the whole political scene, the thesis looks at how the media reported domestic politics and at the extent, to which they critically scrutinised the domestic political activities in the period from 1994 to 1998, especially in the run-up to the 1998 parliamentary elections. This period was marked by a high level of polarisation and confrontation between the government and the opposition. The thesis also explores the impact of the connections between the mass media and the political actors, and between the mass media and the market forces.

In his article on democratisation and the mass media, Patrick H. O'Neil argued that the contribution of the mass media to the process of political transition and democratisation depends on "the form of and function of media in a given society, shaped by cultural, socio-economic and political factors."² Further, he outlined a theoretical framework, by discussing the topic within three areas: types of mass communication; degree and form of state control (political manipulation); and market, property and the locus of media authority (economic manipulation). The empirical part of the dissertation will follow this framework in analysing the relationship between the media and democratisation and will look at the extent to which political and economic manipulation is reflected in the way the media treat the domestic politics.

I: THEORISING ABOUT THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

The media in a democratic system must be "credible and reliable lest they lose their influence and authority."³ Simultaneously, despite their attempts to define or at least outline an ideal situation, most of the authors writing on the media and democracy admit that it has not been clear how to achieve and sustain an ideal role of the media in a democratic regime.

Essays by John Keane⁴ and Colin Sparks⁵ tried to cast some light on the relationship between the media and democracy from a perspective of an established Western democratic society. Both authors claimed that market liberalism and deregulation in the mass media sector have a very negative impact on the quality of democracy and plurality of opinions

² O'Neil (1998), p. 7.

³ Dennis and Snyder, p. xv.

⁴ John Keane, *The Media and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

⁵ Colin Sparks, "State, Market, Media and Democracy," in *Media in Transition: From Totalitarianism to Democracy*, by Oleg Manaev and Yuri Pryliuk, eds. (Kyiv: ABRIS, 1993): pp. 103-118.

offered by the media. They argued in favour of an increased state regulation and a need to provide high quality public information system. Keane and Sparks advocated a public scheme that would offer a genuine plurality of opinions necessary in a democratic system, which requires informed citizens. This essay analyses the viability of Keane's and Sparks' arguments and their applicability to a post-communist country, contrasting their arguments about the relationship and interaction of the media and democracy based on a Western European experience with the situation in the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe.

John Keane wrote his essay as an ambitious effort to rethink the relationship between the media and democracy. Indeed, the initial sections of the essay present the very basic questions about the relationship between democratic ideals and institutions and the contemporary media. Market liberalism and deregulation are a twofold target of Keane's essay. To prevent the manipulation exercised by a deregulated market, Keane suggested a new public service model facilitating 'a genuine commonwealth of forms of life and opinions.'

Liberty of the press and its meaning in the contemporary world is the first of the 'basic questions' addressed by Keane referring to the path-breaking work of Ferdinand Tönnies. Tönnies affirmed that the call for press freedom is a distinctive organising principle of the modern European and North American worlds. The theory and practice of publicly articulating opinions through communication media has not indigenously developed in any other civilisation. Despite their uneven distribution, the demands for press freedom appeared throughout all of Europe, including its more backward areas with weaker civil society.⁶

The fight for press freedom was shaped in the despotic and omnipresent monarchies as a "campaign by social groups whose scientific, literary, artistic, and religious pursuits placed them at odds with the accumulation of unaccountable state power."⁷ Keane emphasised that due to the nature of the press manipulation, the early defenders of a free press overlooked the possibility that a free press rooted in a civil society would constantly misrepresent its citizens. Similarly, also many of the contemporary defenders of press freedom in Slovakia and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe see the guarantee of freedom of expression primarily in market liberalism to counter the detrimental role of the state. This has been due to the similarity of their experience under the totalitarian communist regime to the experience of early defenders of press freedom under Europe's despotic monarchies. Significantly, Keane's definition of despotism as a system of concentrated and unlimited secular power brought it

⁶ Ferdinand Tönnies quoted in Keane, pp. 6-7.

⁷ Keane, p. 23.

very close to the reality of modern totalitarian regimes ruling in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the second half of the 20th century. Thus, very naturally, the belief in market liberalism and deregulation has been seen by many as a vital antidote originally to the despotism, later to the totalitarianism and more recently to the authoritarian tendencies of some of the post-communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. A common feature of all these systems has been that press freedom was primarily endangered by the state. Nevertheless, Keane strongly argued that the defenders of market liberalism and deregulation failed to grasp the many ways in which communications markets restrict liberty of the press.

Keane admitted that "old language of 'liberty of the press' shaped by the ethos of private market competition, is making a grand return to the centre stage of public debate about the future shape of the mass media,"⁸ but labelled the arguments of market liberals as an 'old-fashioned' talk of state-censorship, individual freedom, deregulation and market competition. However, what is really old-fashioned talk is in fact open to a discussion. State-censorship might be an old fashioned term in Western liberal democracies due to a long tradition and stable character of their democracy, more developed institutional framework, civil society and political culture. The efforts of the governments to manipulate the media have persisted also in more developed democratic systems in Western Europe, but they are more subtle and have less detrimental effects on the independent and critical operation of both public and market-based media, which are more firmly rooted in Western Europe compared to the post-communist countries.

The talk of state-censorship, individual freedom, deregulation and market competition is not old-fashioned at all in Slovakia and other Central and East European countries. Recent experience of state-censorship and strict regulation during communism, and a total absence of individual political freedoms and market competition turned these terms into a powerful and topical language in Slovakia and elsewhere. Moreover, there has been also a strong impact of the most recent experience of authoritarian methods, massive manipulation of public media and intimidation of private media in the 1994-1998 period of government dominated by the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS).

Keane's remark on 'old-fashioned' talk and his dismissal of the market-based mass media is therefore not valid in the Slovak case, because of a different development of its mass media and a different approach of the state towards the 'public' media. During the 1994-1998 period, it was precisely the market-based mass media that guaranteed a free and pluralistic news service, especially when contrasted to the politically manipulated 'public' media serving

the interests of the government. The market-based media had to face state intimidation and various efforts to obstruct their broadcasting. Keane rejected the affirmation of media magnate Rupert Murdoch who insisted that "market competition is the key condition of press and broadcasting freedom, understood as freedom from state interference."⁹ Murdoch's statement proved to be right in Slovakia, because of the persistence and validity of the understanding of press and broadcasting freedom as freedom from state interference.

The most prominent example of a market failure brought up by Keane was the deregulation in Italy, which had decadent effects on broadcasting and led to the phenomenon of a low-quality entertainment-oriented television.¹⁰ Interestingly, Keane failed to mention that the long-lasting practice of the Italian public television and radio broadcaster RAI was an informal division of the three public television channels and their separate News and Current Affairs Departments among Christian Democrats (RAIUNO), Socialists (RAIDUE) and Communists (RAITRE). Similar state and party sponsorship has been observed in Austria, where the praised state monopoly broadcaster ORF was dominated by appointees delegated through the SPÖ and ÖVP governing parties. The Spanish public television TVE is controlled by the government cronies. In France and Germany too, supervisory boards are politicised along the left-right divide and some bargaining among political parties and sharing of the main positions is usual. The above-mentioned state or party sponsorship has limited the independence and reputation - and consequently also the influence and legitimacy - of public broadcasters, although they were generally regarded as offering balanced programming. The programming was balanced only within the limits permitted by the state and dominant political parties, which usurped the public broadcasters for their own use. This model of defining democracy or public interest within the mass media as dividing the public broadcasting among existing political parties was described in ground-breaking work on 'partitocrazia' by Giovanni Sartori.¹¹

Contrary to Austria, which did not develop a private media sector until the late 1990s, Italy has subsequently been an example of both market failure and public service failure. But Keane refers to the RAI as "a synonym for institution ... whose reputation, size, diversity and privileged position enable them to produce ... balanced quality programming."¹² In the light of the above mentioned arguments, instead of balanced programming, the RAI was offering a

⁸ Keane, p. 52.

