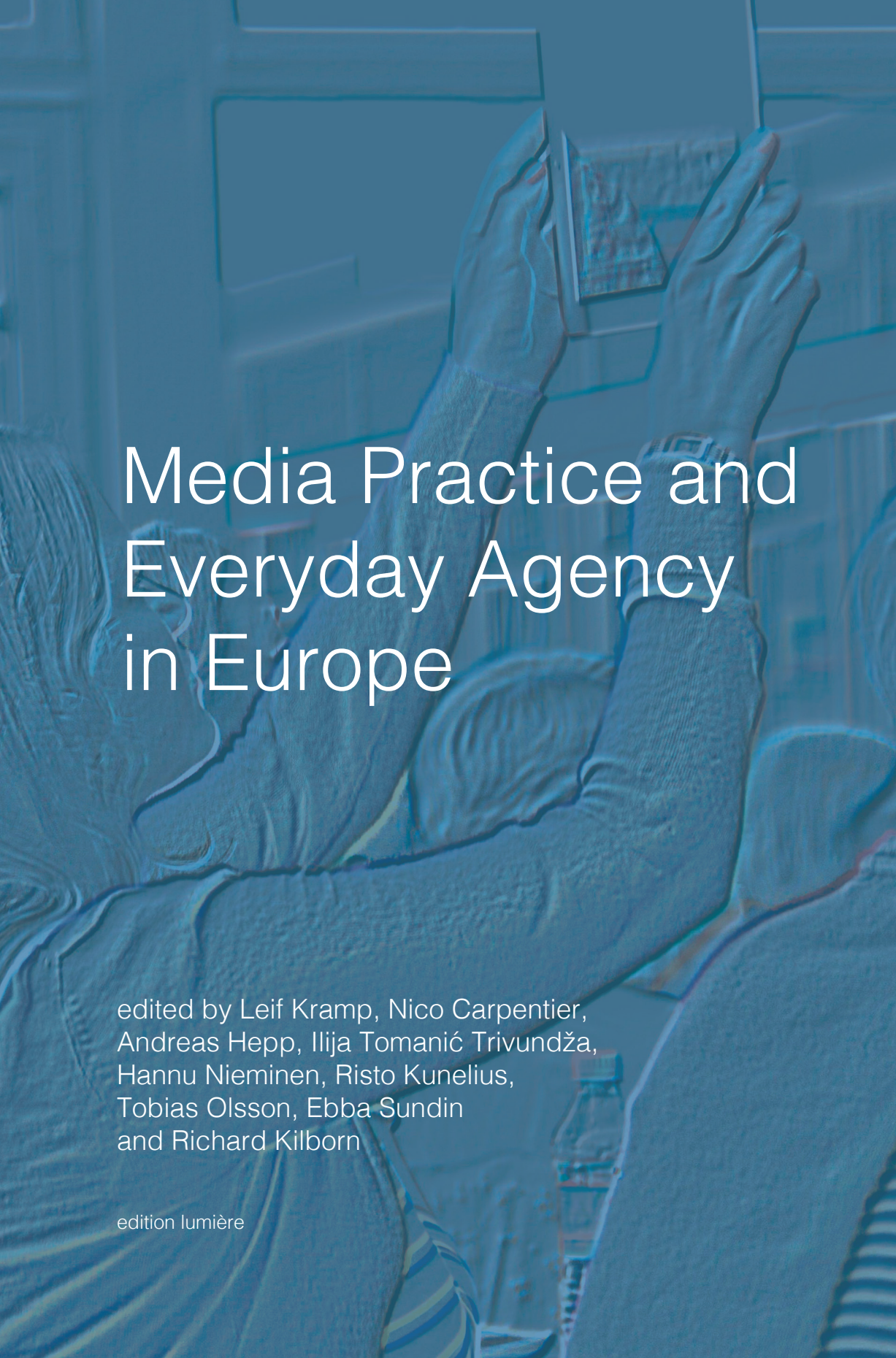

Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe

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edition lumière

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The European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School 2013 and its Participants

The Alchemy of Central and East European Media Transformations: Historical Pathways, Cultures and Consequences

Auksė Balčytienė

1. Introduction: Histories of development, and traditions of CEE media research

Comparative studies in media and politics have been prized for some decades. Some scholars have identified the comparative approach as the only enquiry allowing the detection and identification of invisible social features. Others stress that academic thinking without comparative elements is unthinkable. As seen from today's media analyses, it indeed seems appropriate to place the examination of contemporary media developments in international (European) contexts and frameworks since such placements highlight historical tendencies, allowing the identification of commonalities and differences in the development of contemporary social institutions.

