

MEDIA IN EASTERN EUROPE AND THE FORMER SOVIET UNION IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Media in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have changed dramatically since the collapse of Communism. In many formerly-communist countries, media are now free, various forms of censorship have disappeared, and private and foreign-owned media institutions have proliferated. In some countries, Western companies have been able to acquire majority shares in local periodicals. Across the region, journalists generally have been free to set up organizations that defend their interests. However, despite the progress, media across the region still suffer from a variety of ills: journalistic standards leave much to be desired; periodicals in many countries struggle with financial problems related to poor economic conditions or the impact of market-oriented reforms; and media organizations in some countries have been under political pressure to toe a government line or have been subjected to various forms of intimidation. Overt forms of censorship have disappeared in most countries but are not yet completely absent from the region. While, in general, being free, media – in particular radio and television – in most former communist countries are not necessarily fully independent.

GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE

Five years after the collapse of communist systems in Eastern Europe, we can see three groups of post-communist societies: those that have abandoned the communist ideology but not necessarily authoritarian (or even totalitarian) practices; those that are truly or ostensibly trying to build democratic institutions but, for a variety of reasons, do not meet Western criteria of democracy; and those that have met the basic institutional criteria set by Western institutions, such as the Council of Europe, but whose citizens have not always adopted the thinking required to foster new democratic institutions. Developments toward free media – in particular, the intensity of government interference with the media – roughly correspond to the general progress toward democracy in those countries. Government pressure on the media in the region ranges from subtle forms of interference to murder.

Countries, such as Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Serbia, that have shown little progress toward democracy and respect for human rights, have, as a rule, subjected their media and various kinds of pressure, including overt forms of censorship and physical intimidation of journalists. In some of these countries, such as Tajikistan, a number of journalists have been murdered. These

countries have also either left in place communist-era laws or adopted new laws that significantly restrict media freedoms. Nevertheless, over the last year, significant loosening of governmental control over media has occurred in some countries, such as Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, where media were previously tightly controlled.

In some countries, the forms of intimidation of the media and governments' attempts to manipulate the media have been more subtle. In several countries, such as Croatia and Slovakia, governments have tried to use economic pressure to win control over the most outspoken opposition media. In these and some other countries (for example, Poland) the executive branch has attempted either to manipulate or directly control the composition of "independent" councils that have been established to oversee electronic media. Replacements of electronic media heads engineered for political reasons by various governments have taken place, for example, in Hungary, Slovakia, and Russia. While in some countries, governments have attempted to interpret new media laws in such a way as to retain a degree of control over the media, in some other countries (for example, Hungary and Ukraine), the absence of comprehensive new media legislation has made it possible for the authorities to put political pressure on the media or block changes.

In several countries (the Czech Republic, Poland, and the Baltic countries), media freedoms (but not necessarily the performance of journalists) are now approaching Western standards. In fact, the print media in these five countries were listed as "free" in a recent worldwide media survey by Freedom House. But even in these countries, governments could not resist an occasional temptation to win some influence in the media. In the Czech Republic, for example, an "independent" Daily Telegraf has been turned into the mouthpiece of Prime Minister Klaus's Civic Democratic party under dubious circumstances. The prime minister himself has found it difficult not to repeatedly berate media for their alleged lack of objectivity. Poland's media law stipulates that media must observe "Christian values"; and the country's president, Lech Walesa, challenged the decision of the ostensibly "independent" Council for Television Broadcasting and engineered personnel changes in the board after it had licensed a different private TV company to broadcast nationally than the one supported by the president.

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

In all East European countries and the countries that emerged from the former Soviet Union, journalistic standards remain relatively low, regardless of the given country's political climate. In many countries, both periodicals and electronic media have a clear ideological bent, as journalists are often associated with particular political philosophies. In many countries, leading newspapers are still directly controlled by or associated with particular political parties. Nationwide

television and radio stations in most countries, on the other hand, are still controlled by the state, either directly or indirectly. The only countries with private nationwide television stations are the Czech Republic and Russia.

In the words of Victor Davidoff, chairman of the Globe Press Syndicate in Moscow that distributes articles to scores of local newspapers in Russia, "professional journalists who were educated during the Soviet years still do not understand themselves as people who provide information...but as teachers, prophets, interpreters of reality." This does not apply only to Russia – journalistic standards in most countries of the region suffer from similar ills.

In some countries, professional standards have been hurt by the fact that the media suffer from a lack of access to major sources of international news, despite the fact that Western organizations have been trying to assist media organizations in the region. As a result, reporting on events that goes beyond domestic politics often suffers from a lack of information or understanding of a wider context. Even in countries like the Czech Republic or Poland, media suffer from a degree of provincialism.