⁹ Rupert Murdoch quoted in Keane, p. 53.

¹⁰ Keane, p. 64.

¹¹ Giovanni Sartori, *Comparative Constitutional Engineering* (New York: New York University Press, 1994).

¹² Keane, p. 117.

diversity of programmes, which were affiliated with political parties sponsoring individual channels. It is very doubtful that Keane's ideal of plurality and diversity of opinions can be illustrated by a model based on patronage of the political parties over the media. After deregulation, the tradition of political patronage of the media continued. Massive campaigns by three major private national channels (Canale 5, Italia 1, Rete 4) owned by media magnate Silvio Berlusconi became a vehicle for a journey into politics for Berlusconi himself and the new political movement Forza Italia that he had established. Berlusconi's channels uncritically supported him and Forza Italia before, during and after electoral campaigns and referenda campaigns, the purpose of which was to introduce some regulations and restrictions of private television in Italy.

Keane summarised his argument about the market liberalism in the mass media sector claiming that "time has long passed when it could be assumed credibly that market competition guarantees freedom of communication."¹³ Although this claim has an undeniable general validity, the market-based media have played a crucial role in guaranteeing freedom of communication in the case of Slovakia in the 1994-1998 period. In this context, it is necessary to note that the manipulative behaviour of the private market-based mass media was observed also in Slovakia. Most notable case has been the behaviour of the private television station TV Markíza and its politically ambitious owners. Keane's claim that some kind of market regulation is necessary obviously applies to any country, Slovakia included. There seems to be a broad consensus on a necessity of some kind of regulation of the media to prevent detrimental effects exerted by the state and market. The question is how to regulate the mass media so that they do not become slaves either of the state or of the market.

Keane's key argument about the role of the state in the media sector is based on the assumption that "the market 'libertarianism' coexists with a deeply neo-conservative attachment to political and cultural authoritarianism."¹⁴ Thus, preference for free market is accompanied by a strong state interference and manipulation of the public sector media, which Keane documented by several examples from Western Europe. However, there is a fundamental difference between the established democracies of Western Europe and the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe in this respect.

In the post-communist countries, the support for free market has generally not been linked to social conservatism, traditionalism or authoritarianism in a similar way as it has developed in Western Europe. In a seminal work on formation of party cleavages in post-

¹³ Keane, pp. 88-89.

¹⁴ Keane, p. 112.

communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Kitschelt, similarly to Keane, observed that West European party systems in the late twentieth century tended to be oriented towards an anti-market/libertarian versus a pro-market/authoritarian axis. At the same time, Kitschelt predicted that all party systems in post-communist countries would be centred around a pro-market/libertarian versus an anti-market/authoritarian axis.¹⁵ Thus, Keane's strong argument against combined forces of market liberalism and political and cultural authoritarianism does not work at all in most of Central and Eastern Europe. Slovakia and its party system have been a showcase example of the pro-market/libertarian versus the anti-market/authoritarian axis. Keane's key point that market liberalism is incapable of actualising the libertarian values due to its co-existence with a deeply neo-conservative attachment to political and cultural authoritarianism and omnipresence of the state has not been supported by developments in Slovakia.

Pro-market parties have been champions of liberalism in Slovakia and have rejected cultural and political authoritarianism and favoured decentralisation and a decreased role of state in the life of citizens. In practice, this can be illustrated by the adoption of a liberal version of the Freedom of Information Act in 2000, which was pushed through by the pro-market liberals/libertarians. This law was passed in Slovakia even before the adoption of a comparable law in the United Kingdom. The issue became a public debate topic simultaneously in both countries. The adoption of the law in Slovakia undermined the arrogance of state and its officials and enhanced the democratic rights of citizens by facilitating their access to information held in the files of state and civil authorities. Similarly to the support of a liberal law on information, the market liberals have been champions of decentralisation, decreased and weaker role of central state organs and transfer of the decision-making powers closer to the citizens. This attitude has been contrasted to the stand of the centre-left, which has blocked decentralisation, only unwillingly supported the information law, and favoured reliance on the state.

Keane suggested that a redefined, broadened and more accessible and accountable public service model is a way out of the trap created by market liberalism. The new public service model should "facilitate a genuine commonwealth of forms of life, tastes and opinions and empower a plurality of citizens who are governed neither by despotic states nor by market forces."¹⁶ The new public service model outlined by Keane should be firmly rooted in the

¹⁵ Herbert Kitschelt, "The Formation of Party Systems in East Central Europe.," *Politics & Society*, vol. 20, no. 1 (March 1992): p. 20.

¹⁶ Keane, p. 126.

civil society to escape the manipulation and censorship either by state or by market forces. Keane stressed the importance of accountability of the new public service media, but outlined it broadly and in a very vague way as being accountable to the civil society. However, the issue of who and how defines what constitutes the 'relevant' civil society and the institutional set-up of accountability remained unanswered and unclear.

Keane's assumption that publicly funded self-organising and cosmopolitan civil society is "genuinely pluralist because it is not dominated by commodity production and exchange"¹⁷ is problematic too. The assumption does not take into account that similarly to media themselves, the civil society cannot be viewed as a passive or neutral conduit through which information circulates. Keane himself affirmed that the media "pre-structure and bias the reception of opinions by individuals,"¹⁸ and there is no reason to believe why the civil society should not behave in the same way. Despite its internally pluralitarian nature, civil society can behave towards external actors - like the state or government - as an independent economic and political actor with a number of common interests of its own. A massive campaign by Slovak civil society to increase the turnout at the 1998 elections in Slovakia, proved that civil society can behave as a monolithic actor with interests of its own .

Moreover, the transformation of former state broadcasters into public institutions has been prevalingly formal in Central and Eastern Europe. The appointments of their directors and chief editors of news and current affairs departments remained highly politicised and controlled by governing political formations. The coverage of government activities by the 'public' media has tended to remain favourable. This has not been limited to Central and Eastern Europe only. The appointment of Greg Dyke to head the BBC was surrounded by a scandal due to his publicly known financial support of the governing Labour Party. This behaviour does not fit Keane's pattern of 'state sponsorship by market liberals,' since it comes from the centre-left and shows that the attempts to control the public broadcasters are far from being limited to market liberals.

Keane is self-evidently right claiming that "the freedom publicly to express or receive opinions is not identical with the freedom to own and control the means of communication."¹⁹ His call for restricting the market-based media and increasing regulation is very understandable from a perspective of an established Western democracy, where the main concern over media freedom has been the extensive market manipulation brought to an

¹⁷ Keane, p. 152.

¹⁸ Keane, p. 37.

¹⁹ Keane, p. 165.

extreme by the existence of the media empires. However, the context of Central and Eastern Europe's new democracies is essentially different, since they face the tradition and political culture of an omnipresent state dominating the media and making normative decisions about what is right and what is wrong. Keane's statement about the defence of state sponsorship and principle of executive sovereignty by market liberals is not valid in Slovakia. This has already been illustrated by the struggle of market liberals for a liberal and wide-ranging Freedom of Information Act and decentralisation of the state.