In media studies, and particularly in CEE media developments and professionalisation research, there has been a dominant trend to describe those contexts and societies as vulnerable and imperfect – as displaying more fragile and uncertain institutional legitimacy and trust, weaker media professionalism and accountability, as well as vaguer public service ethos (Trappel et al., 2011). Despite the fact that this can be seen to varying degree in all countries around Europe, such features have predominantly contributed to the assignment of CEE countries and their political and media arrangements into a specific (fourth) model of European media and politics (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

In recent years, in spite of the still dominant voices of the CEE region's relative homogeneity, another group of scholars emerged who emphasise the importance of looking at CEE transformations as incorporating multilateral – pre-communist, communist, and post-communist – attributes and legacies found in their political cultures (Gross and Jakubowicz, 2012). In succeeding arguments the historical perspective sounds particularly significant, empha-

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Balčytienė, A. (2014) 'The Alchemy of Central and East European Media Transformations: Historical Pathways, Cultures and Consequences', pp. 139-151 in L. Kramp/N. Carpentier/A. Hepp/I. Tomanić Trivundža/H. Nieminen/R. Kunelius/T. Olsson/E. Sundin/R. Kilborn (eds.) *Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe*. Bremen: edition lumière.

sising that the communist decades in those countries were in many ways as diverse as those of the new democracies turned out to be. The communist-ruled states in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe resembled various ways of life and of self-organisation and, quite analogously, today's Central and Eastern Europe is nothing more nor less than a heterogeneous constituency of political and media cultures where the patterns of today's politics (dominating discourses, policy choices, regime stability) and economic development correlate with patterns of politics and institutional choices in the region made in the critical times of the past century (EHDR, 2011; Norkus, 2011; Ekiert and Ziblatt, 2013). Analysis recognises at least three historical phases as significant in institutional development in those countries, particularly the point of nation building and modernisation which followed the founding of new nation states in the early twentieth century (1918), regime changes after 1945, and the democratic transformations and emancipation following the 1989-1991 revolutions (Ekiert and Ziblatt, 2013; Perusko, 2013).

In democratisation studies it is customary to claim that among those most significant constraints contributing to change in CEE are the countries' (political) elites and the choices made in various phases of political and economic transition (Davis, 2007; Sparks, 2010; Jakubowicz, 2010; Norkus, 2011). The historical perspective does not exclude the role of elites, but also calls for consideration of historical legacies as manifested in values and behaviours as well as the feeling of 'the right timing' (Hoyer, 2001) of evolving events. The latter approach specifically emphasises that all decisions are made by people (or groups of people and organisations) and thus enduring traditions, norms, values and ways of life shouldn't be neglected or underestimated. Geographic particularities, such as location and the territorial changes experienced by many CEE countries in the twentieth century, seem to be significant too – especially as seen from the Balkan region of today's South Eastern Europe; despite decades of life in changed conditions many of the cultural and social transformations which accompanied those have not been made obsolete and strongly influence their present institutional existence.

All things considered, the above observations, discussions and findings suggest that history and anthropology, in addition to other academic disciplines (political science, media sociology), appear to be two most appealing scholarly approaches, creatively highlighting the most obvious 'white spots' still found on the map of European media cultures. The summary perspective and its complexities are beautifully reviewed and clarified by Ekiert and Ziblatt (2013):

> "The standard argument, however, emphasizes the unique nature of communist rule and specific legacies that communist regimes left behind. In contrast, our claim is that post-communist political transformations (outside of the former Soviet Union but including the Baltic states) should be conceptualized as a part of an ongoing and long-term historical democratization process across the gradient of Europe's continent, from which the communist rule was but almost a temporary diversion. Moreover, being a constitutive part of

> the European democratization process means that the contours and mechanisms of political transformations exhibit dynamics common to earlier European instances of democratization as well as reflect the changing constitution of Europe" (p. 91-92).

