Past, future and change:
Contemporary analysis
of evolving media scapes

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PAST, FUTURE AND CHANGE: CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS OF EVOLVING MEDIA SCAPES

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A Conceptual Guide to the Analysis of Central and East European Transformations[1]

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All the arguments in this chapter revolve around the idea that the transitional societies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) could be perceived as symbolic social laboratories where all the controversies and contemporary challenges of modern life can be tested.

In this chapter I will provide only a very brief overview of the most distinctive features of political and media life in CEE. In addition, I will identify at least three critical attributes of this life; as I shall show, all three of them seem to contribute to the development and maintenance of a certain 'culture of agreements and social dependency' in those societies. Furthermore, this particular culture is especially prone to serious social consequences and emerging trends, registered in all contemporary societies and cultures and observed not just in the young democracies of CEE. It also seems that new social arrangements arise on the basis of complex social developments and trends, such as liquidity, individualisation, economic competitiveness and the striving for efficiency in all spheres of human activity. As previously argued, many of those have been present for a long time (Bauman, 2008).

CEE countries and their media are traditionally seen as displaying weak professionalism, weak media accountability and a weak public service ethos (Trappel et al., 2011). However, the trend towards fragmentation, social atomisation, polarisation and media de-professionalization appears to be a reality in many countries around the world; these trends have also been registered in countries with longstanding traditions of consensual

democracy (Nieminen, 2010). Erosion of the idea of the common good and the decline of moral and public interests-focused thinking, the weakening of public connectedness and decreasing support for the ideals of public service, as well as other developments tending towards personified consumption, are among those collectively recognised social features which are identified with liquid (or second) modernity (Bauman, 2008; Beck, 2009).

Western democracies and their professional journalism cultures have traditionally been associated with high ideals and principles guiding the media's democratic performance (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Among those emblematic principles are a professional ethos of objectivity and neutrality, a public service mission and media accountability. The increase in competition which comes with market liberalisation, growing media industry attempts to popularise production to accommodate new requests from the changing audience, and further trends towards media commercialisation and commodification, do not seem to support those normative expectations previously associated with journalistic professionalism. On the contrary, a significant number of contrary tendencies are being identified, namely the rise of strategic communications and news management in political communications and an increase in ideologically shaped reporting and opinionated journalism. These and other developments can be regarded as serious symptoms signalling general media de-professionalization in the West (Hallin, 2009; Gross, 2009; Nygren, 2012).

It could be disputed without any hesitation that the overwhelming nature of contemporary change, and the complex and many-sided social transformations that are leading to a questioning not only of the new identity of Central and Eastern Europe, but also pose serious questions about the future and the political, economic and cultural fate of the European Union, are a fascinating area for intellectual enquiry and social research (Auer, 2012; Žagar, 2012; Bianchini, 2012; Donskis and Dabašinskienė, 2010). Broadly speaking, all post-communist societies already have a historical experience of approaching, dealing with and assigning meaning to a very rapid change. It could, therefore, be imagined that these countries possess a certain expertise, knowledge and understanding which comes from their unique (cultural) dynamism, and which could be applied in further enquiries about the continuing fragmentation and diversification of contemporary life. In the past few decades alone, CEE countries have had to confront dramatic transformations in their political systems and market structures, as well as facing striking social changes that have affec-

ted the formation of new social relations and forms. Among those several exceptional features attributed to changes in CEE is the fact that those countries had to deal with both the factors and causes of transformations, 'internal and external' (Gross, 2002; Jakubowicz and Sukosd, 2009). In addition to the urgent need to solve their internal transformations, they had to face the external pressures of increasing globalisation, internetisation, Europeanisation, cultural diffusion and others. Those countries had to approach and adapt to all these changes in a very short period of time. Moreover, they had to deal with all these changes in a synchronised manner. If assessed from today's perspective, for most of the countries in the CEE region, the last two decades were not only a time for rapid changes and developments, or for different adoptions and adaptations to new demands and emerging cultures. It was also the time for authentic discoveries and learning.