Similarly to John Keane, Colin Sparks' main concern with freedom of expression in the mass media is the manipulation by the market-based mass media. Sparks too is convinced that dichotomy consisting of state ownership, censorship, dictatorship and unfreedom versus private ownership, freedom of communication, democracy and freedom is mistaken.²⁰ He admitted too that his proposition was unfashionable in Central and Eastern Europe that emerged from periods of state oppression. However, Sparks' essay, despite being included in an edited book on media in transition, deals only with the British media. The author did not even attempt to support his arguments with insights into the mass media systems in post-communist transition countries. Instead, Sparks comparatively analysed the impartiality and provision of public information by the British state broadcasting sector and private press sector. This comparison however does not compare like with like. It represents the same kind of methodological problems for which the author rejected viability of a comparison of the state media system in totalitarian China with the private media system in the democratic United States.

Overlooking the methodological problems and different roles of press and broadcasting, one has to accept that Sparks proved that "state controlled broadcasters discharge their democratic functions much more satisfactorily than do the privately owned and market led press."²¹ While broadcasters report fairly and accurately, the press is often partisan. However, the relevance of the British case of a respected and independent public media broadcaster to the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe is doubtful. It remains only at a normative level as a working ideal model of an independent public broadcaster - even Sparks himself admitted that the British situation is a 'fortunate exception.' The public broadcasters in Central and Eastern Europe operate in a different institutional set-up and even more importantly in an essentially different political culture, weaker democratic tradition and poor history of independent and adversarial mass media. Comparing to the

²⁰ Sparks, p. 103.

²¹ Sparks, p. 112.

private media, the legacy of servile coverage of ‘those in power’ and missing tradition of adversarial and investigative journalism have remained more strongly rooted in the public media due to institutional inertia and institutional, budgetary and personnel link-up between the state and public media.

Despite similarities in legislation on public mass media, temptations of politicians to manipulate the media in post-communist countries materialise more often than in the established Western democracies. In both cases the nomination process of the directors of public broadcasting institutions is under more or less direct influence of the parliamentary majority/government. However, due to a more developed political culture, the appointment of a Labour nominee to head the BBC has not led to a servile coverage of the British government, while similar appointments along party lines have led to substantial changes in editorial policies of the public broadcasters in post-communist countries. Indeed, in a study of the reform of public television in post-communist countries, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi emphasises the importance of political culture asserting that the editorial independence of the BBC has been protected not only by its Charter, but fundamentally by the distinct British political culture. The situation of the BBC thus looks like an exception rather than a rule even in a Western liberal democratic perspective. In Britain, autonomy and pluralism have been long-lasting values, thus the government has been more likely to respect public mass media and public mass media have striven to be an independent actor, while in continental Europe some degree of political dependence of public broadcasters has been accepted.²²

Sparks summed up that the "commonplace identity of the state regulated media with a denial of democracy and the free market media with democracy is not only wrong, it is an exact contradiction of evidence."²³ The evidence, however, is British – and the evidence from Slovakia has proved the exact opposite of Sparks’ claim. Sparks admits the uniqueness of the British experience - the success of the British broadcasting in satisfying its democratic functions has not been a necessary and inevitable consequence of its public status.

Indeed, in a study of television in transition Sparks himself admitted the failure to establish truly public and independent broadcasting institutions in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. Correctly, he pointed out that the failure was not the result of inadequate legal formulations or commercial pressures, but the cause was "the absence of the kind of political culture necessary for any public service broadcaster to survive."²⁴ As Sparks

²² Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *State Into Public: The Reform of State TV in East Central Europe*, OSI-IPF Policy Papers (Budapest: Open Society Institute, 2000): downloaded from <http://www.osi.hu/ipf/>.

²³ Sparks, p. 112.

²⁴ Colin Sparks, "Television in Transition," in *International media research: A critical survey*, by John Corner,

continued, the example of the BBC demonstrated that "with the right safeguards, professional journalism can maintain its autonomy within the confines of what remains essentially a government institution."²⁵ However, the government has at its disposal a wide range of formal and informal powers to influence the public broadcaster - the appointment of a partisan head of the BBC was only the tip of the iceberg. Thus, there is an important qualitative difference between the British case on one hand and the Central and East European cases on the other hand in regard to how far the governments dare to go in their efforts to manipulate the mass media.

The message behind Keane's and Sparks' essays is that neither the state nor the market represent guarantees of the democratic and pluralistic discharge of the media functions. However, their primary concern is the negative impact of the market-based media. This concern is based on the Western, predominantly British, experience. This paper argues that the primary concern in Slovakia has still been within the impact of state on the media, which has been due to different history, political culture, traditions, and institutional set-up.

Oleg Manaev and Yuri Pryliuk, the editors of a book on transition of mass media from totalitarianism to democracy, pointed out that the post-communist authors unanimously rejected that a more active and differentiated state participation in regulating the mass communication is a solution. They preferred the development of market mechanism and civil structures.²⁶ Those that have experienced totalitarianism and most recently authoritarian government methods have no illusions as to state regulation of the media. Thus, the main guarantee of democratic character of the media is a pluralist mechanism of their interaction - the market or the state alone are not enough and tend to manipulate them. Importantly, the operation of public and private media must be firmly rooted in the law and in a transparent institutional set-up. On the other hand, experience has shown that even the existence of similar supervisory structures in the post-communist countries and Western democracies has not prevented repeated interference of the government within the public broadcasters. Therefore, despite being an essential prerequisite of media independence, the legislative framework cannot solve all the problems of the state meddling within the media, but must go hand in hand with a wide consensus of the political elite on the importance of the media

Philip Schlesinger and Roger Silverstone, eds. (London: Routledge, 1996) quoted in Andrej Školkay, "An Analysis of Politicians Attitudes Regarding the Mass Media in Post-communist Slovakia," *Sociológia - Slovak Sociological Review*, vol. 2 (February 1997): downloaded from <http://www.fphil.uniba.sk/~kpol/analysis.html>.

²⁵ Leo Bogart, "Media and Democracy," in *Media and Democracy*, by Everette E. Dennis and Robert W. Snyder, eds. (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998), p. 8.

²⁶ Oleg Manaev and Yuri Pryliuk, eds., *Media in Transition: From Totalitarianism to Democracy* (Kyiv: ABRIS, 1993).

independence. Legal framework designed to guarantee media independence must be supported by a developed political culture. Series of surveys conducted in 1995 and 1996 showed that between two thirds and three quarters of the Slovak population disapprove of government control of the mass media. The number of respondents indicating this view increased over time.²⁷ These findings are very promising since they indicate the presence of a liberal political culture in Slovakia.

O'Neil's essay on the mass media and democratisation is based on the assumption that "the media can and often do play a central role in shaping the course of political transition."²⁸ O'Neil suggested a basic theoretical framework for an analysis of the relationship between the mass media and the process of political transition and democratisation. The framework analysed the media from three perspectives: types of mass communication, degree and form of state control, and market, property and the locus of media authority. This way, the author avoids the methodological problems of Sparks' approach mixing two types of the mass media. Simultaneously, the framework directs the attention towards the main issue at the media playground: market and state, ownership and regulation. The second part of the dissertation analyses the electronic mass media in Slovakia from the perspective of their relationship to the working of democracy.

II: THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY: CASE OF SLOVAKIA FROM 1994 TO 1998

The studies of the relationship between the media and democracy by most of the Western political scientists have been based on the assumption of a stable and liberal democratic order. Consequently, most of the Western studies of the media have little to say about the role of the mass media in transitional systems.²⁹ The first part of this dissertation was an effort to show and prove the discrepancy between Western thinking about the media and post-communist reality.