2. Democratisation and non-democratisation in today's CEE: Hopes, constraints, and achievements

Mounting political and economic liberalisation, increasing disagreements and conflicts and the struggle for competitiveness in all spheres of human activity in CEE could have been perceived as a natural factor, metaphorically defined as the 'Return to the West', already guiding the thinking of the elites and masses of those countries for two decades. The Central East European narrative of a 'Return to Europe' may seem unimportant for the countries that believe that they have never disappeared from the European continent, but for others (especially the Baltic States) it was a crucial factor defining their choices. At the same time, as can be seen from the still ongoing transformations, such universally dominant post-communist ideology was not immune to the complex interplay between various contextual and circumstantial factors, particularly the economic opinions of both ordinary people and elites.

It is quite correct to claim that all CEE revolutions have taken place in economically much weaker European contexts. Two decades later, still, this factor is as strong as it was previously, separating the Western and the Central Eastern parts of the same continent. Hence, unsurprisingly, the (political) thinking of elites in those countries is predominantly shaped through attempts to increase political control of economic capital and resources. As vividly shown with illustrations from Romania and Hungary, the dominant culture of political and media elites in those countries leads to developments which in academic circles are quite commonly labelled as state 'politisation', as the capture of the state by various political powers and interests. In such operations the media is viewed as an instrumental player, an actor which has a mission of skilfully managing public opinion, thus its subsequent occupation and colonisation of its logics and operations by political or business interests seem to be an everyday reality vitally important for elites in those countries. In the case of Hungary, for example, the government tends to keep its media under great pressure, whereas in other CEE states (Romania, Bulgaria, Latvia) oligarchs instrumentalise media organisations ensuring positive political coverage which should lead to political and economic gains (Bajomi-Lazar, 2013; Stetka, 2013). But the media itself, is not without sin either – it is prone to heavy manipulation, populism, sensationalism, and political consumerism. Briefly, media becomes a governing player and dominating actor, orchestrating society's social and political life. With secularisation on the rise as ideology and formal group

identifications (e.g., party, union, church, or class) fade as the mechanisms for organising civic life, individuals increasingly code their political attachments through personal lifestyle values, and these are exposed, articulated and made public through the media and other public communication channels. All such practices have serious effects on the professionalization of CEE journalism, particularly its independence, which is seen through media freedom indicators being much lower in CEE countries if compared to those in Western Europe.

Thus among the most striking conclusions emerging from a significant number of available research studies is the finding that CEE (political and media) elites are very polarised, very divided. They also have fragile and uncertain legitimacy – as seen in public opinion polls, public support to political and social institutions in CEE is amongst the lowest across all European states. Its low (political and social) legitimacy is manifested through low institutional trust, low public engagement, low party memberships, low funding, and so forth.

At the same time, quite paradoxically, the overall impression arises that political parties in CEE are powerful and relatively strong institutions able to assemble the necessary resources to gain adequate status and thus visible power, for example by mobilising public opinion (through group interests and clientelist media) during elections. Among those most evident inconsistencies of social life in today's CEE, however, is the fact that other political and societal components and structures that should instigate public control, awareness and associational participation, such as trade unions, civil society, professional independent media and others, are exceptionally weak or marginal. Such a dichotomy, finally, leads to a critical condition. As a result of rising professionalization of political communication schemes and strategies, which goes in parallel with dominant group interests instrumentalising news media, the public communications sphere in most of CEE countries becomes saturated with controversial, polarised, conflictual, and divergent issues. Citizens, correspondingly, find themselves as deliberately and permanently uninformed, manipulated, and misrepresented voters. Conflict, disagreement, volatility and flux (and, therefore, the lack and absence of long-term political thinking and public policy visions) thus appears to be amongst the most striking features of today's political and social life in most of CEE.

No matter how gloomy this picture may look, alternative possibilities are on the rise. As seen from Estonian examples, one of the plausible explanations of the country's contemporary advances in terms of its media's democratic institutionalisation and its professionalisation appears to be its historical continuities from both communist and pre-communist cultures, and capacity to cultivate, within reasonable limits, a potential for moral choice and democratically useful experiences leading to the formation of counter-elite cultures. As shown through examples (Bennich-Bjorkman, 2007), such a mentality had already grown, earlier in the twentieth century. The liberal idea of equal opportunities

and a profound respect for individuality (rather than the notion of equal outcome) also aptly characterises the predominant mentality of this small nation in the present times. It is not the individualism as ruthless self-interest that was seen in inter-war Estonia, but rather individualism combined with respect for the actions of others, and for communal practices, which has endured throughout the twentieth into the twenty first century.