For quite some years now, research studies and academic literature on media and journalism professionalisation in CEE have followed the so-called prescriptive line of thinking. In particular, this was shaped by a standard idea that the political system changes of the late 1980s and early 1990s have indeed reestablished the historical truth and therefore should be treated as a 'natural return of CEE countries to the Western World' (Hoyer et al., 1993; Lauristin and Vihalemm, 1997). Even very sophisticated academic debates tended to rely on the idea that the post-Soviet bloc is a homogeneous entity of post-communist countries, thus proposing the idea that their journalisms should also manifest significant similarities and visible characteristics descriptive of those countries' political transformations and current developments. This would allow for certain theoretical generalisations, and the development of a unique CEE model of political and media culture (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

As is often argued nowadays, CEE studies can be approached as an emblematic example of a region that is in constant flux. It is a region of diversities, and, to quote from a seminal essay by Milan Kundera, this region represents *"a reduced model of Europe made up of nations conceived according to one rule: the greatest variety within the smallest space"* (Kundera, 1984: 3). Two decades on from the disruption of communism, all CEE nations are still struggling to transform their mentalities, to understand what values and assigned meanings underlie the behaviours of their citizens and elites. Due to the different patterns of social and cultural life, the different ways of practising religions, values and traditions, and different historical developments and meanings, the existing political cultures in the region are

a mixture of pre-communist, communist and post-communist combinations (Gross, 2002). Thus among those attributes distinctive to post-communist societies and young democracies is their 'miscellaneity and hybridity, heterogeneity, and even flux' (Balčytienė, 2010, 2012). Such descriptions and sentiments are based on a mix of different social and political structures, forms and relations identified in young democracies – effects that arise from their weak ideological foundations, their weak political and party systems and, especially, their weak civil societies.

In general, many things in CEE countries seem to be in place, and their political and economic structures and systems are competitive and functioning. Yet, at the same time, in most of those societies social commitments and loyalties to democratic values are deemed to be coexisting with generally antidemocratic, clientelist practices and imitative behaviours that have deep roots and long-lasting historical traditions (developed during different occupations). Because of these different and complex reasons, young democracies and transitional societies display different political cultures with different layers and degrees of social arrangements and formal or informal networks functioning with their own enduring traditions, systems, networks and habits.

It is rightly said that all the political and social transformations that took place in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s were 'genuine revolutions' (Sparks, 2010; Lauristin et al., 2011). In all cases, these revolutions have resulted in the breaking of all types of political and economic monopolies; they also instigated the overwhelming 'pluralisation of political and social life' in those countries. They granted freedoms of expression and association, and opened arenas for enquiry and networking. At the same time, although these changes very rapidly transformed the ways in which the countries were governed, these were not whole and widespread social transformations, since they did not pose a fundamental challenge to the existing social and cultural orders. Many social institutions and state structures such as the civil service, educational institutions or certain media outlets have remained intact, since they have not changed their internal structures, for example, through the change of personnel or other means. Their social positions have also remained largely intact, as there was considerable continuity in both institutions and personnel between the old regime and the emerging new[2].

2   Lithuanian sociologist Zenonas Norkus provides a very focused analysis of the effects of economic reforms carried out in the early 1990s and current characteristics of public life in different CEE countries (see Norkus, 2008). According to Norkus, the most significant difference between different types of thinking applied in the early 1990s in CEE

Thus, before delving into a more detailed discussion of the particularities of contemporary political or media life in CEE, it is crucially important to re-examine once again all the social and cultural visions and imaginaries that shaped people's thinking at the exact moment of historical change. To be more precise, it is important to study not only what those countries represent today (imperfect societies and incomplete democracies); it is also important to assess what they hoped to be and what they dreamed about at times of political transformation, and how exactly they 'escaped from communism' (Norkus, 2008; Lauristin et al., 2011).

Among those dominating visions in CEE countries in times of transformation were the attempts (a) to restore and rebuild the independent state, and to initiate (b) economic and (c) social reforms. These were shaped by the natural and genuine desire of those nations to have a better life, and to break away from the planned economy and communist directives. Although many of the expectations from each of those three fields were successfully met, two decades later, however, it seems that certain social visions and imaginaries still retain the status of ideas.