The notion of a free press is central to many models of democracy. However, little has been known about the relationship between media and the formation of stable democracy. What arrangement of the media is most suitable to sustain the establishment of democratic

²⁷ Zora Bútorová, "Verejná mienka na Slovensku v roku 1995," in *Slovensko 1995: Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti*, by Martin Bútor and Pēter Hunčík, eds., (Bratislava, Nadácia Sándora Máraiho, 1996), p. 243; Zora Bútorová, Oľga Gyarfášová, and Miroslav Kúska, *Aktuálne problémy Slovenska na prelome rokov 1995-1996* (Bratislava: Focus, 1996), p. 94.

²⁸ O'Neil (1998), p. 7.

²⁹ Patrick H. O'Neil, Introduction: Media Reform and Democratization in Eastern Europe, *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, Special Issue: Post-Communism and the Media in Eastern Europe,

politics? Despite playing a central role in democracy, the mass media do not inherently serve democracy due to their vulnerability to manipulation by political authorities or economic forces. It is necessary to establish that the media are not inevitably an agent of democracy and their activities can have detrimental effect on the quality of democracy.³⁰

The second part of this paper examines the relationship between the electronic media and democracy in Slovakia from 1994 to 1998, especially in the run-up to the 1998 parliamentary elections. The 1994-1998 period was the term of the office of the government led by Vladimír Mečiar and his Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS). The observed period was marked by authoritarian tendencies, submission and use of the public media by the government and conflicts with the private media independent from the state. Andrej Školkay listed several authoritarian methods in regard to the mass media that were applied in Slovakia. The list included changes in the legal system, technical arguments against the renewal of broadcasting licence, economic pressure, dismissal of management and journalists working in public broadcasting institutions and the state news agency, establishment of own newspapers and magazines, direct and indirect financial support of loyal media, appointment of government supporters into supervisory boards of public broadcasting institutions, refusals to give information or access to information to journalists from critical media, awards to loyal media and journalists, collection of damaging information about and intimidation of critical journalists.³¹ The government's hostility towards the independent media was also aggravated by a general lack of experience in dealing with a newly independent and increasingly self-confident media especially with those media determined to act as a watchdog of the public interest. The lack of experience in dealing with the free media was however symptomatic of the behaviour of post-communist politicians in all transition countries.

The political development in Slovakia has often been quoted as a departure from the promising and more smooth transition of other Central European countries towards democracy. Slovakia was the only post-communist country described as a "particularly difficult place for the operation of the newly free media"³² in a comparative study of mass media in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. Similarly, some authors compared Slovakia to the countries of South Eastern Europe, because the political leaders in those

vol. 12, no. 4 (December 1996): pp. 1-6.

³⁰ Bogart, p. 3.

³¹ Školkay (1997), <http://www.fphil.uniba.sk/~kpol/analysis.html>.

³² Andrew K. Milton, News Media Reform in Eastern Europe: A Cross-National Comparison, *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics, Special Issue: Post-Communism and the Media in Eastern Europe*, vol. 12, no. 4 (December 1996): p. 19.

countries have created mechanisms to hinder freedom of the mass media by imposing special taxes, buying majority ownership, questioning licences and so forth."³³

A number of international organisations classified Slovakia as a country with only partial freedom of the media due to the governmental activities aimed at limiting or obstructing media freedom. Freedom House decreased the democratic ratings of Slovakia in the 1994-1998 period.³⁴ In the annual ratings for the 1994-1995 and 1995-1996 periods, the scores of political rights and civil liberties were 2 and 3 respectively; the freedom status was 'free.' However, the evaluation of respect for civil liberties gradually worsened and the respective ratings for 1996-1997 and 1997-1998 periods were 2 and 4. Simultaneously Slovakia passed into the category of countries designated as 'partly free.'³⁵ The relevance of the Freedom House evaluation as one of the major efforts to operationalise the scale of democracy has been acknowledged by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, authors of one of the most respected books on democratic transition and consolidation.³⁶

International criticism aimed against the systematic repression of the mass media in Slovakia came also from the Committee to Protect Journalists,³⁷ which put Slovak prime minister Mečiar on its annual list of the ten worst enemies of the press in 1996. The reasons for his inclusion in the list were that he pushed through the parliament the amendment to the Criminal Code that would imprison journalists and others found guilty of 'spreading false information abroad,' dismissed all but one of the 18 members of the state radio and television supervisory boards, and turned the Slovak public broadcasters into mouthpieces and apologists for his increasingly autocratic rule.³⁸

However, the nature of problems and conflicts related to the relationship between the media and democracy has been similar in all the transition countries. Czech prime minister

³³ Owen V. Johnson, "The Media and Democracy in Eastern Europe," in *Communicating Democracy: The Media and Political Transitions*, by Patrick H. O'Neil, ed., (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 1998): p. 112.

³⁴ Freedom House is a respected international non-profit and non-partisan organisation dedicated to the promotion of democracy, political rights and civil liberties world-wide. Since 1972, it has published annual country assessments of state of freedom. The characters representing scores for each year are political rights, civil liberties, and freedom status. Freedom House uses a 7-point scale to rank countries political rights and civil liberties. One represents the highest degree of freedom and seven the lowest. Overall freedom status has been expressed in three categories as 'free,' 'partly free,' and 'not free.' Countries whose combined averages for political rights and for civil liberties fall between 1.0 and 2.5 are designated 'free;' between 3.0 and 5.5 'partly free;' and between 5.5 and 7.0 'not free.'

³⁵ Freedom House, *Annual Survey of Freedom*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/ratings>.

³⁶ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1996): p. 39.

³⁷ Committee to Protect Journalists is a non-profit, non-partisan organisation dedicated to the global defence of press freedom.

³⁸ Committee to Protect Journalists, *Country Reports: Slovakia*, http://www.cpj.org/attacks99/pages_att99/country_frame_att99.html; *The 10 Worst Offenders of 1996*,

Václav Klaus said in 1994 that "journalists are the biggest enemies of humankind."³⁹ The struggle over the state television in Hungary from 1992 to 1994 was indeed known as 'Hungarian Media War.' There was a very intense and charged struggle for control of public television in Poland in 1995-1996 period. President Lech Wałęsa tried to bring pressure on an independent body that awards licences for broadcasters. After the licence was not granted to Wałęsa's favourite, he used a loophole in the law to dismiss the chairman of the licence awarding body.⁴⁰ Thus, the differences between the Visegrad Four countries were rather a matter of degree than of principle. Tension between new post-communist political elites and the mass media has been a common feature of transition in Central and Eastern Europe. There has been a number of similarities especially in regard to governmental attempts to control and manipulate the public radio and television broadcasting. Attempts to establish truly public broadcasting institutions in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe have generally failed, because the governments are not ready to give up their influence within the state-financed media.

One of the main problems of the mass media in the democratising countries of Central Europe have been persistence of communist and even pre-communist approaches to the collection, presentation and dissemination of news.⁴¹ This persistence has been most marked in the old media that tried to re-invent themselves after the collapse of communism, particularly in the public television and radio - reformed from the state-run propaganda transmission belts of the communist regimes. Endurance of old approaches to the news has resulted in and can be illustrated by rigid presentation of the news, which often lacks dynamics; conformity and servile attitudes and lack of critical and adversarial approach to the government; under-reporting of explanatory elements and reliance on official viewpoints and attitudes. Describing the situation of mass media in post-communist countries, one can only agree with Dennis and Snyder, who observed that truly critical, adversarial journalism, such as extensive investigative reporting, is more often the exception than the rule.⁴²

A content-analysis of media pieces that covered any aspect of international relations or foreign affairs and any aspect of economic development, plans or programmes proved prevailing reliance on official sources and viewpoints and lack of investigative journalism and independent researching from other than official sources. The content analysis covered two

<http://www.cpj.org/enemies/enemies96.html>.