In some countries, such as Russia, print media frequently publish information that they do not bother to check. As a result (some opinion polls suggest), readers' trust in various newspapers as a reliable source of information has declined significantly. In Russia, readers tend to trust individual journalists, whose professional standards they respect, rather than specific publications. Clearly, the emerging democracies need both laws protecting journalists and laws protecting those journalists write about. Unfortunately, only a few countries have been able to enact legislation that strikes a balance between protecting journalists and people who may be victims of inaccurate or slanderous reporting. Some countries – such as Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova – have adopted media and libel laws that make it possible for government officials, in particular, to intimidate opposition and independent press.

It appears that in most countries of the region, improvements in this area are connected to generational change and education.

ECONOMIC PRESSURES

Market-oriented reforms in many countries have resulted in skyrocketing costs of newsprint and other typographical services, driving many periodicals out of business. Launching and sustaining new periodicals has become increasingly difficult. Governments in many countries, such as Ukraine, Belarus, or Macedonia, have been able to exercise a degree of control over the otherwise ostensibly independent periodicals by refusing to relinquish control over state-run print facilities.

The pool of periodicals, that grew rapidly after the system, has been gradually shrinking in most countries. Many party newspapers have become victims of changing political landscapes in various countries. The general trend in the region has been the gradual reduction in the number of party periodicals and the emergence of periodicals that have backing from either various business groups or foreign companies.

If the Czech Republic or Poland – the two countries that are generally considered frontrunners of the transition period – are to be seen as models of post-communist developments in the media, only a few nation-wide periodicals are eventually going to survive in most countries, as party newspapers, in particular, are gradually likely to disappear.

Foreign investment has come to the rescue of some periodicals, especially in Central Europe, but the arrival of foreign backers has not passed without a controversy. Extreme-right and extreme-left parties in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Russia, and some other countries have repeatedly warned against the foreign domination of domestic media organizations. In Albania, for example, the formerly prominent Rilindja Demokratike newspaper has led a campaign against the increasingly-popular Gazeta Shqiptare that is financially backed by an Italian company, alleging that the Gazeta is, in fact, backed by the Italian mafia.

In practice, foreign investment appears to have had both positive and negative effects on local media. In general, Western companies have not tried to use their economic base to exercise political influence. In many cases, Western capital has helped domestic media to become more professional and, in fact, more independent of government pressure. As a rule, newspapers with foreign backing have been able to benefit from an improved infrastructure and skills of their foreign backers.

On the other hand, the influx of foreign capital has also resulted in the proliferation of the tabloid press and the pornographic publications. In several countries, boulevard periodicals have the largest readerships.

In general, market pressures have dramatically changed media landscapes in many countries. Boulevard newspapers, magazines that appeal to the lowest common denominator, and pornographic publications have mushroomed. In some countries, the tabloid publications have become the most popular periodicals.

ELECTRONIC MEDIA

In many countries of the region, private radio and television stations have proliferated, often despite the lack of comprehensive legislation. Aware of the importance of the electronic media, governments generally have been reluctant to

license nationwide private television networks. The Czech Republic is the only country so far where such a network has been officially licensed. In Russia, two local private television stations have expanded into nationwide networks that serve as counterparts to public television. In some other countries, most notably Hungary, entrepreneurs have tried to bypass the government's insistence on controlling television channels by launching cable television stations. In Poland, a lack of legislation has prompted some broadcasters to launch pirate stations.

In general, while it has been relatively easy in some countries to establish (although not necessarily sustain) periodicals, access to airwaves has proved to be more problematic. In most countries, governments control the airwaves by either controlling the licensing process or by controlling the distribution of frequencies. Even in countries where media are relatively free – such as Hungary, Russia, Ukraine – the governments have not been able to resist the temptation of using their power to manipulate the electronic media. Last year, for example, the Russian government threatened to revoke the license of Nezvisimoe Televidenie (NTV) over the station's reporting of events in Chechnya, to which the government objected.

FUTURE

In general, most countries have been progressing toward more openness. Only a few countries, owing to specific developments such as war or political turmoil, have regressed or stagnated after a period of initial progress that followed the collapse of communism. It appears, however, that progress toward more freedom is irreversible not only because most countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have been under both domestic and outside pressure to democratize but also because it has been increasingly difficult, even for authoritarian governments, to eliminate the influence of foreign media reaching their countries via satellites or to cut the inflow of uncensored information over computer networks, such as Internet. At the same time, it is likely to take several (and in some countries many) more years before the media start approaching the standards of serious media organizations in the West.