As accurately argued by Colin Sparks, the main dynamic in most revolutions in CEE was that it permitted the old elite (the nomenklatura) to transform itself from one that was based upon the collective ownership of state property, which it guaranteed through its political monopoly, to one that was based on private property acquired, formally or informally, through the exercise of political power but sustained economically in a manner familiar from Western capitalist societies (Sparks, 2010). Even today, the exceptional characteristics which also define contemporary developments in CEE include the 'politicisation (or ideologisation) of transformations'. As Zielonka and Mancini (2011) discuss in their overview of democratisation patterns in CEE, different policies and decisions in those countries are shaped by spontaneous actions and by the 'ad hoc needs' of political actors, rather than by 'a priori policy objectives' that are aimed at providing public service and public goods. The 'mechanism of the political and economic instrumentalisation of the state' functions in the following way: policies and laws are designed and implemented through political interests, whereas implemented policies lead to material gains used for private

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revolves around the dominant meanings and treatments assigned to the Soviet past. Based on these assessments, certain CEE region countries (Estonia, East Germany) have followed revolutionary approaches in their economic and political liberalisation reforms: they attempted to 'clean the house' (to take all previous privileges away from the old nomenklatura), to follow the most radical approach in reforms (introduce monetary reforms, open the market up to international investments), etc.

ends. Naturally, the logic of instrumentalisation politicises all social relations and forms. In such clientelist arrangements, loyalties are valued as the most important criterion for obtaining resources, and not all actors and partnerships are treated as equal.

In providing a more general assessment of all the changes and continuities in CEE, it is important to stress that, as a social characteristic, clientelism permeates into existing social relationships and particularly affects the 'meanings assigned to those relationships'. As observed, clientelist relations practically institutionalise a certain tradition and 'culture of agreements' and negotiations among the parties and powers in that relationship. This type of culture seeks compromise, fidelity, support, appreciation and, to some extent, devotion and certain services that will be paid back (Roudakova, 2008; Ornebring, 2012).

Indeed, clientelist society gives rise to a weak state and weak social structures. State structures are volatile and prone to capture by political competitors. In such a context, corruption may not be officially defined as a norm. But it occurs. It is observed. And, in addition, it is silently tolerated. Likewise, another cultural characteristic seems to be applicable in such a context – so-called 'façade-oriented' thinking. Although officially defined and written into certain documents, rules and statements do not have universal application, and there is only selective institutional accountability. Media, too, are accountable only on fragmented terms, i.e. when it is most appropriate for the industry itself, or when it is imposed by certain external requests. In short, in CEE media accountability does not take place as a process that comes naturally, as inspired and coming from within the (media) profession (Balčytienė, 2011).

Similarly to political transformations, the shift and change towards market liberalisation, privatisation and economic reforms in those countries are also highly politicized. In the early 1990s, a range of favourable investment and privatisation opportunities were created for those who were closely connected to political power. As observed, the shift to individualised private capital certainly implies the diversification and pluralisation of power in society. It does not automatically follow that this will be articulated through democratic frameworks (Sparks, 2010). CEE media and journalism were also affected by these changes and arrangements of politicised liberalisation. Many media institutions which emerged from the process of transition, particularly the newly created ideals and visions of public service broadcasters, were strongly influenced by the political elite.

To conclude, political and media lives in CEE countries are shaped through the 'culture of agreements' and dependency on different, informally maintained partnerships and networks, with core features such as informal and clientelist relations, but also suspicion and distrust. This type of model of social arrangements and its logic could be further conceptualised and graphically illustrated in Figure 1, where three constitutive dimensions (the level of existing norms and agreements, the idea of common good and public interest, and the character and type of means and channels for meaning-making) become prevailing contextual features that define different degrees and levels and publicity of agreements and negotiations, and give rise to the emergence of a certain type of culture of social dependency.