³⁹ Václav Klaus quoted in Školkay (1997), <http://www.fphil.uniba.sk/~kpol/analysis.html>.

⁴⁰ Ireneusz C. Kamiński, *Western Media Standards in New Democracies of Central and Eastern Europe*, OSI-IPF Policy Papers (Budapest: Open Society Institute, 2000): downloaded from <http://www.osi.hu/ipf/>.

⁴¹ Milton, p. 7.

divergent transitional countries. While the Czech Republic was generally considered to exhibit greater development of civil society and democratic principles, the Slovak government disrespected the democratic principles and the rule of law. The content-analysis proved the extensive use of official sources in both countries. It appeared that the media were good at reporting official actions, statements, and preferences, and failed to report independently acquired or gathered material.⁴³ The submissive understanding of the media's role can be illustrated by a statement of Roman Kaliský, the first post-communist director of the public television in Slovakia, who noted that Slovak Television was "an important informational medium of the Slovak parliament and Slovak government to serve the democratisation of Slovak society."⁴⁴ The extensive use of official sources and lack of explanation and understanding of the context and causation in economic policy are a serious setback to the democratic politics, because of their vital importance to the prospect for both market and democratic reform. Equivalent patterns of media performance in respect to their tendency to over-rely on official sources and to under-report important explanatory elements were observed in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria.⁴⁵

Attitudinal and institutional legacies have been shaping the post-communist mass media in Slovakia and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. Despite significant changes in the media institutions, there was no radical change of the role and function of the mass media, particularly public television and radio. Their existing political and organisational structure has not been sufficiently transformed yet. The absence of an established civil society has made the media vulnerable to attempts at political control. The essential problem in Central and Eastern Europe is the unwillingness or inability to reconstruct the institution of the free media comprehensively: the state continues to exert excessive control of public television and radio.

The level of state influence in the Slovak media has remained high. A number of legal changes have liberalised the environment for an independent operation of the media, however, two important paragraphs related to the defamation of either state or its representatives remained intact. The category of state defamation has not been used since the collapse of communism, probably due to its previous abuse by the communist regime. However, the personal defamation has been used on a number of occasions in cases of legitimate issues of

⁴² Dennis and Snyder, p. xvi.

⁴³ Milton, pp. 8-12.

⁴⁴ Roman Kaliský quoted in Andrej Školkay, "Journalists, Political Elites and the Post-Communist Public: The Case of Slovakia," *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics, Special Issue: Post-Communism and the Media in Eastern Europe*, vol. 12, no. 4 (December 1996): p. 67.

slander, but also apparently in order to intimidate the media.⁴⁶ Ireneusz C. Kamiński asserted that there were attempts in Slovakia to use provisions protecting privacy to intimidate the media critical about the governing officials.⁴⁷ The government submitted to the parliament the draft Law for the Protection of the Republic also called Anti-Subversion Law, which was targeted against media freedom and against critical and independently thinking journalists as it was designed to prevent the allegedly subversive activities of some journalists. The HZDS-dominated parliament passed the law twice in 1996, but President Michal Kováč vetoed the legislation in both cases. In 1997, following substantial domestic and international criticism of the proposed law, the parliament declined to pass it into further reading.⁴⁸

Another method of governmental interference with freedom of media was brought about by the amendment of the election law in May 1998, just about five months before the elections, which were scheduled for 25-26 September 1998. The new law limited the election campaign in electronic media only to the public broadcasters. This restriction was opposed by the opposition parties, Slovak Syndicate of Journalists, and Association of Independent Radio and Television Stations, who argued that the Constitution guarantees freedom of choice, distribution and reception of information. The election law also authorised the Council of the Slovak Republic for Radio and Television Broadcasting⁴⁹ to monitor the electronic media during the election campaign. The sections of the law amendments concerning the news coverage in the media were so unclear that the Council had to specify them issuing a set of recommendations for the electronic media. Although the recommendations were not legally binding, they clearly indicated how the Council would evaluate political programmes. Chairman of the Slovak Syndicate of Journalists Ján Füle praised the attitude of the Council and its merit in clarifying the rules of the game for the media in the election campaign.⁵⁰

Facing a growing governmental interference and restriction in the election law on participation of the private media in the campaign of political parties, the major private broadcasting media - TV Markíza and Radio Twist - joined the campaign of the non-governmental organisations to mobilise the public to vote. The two stations broadcast special informative and motivating advertisements shortly before their respective main news

⁴⁵ Milton, pp. 12-14.

⁴⁶ Školkay (1996), p. 66.

⁴⁷ Kamiński, <http://www.osi.hu/ipf/>.

⁴⁸ Ján Füle, "Médiá," in *Slovensko 1998-1999: Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti*, by Grigorij Mesežnikov, and Michal Ivantyšin, eds. (Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 1999): p. 583.

⁴⁹ The Council of the Slovak Republic for Radio and Television Broadcasting is the supreme body responsible for assignment of television and radio licences, distribution of frequencies and supervision of private and public broadcasting.

⁵⁰ Füle, p. 602.

programmes. These materials were produced by non-governmental organisations and did not promote particular parties, but highlighted the importance of taking part in the elections. The media and non-governmental organisations played a vital role in mobilising the population. The election turnout reached 84.24 per cent, while in the 1994 elections it was only 75.65 per cent.

II.1 Television

In May 1991, Slovakia became the first post-communist country in Central and Eastern Europe to adopt the law on 'public broadcasting institutions,' which should technically have created more independent electronic mass media. The impetus for the transformation of the state media to truly independent public broadcasters came from the new managing directors of Slovak Television and Slovak Radio, who understood the importance of institutional independence of the media from the state and had a professional interest in promoting these changes. The impulse for transformation of the media did not come from leading democratic politicians of the former anti-communist opposition in Slovakia (Public Against Violence, Christian Democratic Movement). This indicates that they failed to grasp the importance of the public status of the mass media and preferred to have the media subject to their potential control.

The legislation passed by the Slovak parliament did not clarify what in fact the public status entailed. It appears now that the parliament and government were reluctant to define the term 'public' (*verejnoprávny*), finding its ambiguity potentially useful in serving their needs. The new law therefore did not guarantee financial and political independence of the broadcasting media. The change in the legislation replaced the state or government control with a 'public' control, which was however seen solely in terms of political representation. Thus, the public broadcasters started to be controlled by the parliamentary majority, which in practice however consists of the same political parties that form the government. The ambiguous status of the term 'public' made it relatively easy to amend the legislation on public television and radio on several occasions since 1991. Following the 1992 parliamentary elections and Mečiar's return to the position of the prime minister, the HZDS-dominated Slovak parliament simplified the elections of members of the supervisory Board of Slovak Television and Board of Slovak Radio.

Thus, the legal protections designed to ensure at least certain level of independence of the broadcasters through the creation of publicly accountable supervisory boards was

undermined. A simple majority in parliament could elect and dismiss the board members. The supervisory boards of the public broadcasters came under firm control by parliamentary majority. The new law reduced political diversity and political autonomy of the board members. The power-sharing formula, which previously guaranteed representation for each parliamentary party was abandoned in favour of a more proportional representation, which resulted in a take-over of the supervisory boards by the governmental appointees.

Independent and 'public' status of Slovak Television and Slovak Radio became only a formal attribute to cover indirect submission to and control by the government through its parliamentary majority. Transition from a state broadcaster to a truly independent public service operator was successfully blocked. The public broadcasters became controlled and even run by the government. The institutional modification allowed the government to carry out changes in personnel not only at the board level, but also within the broadcasters and their news programmes. The right to appoint the directors of Slovak Television and Slovak Radio was transferred to the HZDS-dominated parliament. Several observers of the Slovak media concluded that, as a consequence of the institutional changes, Slovak Television worked as a tool of HZDS propaganda in the 1994-1998 period, and particularly in the run-up to the 1998 elections.⁵¹

Füle claimed that the main news programme of the STV was based on three fundamental principles of propaganda: selective information, frequent repetition, and use of emotional appeal focused on sentiment rather than rational appeal.⁵² During the election campaign, Slovak Television ignored the recommendations of the Council of the Slovak Republic for Radio and Television Broadcasting and continued to broadcast strongly partisan commentaries in its main evening news programme. Absolute lack of impartiality and neutral approach to the political news was illustrated by a growing number of commentaries, which constituted almost 20 per cent of the news broadcasts of the STV before the election campaign and only slightly decreased during the campaign.⁵³ Leading journalists and commentators of the STV - Richard Hergott, Pavol Kapusta, Hana Pravdová, Maroš Púchovský, Michal Zölde - were either directly personally linked to the HZDS, or extremely supportive of it. STV Director Ivan Kubiš declared his absolute personal loyalty and support

⁵¹ Füle, p. 593; Andrej Školkay, "The Media and Political Communication in the Election Campaign," in *The 1998 Parliamentary Elections and Democratic Rebirth in Slovakia*, by Martin Bútorá, Grigorij Mesežnikov, Zora Bútorová, and Sharon Fisher, (Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 1999): p. 118.

⁵² Füle, p. 603.

⁵³ Školkay (1999), p. 115.

to prime minister Vladimír Mečiar. The chairman of the supervisory Board of Slovak Television Dušan Jarjabek became a HZDS candidate in the parliamentary elections.

The official rule for the division of the time in the news programmes among various political formations was based on the principle of thirds. One third of the STV news airtime was to be devoted to the government, one third to the ruling parties and one third to the opposition parties. However, the STV news did not adhere even to the self-proclaimed principle of the airtime distribution. The opinion polls reflected that the population perceived the bias of the STV. In a poll conducted in July 1998, enormous 46 per cent of the interviewees said they distrusted this public broadcasting institution. The STV recorded by far the highest level of mistrust comparing to other major electronic media.⁵⁴

The electronic media in Slovakia were monitored during the election campaign by a number of domestic and international organisations. The already mentioned Council of the Slovak Republic for Radio and Television Broadcasting was authorised by law to monitor the election. There was a number of other organisations monitoring the elections: the Slovak Syndicate of Journalists, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the MEMO'98 project. The results of monitoring confirmed a strong bias of the STV against the opposition parties and in favour of the HZDS.

The MEMO'98⁵⁵ project noted that there was no doubt that the viewers of the STV news were offered dramatically different views of the events than were the viewers of TV Markíza before the start and during the election campaign. The STV offered significantly more coverage of the government and ruling coalition parties than TV Markíza. STV consistently portrayed the government, HZDS and its junior partner, the Slovak National Party (SNS) in a positive light, while usually portraying the opposition parties in neutral or negative light. The stories offered by the STV were not balanced, as they frequently failed to offer opposing views in the body of the story and thus were one-sided and unfair. The STV also repeatedly devoted time in its main evening news programme to the same pieces of discrediting information, which were old and unrelated to current events. The criticised parties were given no opportunity to express their opinion. The news reports on domestic political affairs were focused on discrediting the opposition. The MEMO'98 report concluded that lack of balance, distortion and misinformation were the norm of the STV news. The

⁵⁴ Školkay (1999), p. 115.

⁵⁵ The MEMO'98 project is a civic association formed by the Helsinki Citizens Assembly and the Association for the Support of the Local Democracy to systematically monitor the media coverage of the parliamentary elections. During the election campaign the MEMO'98 project published weekly in-depth monitoring reports that covered the two major television and radio stations - Slovak Television, TV Markíza, Slovak Radio, and

MEMO'98 project monitored the distribution of the airtime in the STV news programmes. In the period from 20 July 1998 to 6 September 1998, the MEMO'98 project published weekly data on distribution of airtime among the government, ruling parties and opposition parties. The figures showed that the proclaimed principle of division of airtime devoted to politically significant stories into thirds was not respected and that the STV news strongly favoured the government and ruling parties. The figures of the weekly airtime devoted to the government ranged from 29 to 52 per cent. The coverage of the ruling parties ranged from 16 to 28.6 per cent, and the coverage of the political parties that were not part of the ruling coalition ranged from 13 to 21 per cent.⁵⁶

In its last report before the elections, the MEMO'98 project summarised that "the most disturbing finding of MEMO'98 throughout this project has been the consistent practice on STV of neglecting to air opposing views in the body of particular stories. STV as a public institution, has completely failed to live up its obligations to the Slovak public by substituting objective news coverage with biased and distorted stories that advance the interests of ruling powers and unscrupulously attack any opposition activities."⁵⁷ The lack of balance in the STV news was especially troubling, because of its public status and obligation to serve the interests of all Slovak citizens. Instead, the STV news programmes served partisan interests of only one group of political subjects, while they neglected to explain alternative views necessary for electorate to make informed choices at the ballot box. Comparing to private broadcasters, the public television should be held to higher standards, because of its public role defined by law and obligation to provide non-partisan and independent news service. And yet, one must keep in mind that also private broadcasters have public duties, because they have been given privileged access to their licences. An essential difference between public and private television has been stressed also by Mungiu-Pippidi who admitted that the challenge of legitimacy is more important in the case of public television: in order to justify its public spending, it cannot afford to be partisan, but has to be objective and act in public interest.⁵⁸

The main private television station TV Markíza offered entirely different and more balanced news programmes comparing to the STV. TV Markíza started broadcasting in August 1996 covering nearly two thirds of the Slovak territory. The station was co-owned by the licence-holder Markíza Slovakia, which held 51 per cent of the shares and its partner

Radio Twist.

⁵⁶ MEMO'98 project, Media Monitoring: Reports on Media Coverage of Slovak Politics, no. 1-6 (23 July 1998-22 September 1998): <http://www.memo98.sk/spravys/archiv.html>.

⁵⁷ MEMO'98 project, Report on Media Coverage of Slovak Politics, no. 6 (22 September 1998): http://www.memo98.sk/spravys/subory/us_report6.html.

Central European Media Enterprises, which held the remaining 49 per cent of the shares. The licence-holder Markíza Slovakia was owned by TV Markíza's managing director Pavol Rusko and Sylvia Volzová. Soon after its start-up, TV Markíza became the most popular television station in Slovakia, regularly gaining the highest audience shares. Its main evening news programme has belonged to the station's most viewed programmes. A monitoring survey conducted by the Slovak Syndicate of Journalists showed that politically significant information occupied 75.7 per cent of airtime of TV Markíza's main evening news programme in the pre-election period, while it constituted only 65.6 per cent of the STV main evening news programme airtime.⁵⁹

TV Markíza generally offered more balanced and impartial news service than the STV, but cases of partisan behaviour and favourable treatment of certain politicians and political formations appeared also at TV Markíza. From spring 1998, TV Markíza was giving unequivocal support to Košice mayor and former chairman of the Slovak parliament Rudolf Schuster and his forming Party of Civic Understanding (SOP). Školkay pointed out that TV Markíza became a political issue for its role in creating a positive image for the newly-established SOP.⁶⁰ Even before the formal establishment of the SOP, TV Markíza gave large airtime to favourable stories on Košice mayor Schuster and published results of surveys, which gave high ranking to his political party, which has not existed yet. The behaviour of TV Markíza was an example of a trend described by Bogart who observed how mass media change away coverage of election campaigns or politics in general from reports on principled debates or policy choices to tracking who is ahead in the surveys.⁶¹ TV Markíza became also directly personally associated with the SOP. Viera Rusková, the wife of TV Markíza's managing director Pavol Rusko, held a senior position at TV Markíza's News and Current Affairs Department. Later, she became a candidate for the SOP in the parliamentary elections and eventually happened to be elected a member of the parliament. Michal Arpáš, a senior sports journalist at TV Markíza was another SOP parliamentary candidate coming from TV Markíza. As for the amount of airtime provided to individual politicians, Rudolf Schuster, Igor Presperín and Pavol Hamžík, three leading politicians of the SOP belonged to the eight most frequently featured politicians on TV Markíza's news.⁶² Apart from a favourable coverage of the SOP, TV Markíza also portrayed in a positive light two other opposition

⁵⁸ Mungiu-Pippidi, <http://www.osi.hu/ipf/>.