Figure 1. Three levels distinctive to the development of certain types of social culture
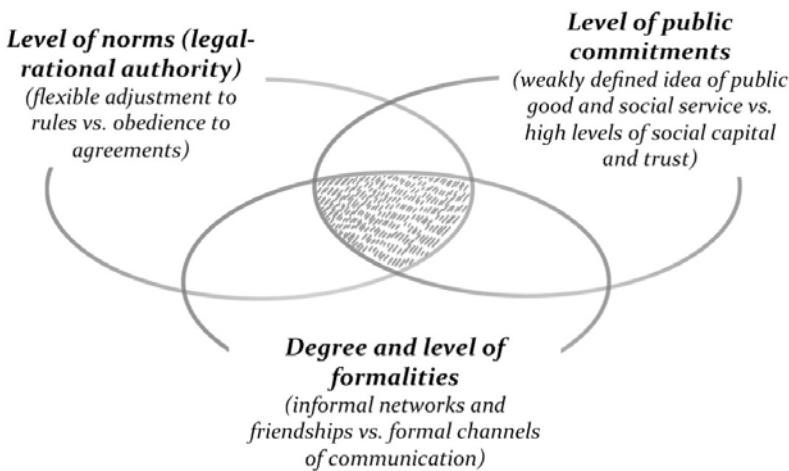
As argued, high levels of clientelism and political and economic instrumentalisation lead to the manifestation of a culture of agreements and dependency in most CEE countries.

There is no doubt that CEE revolutions have inspired important and significant social transformations, and have resulted in a significant rise in democratization processes in this part of Europe. Political system changes have indeed stimulated the pluralisation of CEE societies, notably in establishing rights to free expression and political association. The descrip-

tive outcome of such a process is that there is a broad diversity of media registered in CEE. Independent media, however, are missing. According to some studies, CEE media are very polarised, and each media sector operates according to its own logic: the mainstream media operate under the logic of commercialism, whereas there is also a wealth of alternative and niche online media that aim to fulfil the needs and expectations of underrepresented (niche) audience groups (Balčytienė, 2012). Thus it appears that these political, economic and social revolutions in CEE have only displayed a 'selected version of transformations', since these were partial transformations where social developments did not evolve to the same degree as the changes that took place in other fields of public life, such as politics or the economy.

As historical developments show, independent states were restored and most of the material needs and requests were met. Still, these political or economic liberalisations have mainly followed the political rhetoric and well-known practices and technicalities tested in other (Western) contexts. Indeed, the marketisation of production and capitalisation of economies in those countries have developed to a fascinating degree. But, most importantly, these developments were not automatically supported with social and cultural reforms and the re-establishment of norms built on the ideals of public service, respect for the common good and respect for agreed rules and established laws, and the building of social capital and trust. The absence of a culture with a focus on the idea of the common good and public service is among the most evident drawbacks in contemporary social transformations in the entire CEE region.

Although all the observations above offer only a more conceptually sketched illustration of social and cultural transformations in CEE, one important observation arises from these findings. Specifically, it is not possible to think of CEE democratisation in the broadest sense as if it is a process where a new political system replaces old structures and organisational culture, and a completely new social system is born. The process of CEE transformations actually deals with multiple 'cultural transformations' – with transformations of views and mentalities, and also with the gradual freeing from the consequences of communism.

The initial idea in this discussion was that contemporary CEE societies have distinctive social attributes and characteristics, and that all changes and transformations in CEE have brought serious social consequences such as disappointment, dissatisfaction, political alienation and even anomie.

As shown here, many CEE social characteristics could be grouped under the umbrella of a general culture of dependency, with descriptive attributes such as clientelism and informal networking, the politicisation and marketisation of relations, the deteriorating idea of the common good, and ignorance of the public service mission in various policies. It could be envisioned that such a culture, primarily focused on private gains, is more prone to individualised consumption and social atomisation and polarisation. As an attribute of existing social relations, this sort of culture is also contagious, and could thus be defective to political life and the quality of democracy. Social polarisation leads to the ideologisation of social relations and forms, thus resulting in the development of a range of dependencies. Ideologised media, too, contribute to the provision of a distorted, biased, ideologically shaped view of the world (Gross, 2009).

All these trends, discussed through the prism of Central and East European developments, signal the rise of contemporary consumer-oriented, individualised society. This is a society where personified access to news and information is prioritised and praised. A society that is dispersed along individualised interests and shows very little community-oriented feeling; where the ideas of public interest and common good are only very loosely defined. These developments can also be interpreted as an indicator signalling the rise of a more fragmented, heterogeneous and socially polarised contemporary society – a society that also creates an impression of people living in different diasporic networks, and even in distant, parallel and ideologically shaped universes.

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