⁵⁹ Füle, p. 604.

⁶⁰ Školkay (1999), p. 111.

⁶¹ Bogart, p. 10.

⁶² Slovak Syndicate of Journalists monitoring quoted in Školkay (1999), p. 116.

parties: the SDK and SDL. TV Markíza's managing director Pavol Rusko admitted a direct interference and co-operation with the opposition parties, when he suggested that at a meeting with opposition leaders he tried to explain that if the anti-Mečiar coalition was headed by Ján Čarnogurský, they would not succeed and therefore Rusko recommended that Mikuláš Dzurinda could become a leader of the opposition against Mečiar.⁶³

TV Markíza became a political issue also for its role in mobilising opposition supporters during the station's turbulent ownership struggles in the run-up to the elections. In what appeared to be a politically motivated raid, a group of armed security guards occupied the station's headquarters near Bratislava on 18 August 1998 and then again on 15 September 1998. The security guards were hired by the company Gamatex, which was co-owned by Marián Kočner and Štefan Ágh. Gamatex bought for a symbolic value of one crown the claims of the company ESPE and the outstanding debts of Markíza Slovakia (the licence-holder) claimed by ESPE. On 14 August, Gamatex levied execution against Markíza Slovakia claiming the outstanding debt, which Gamatex took over from ESPE. On 17 August the district court issued a preliminary decision confirming the change of Markíza Slovakia's ownership. One day after the decision of the court, Gamatex occupied the headquarters of Markíza. Managing director of TV Markíza Pavol Rusko refused to accept the execution of Markíza Slovakia. Rusko did not recognise the outstanding debt of Markíza Slovakia towards ESPE. After a preliminary agreement between Rusko, Kočner and Ágh, the security guards left TV Markíza's headquarters. However, a new raid followed on 15 September, less than two weeks before the parliamentary elections. Rusko claimed that the whole affair was engineered by the Slovak Intelligence Service (SIS), which allegedly co-operated with the Gamatex owners.

The opposition leaders used the political opportunity and stood in front of masses rallied to 'defend' the independence of the popular TV station. Opposition politicians from the SOP, SDK and SDL, together with journalists, management and managing director of the station, received a considerable amount of airtime, which they used for attacks on the government. The purported take-over of TV Markíza became a major national news story. The scheduled programme at TV Markíza was substituted by live information about the current situation inside and in front of the TV Markíza building. TV Markíza subsequently received a large fine from the Council of the Slovak Republic for Radio and Television Broadcasting for unapproved changes in programming and airtime unilaterally given to

⁶³ Pavol Rusko quoted in Martin Kontra, "Potlesk pro Mečiara," (Applause for Mečiar) *Respekt*, no. 25 (12-18 June 2000), <http://www.respekt.cz/025-11.htm>.

opposition politicians during the ownership struggles. The issue of TV Markíza's disputed ownership proved to be very complicated and legal battles for the company continued until summer 2000, when the owners of Gamatex sold the company to TV Markíza.

The MEMO'98 project that monitored the distribution of the airtime in the news programmes of the main electronic media stated already in its first weekly monitoring report that TV Markíza offered dramatically different views of events than the STV. While the STV devoted more attention to the government and the ruling parties, especially the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), TV Markíza reported a great deal more on the opposition parties, mainly the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK) and Party of Civic Understanding (SOP), but also Party of the Democratic Left (SDL) and to a lesser extent also the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK). The weekly monitoring reports by MEMO'98 on the distribution of airtime in the period from 20 July 1998 to 6 September 1998 clearly showed that TV Markíza dedicated much more airtime to the opposition parties than the STV. The airtime devoted to the government ranged from 8 to 26.4 per cent. The coverage of the ruling parties ranged from 5 to 14.7 per cent, and the coverage of the opposition parties ranged from 37.6 to 55 per cent. The preference of the opposition parties at TV Markíza culminated in the last 12 days before the elections, when TV Markíza offered much more extensive coverage of opposition parties than of government and HZDS. Thus, the monitoring figures clearly indicate a contrary trend at TV Markíza compared to the STV. Even more important than the amount of coverage was the way that significant political activities were portrayed. TV Markíza offered some positive and neutral coverage of the government and HZDS, but most of their coverage was portrayed in a negative light. On the other hand, positive views of the SDK and SOP, and to a lesser degree also of the SDL and SMK, were the norm on TV Markíza, which also presented the SNS in a mostly positive or neutral manner. There was also a difference in balance within each story on the two main television channels. TV Markíza only occasionally aired stories without offering a fair view of the other side, while one-sided or unfair presentation of stories was a standard behaviour at the STV. However, TV Markíza presented a few stories in ways favourable to itself without giving the complete story or in ways that portray individual subjects unfairly, yet this tendency was markedly more pronounced on the STV.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ MEMO'98 project, Media Monitoring: Reports on Media Coverage of Slovak Politics, no. 1-6 (23 July 1998-22 September 1998): <http://www.memo98.sk/spravy/archiv.html>.

II.2 Radio

Slovak Radio, the public radio broadcaster in Slovakia, managed to maintain more independence from the government and provide more alternative opinions and more proportionate division of airtime between the government and opposition parties and unlike STV, Slovak Radio stopped broadcasting the commentaries in its news programmes. The more balanced news service of Slovak Radio was not a result of a different institutional or legal protection of its independence compared to the STV, but as Školkey argued, more independent behaviour of Slovak Radio was "primarily a result of the resistance of the ordinary reporters, who found support in the chairman of the [Slovak Radio] trade union."⁶⁵ Školkey's opinion was supported by an observation made by Kamiński in his paper on mass media standards in Central and Eastern Europe. In accordance with Školkey, Kamiński observed that the simplistic approach of the politicians who see the mass media as an instrument of political power only faces opposition when journalists, publishers and broadcasters become convinced about their role in a democratic society and, in addition, are able to organise themselves in order to defend their independence.⁶⁶ In his article on media and democracy Bogart too concluded that mass media can serve democracy only when those who work in them feel a passionate responsibility to create and maintain democracy.⁶⁷

However, despite giving airtime to alternative opinions unlike the STV, the monitoring of the Slovak Radio news programmes by the Slovak Syndicate of Journalists showed "biased selection of news showing the ruling coalition in a good light and ... the limitation of opposing opinions by minimising the airtime given to the opposition. Investigative and critical journalism disappeared from the Slovak Radio news programmes."⁶⁸ The weekly monitoring reports by the MEMO'98 project stated that Slovak Radio offered significantly much more coverage of the government and the ruling coalition than Radio Twist, the main private radio broadcaster. Slovak Radio also portrayed the government and HZDS much more often in a positive light, than in a negative light. However, Slovak Radio also offered significant amount of neutral and balanced coverage. There was a number of instances when Slovak Radio sought particular opportunities to give the government additional favourable news coverage or failed to offer opposing views to those of the

⁶⁵ Školkey (1999), p. 120.

⁶⁶ Kamiński, <http://www.osi.hu/ipf/>.

⁶⁷ Bogart, p. 11.

⁶⁸ Slovak Syndicate of Journalists monitoring quoted in Školkey (1999), p. 120.

government and ruling parties.⁶⁹ In the period from 26 August 1998 to 26 September 1998, the main news programme of Slovak Radio provided 40.5 per cent of the airtime to the government, 1.4 per cent to the ruling parties and only 8.2 per cent to the opposition parties.⁷⁰

There were more than 20 private radio stations in Slovakia, however their political influence was limited due to several reasons. Most of the private broadcasters were small regional stations. Only two private radio stations – Fun Radio and Radio Twist – had a large territorial coverage, which was close to the coverage of Slovak Radio. Surveys showed that two most popular radio stations in Slovakia were Slovak Radio's Slovakia 1 and Rock FM Radio, which were followed by the private Fun Radio and Radio Twist stations. However, in Bratislava, Radio Twist has been the most popular radio station with the highest share of the listeners. Out of the two major private radio stations achieving an almost national coverage, only Radio Twist had interest in producing its own domestic and international news programmes of such a scope and quality to provide an alternative to the news programmes of Slovak Radio. Radio Twist suffered at several occasions from governmental interference. Its transmitter in Central Slovakia was switched off by a state controlled communications company on allegedly economic grounds. In 1998, Minister of Culture Ján Hudec attacked the Council of the Slovak Republic for Radio and Television Broadcasting for granting two new frequencies in eastern Slovakia to Radio Twist.

The Radio Twist news programmes devoted less airtime to the news, but presented the government more critically or neutrally comparing with Slovak Radio. Radio Twist also gave large coverage (almost one third of its news programmes) to air opposing views and responses of other side on various issues. The monitoring by the MEMO'98 project from mid-July 1998 showed that the opposition parties (mainly the SDK and SDL) received more airtime on the Radio Twist news programmes than the government and ruling parties. The opposition parties received 41 per cent of airtime of the Radio Twist main news programme during the election campaign, while the government and ruling parties got 29 per cent of the respective airtime.⁷¹ The difference was reflected also by the tone of the reporting. Opposition parties were presented prevailingly neutrally or positively, while the government and HZDS were presented mainly neutrally. However, in a big amount of reports, the government and HZDS were presented in positive or negative light. Thus, the portrayal of all subjects by Radio Twist

⁶⁹ MEMO'98 project, Media Monitoring: Reports on Media Coverage of Slovak Politics, no. 1-6 (23 July 1998-22 September 1998): <http://www.memo98.sk/spravy/archiv.html>.

⁷⁰ Slovak Syndicate of Journalists monitoring quoted in Füle, p. 604.

⁷¹ MEMO'98 project monitoring reports quoted in Šolkay (1999), p. 121.

was positive, negative or neutral with a tendency to portray opposition parties more often favourably than negatively.⁷²

CONCLUSION

Mass media play a crucial role in informing the citizens and making democracy work. In the circumstances of a democratising Slovakia, suffering from an authoritarian government, the vital role of the media has been even more accentuated. One of the main tasks of the media in a democratic society is to work as a watchdog of the public interest. Slovakia suffers from a communist legacy of subordination of the media to the government. Moreover, the democratic political culture has not been fully developed yet. Therefore, being the watchdog of the public interest most importantly means being the watchdog of the government.

There has been a sharp difference between the behaviour of the 'public' and private mass media in Slovakia. While Slovak Television became an uncritical tool of the governmental propaganda, the private TV Markíza gave airtime also to opposition. While Slovak Radio presented the government in more positive light, the private Radio Twist offered more neutral stories on the government and more balanced division of airtime between the government and opposition parties. Importantly, private media were more keen on presenting opinions from both sides to the stories they presented. However, the story is not simple and one-sided at all. Although Slovak Television only rarely broadcast opinions alternative to those of the government, Slovak Radio did so. The cases of serious manipulation appeared also at TV Markíza, which helped to 'fabricate' the SOP party and used the struggles for its ownership to attack the government and rally mass support from opposition politicians and citizens.

Despite cases of manipulation by TV Markíza, the private electronic media in Slovakia fulfilled their role of informing the citizens in an unbiased, in-depth and prompt manner much better than the public broadcasters, which was demonstrated by independent monitoring. These findings disprove the claims of both Keane and Sparks, who argued that market liberalism and deregulation in the mass media sector have a very negative impact on the quality of democracy and plurality of opinions offered by the media. Sparks even claimed commonplace identity of the state regulated media with democracy and the free market media

⁷² MEMO'98 project, Media Monitoring: Reports on Media Coverage of Slovak Politics, no. 1-6 (23 July 1998-22 September 1998): <http://www.memo98.sk/spravy/archiv.html>.

with a denial of democracy.⁷³ The case of Slovakia in the 1994-1998 period, especially in the run-up to the elections disproved the claims of Keane and Sparks considering the negative impact of the market-based media on the quality of democracy. It was the public STV news, the norm of which was "the lack of balance, distortion and misinformation."⁷⁴

It is obvious that the main goal of the market-based media is to make profits. Freedom of expression and fair reporting are usually subordinated to the profit-making. Thus, the question is whether the Slovak example of market-based media serving the needs of citizens for objective information better than public media was accidental. The private media in Slovakia fought for freedom of expression and simultaneously for their own independence from the government. Thus, their decision to be agents of democracy and provide more fair news coverage than the public media was not accidental as it was in the self-interest of the market-based media. If the role of the media is understood as being the watchdog of the government, than the media only naturally incline to defend their editorial independence from the government. The Slovak case however, proves the claim of both authors on importance of the regulation of public media. Regulation must be understood in terms of transparency and independence instead of traditional subordination to the omnipresent governments. Importance of developed democratic political culture is vital to the success of public media. Different behaviour of the public broadcasters in Western democratic countries and post-communist countries has been observed despite similar legislative framework. Clear setting of the rules is fundamental, but ultimately the governments and parliamentary majorities decide about the budgets and nominated the supervisory boards. There is a big space for formal and informal influence on the public media not only in post-communist countries, which has been documented also in this paper.

The law and political culture protecting the editorial independence of the public broadcasters from the governmental interference were not sufficiently strong to prevent biased and one-sided reporting. On the other hand, the self-interest of the private mass media did not coincide with the interests of the government, but went against those that tried to limit the independence of the mass media and introduced authoritarian methods into Slovak politics. Bogart claimed that "market forces can both expand and diminish the democratic possibilities of the media."⁷⁵ The case of Slovakia in 1994-1998 period proved that market-based media can expand the democratic possibilities. The prerequisite for democratic behaviour of private

⁷³ Sparks, p. 112.

⁷⁴ MEMO'98 project, Media Monitoring: Reports on Media Coverage of Slovak Politics, no. 1-6 (23 July 1998-22 September 1998): <http://www.memo98.sk/spravy/archiv.html>.

⁷⁵ Bogart, p. 8.

media is that their self-interest be in line with principles of democracy. Thus, defence of their own independence became a part of a societal struggle for principles of democracy and against authoritarian methods of the government. The failure of the public mass media to objectively inform the citizens is more serious than a similar failure from the side of the private broadcasters. The public media are funded from the state budget and licences paid by the public, they are required by law to provide non-partisan and independent news service.

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