The Estonian case analysis indeed provides one possible explanation of specific attributes contributing to the overall social climate in that particular country. Other attributes could also be considered significant, for example as discussed in earlier comparative studies which emphasised the importance of the state size or dominant religion (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Hallin and Mancini, 2012).

In addition to those politico-economic contextual issues and historic-cultural legacies shaping social cultures and media development conditions, another crucial factor contributing to dramatic changes in CEE media markets is the current global economic crisis. While media privatisation and economic liberalisation were the most important processes shaping the first two decades of evolution of the media markets in CEE, the last few years have seen times charge, with new economic and social challenges. The economic crisis has seriously affected media markets in all CEE countries – in small and large states, in weak and stronger economies. The media was among those economic sectors affected in its own way. Journalists were laid off, many media outlets changed owners or disappeared from the market, advertising shrunk to critical conditions, and media instrumentalisation and corruption increased, particularly in those countries (Romania, Latvia, to some extent also Lithuania and Slovenia) where dominant social structures could be defined through politico-economic cohabitation of their elites (Bajomi-Lazar, 2013; Stetka, 2013). As traditional in such contexts, other – non-political – social structures are portrayed as only marginal and weak, or non-existent.

It is of course important to also pay attention to developments of a more global nature, particularly the internetisation and audience changes, which, as seen from various European countries and international contexts, result in media usage as well as political socialisation changes of various groups. Although the penetration of the internet and the subsequent rise of online media was notably slower in most CEE countries in comparison to the West, in the past few years this difference has disappeared. As can be seen from the most recent online information usage data, in many CEE countries the internet media has indeed turned into the dominant mainstream news media, beating the use of dailies and newspapers (but not television), and for many young Europeans the internet has become their first, and in most cases their only, news source.

The media development tendencies and cultural appearances described above suggest that CEE countries have indeed skipped several phases of societal organisation (such as mass-participation, mass-party formations and growths stage so emblematic to the earlier decades of the previous century) and jumped directly to the media-driven and media-logic saturated communications epoch. It appears that CEE societies have skipped the stage of political and moral individualisation of the industrial age. These countries have found themselves in the era of new modernity with all its downsides, such as intensity, consumption, egocentricity and self-absorption. It seems that in the past two decades CEE political parties have naturally grown into professional campaign organisations reliant more on finances than member support. Respectively, as seen in the latest audience studies in CEE, citizen involvement with politics has also changed from what was seen in the years of the Signing Revolutions of the early 1990s. Instead of being closely involved in politics through more accustomed (Western) participatory forms, such as associational participation (or party membership), it switched its focus to admiration of political representation mainly through TV-saturated political scandals and populism.

Among several exceptional things contributing to these issues in CEE is the fact that those countries had to simultaneously deal with both the factors and causes of transformations. In addition to the urgent need to solve their internal political and economic makeovers and system changes, they had to face the external pressures of increasing globalisation, internetisation, Europeanisation, and cultural diffusion among other things. Those countries had to approach and adapt to all these changes in a very short period of time. Hence all these (also universally identified) developments and social trends, taking place in historically and culturally diverse conditions, significantly contribute to increasing social and political divergence and fragmentation, constructing a heterogeneous and socially polarised picture of the media and politics in young CEE democracies.

3. The alchemic process of CEE media transformations: The effects of history, time and place

As argued in the introductory section of this chapter, the significance of historical perspective in contemporary contemplations of the cultural variations in the paths of CEE democratisation should not be underestimated. Metaphorically speaking, politico-economic and socio-cultural CEE transformations could be analysed as if looking through the lenses of ancient medieval alchemists who, by delving into experiments with precious metals, believed that, under the 'correct' contextual (astrological) conditions, metals could be 'perfected' into gold. Thus it seems justified to ask: by taking into the account all the visions,

imaginaries and hopes of the past two decades in the CEE what such a 'perfect combination of contextual transformations' in terms of CEE democratisation would be? Have all expectations been met? What are the main reasons for the non-democratisation of Central and Eastern Europe? Which of the cultural specifics of CEE media makes its appearance so contextually and historically exclusive? In what ways are these features similar to, or different from, what is observed in other countries in Europe?

Although all these questions seem to be justified, there is one fundamental puzzle of CEE media life: why have some CEE countries (Estonia) succeeded and others (Slovenia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Czech Republic) not been very successful or even failed (Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary) in consolidating and emancipating their media's democratic performance?

One attempt to address these questions would be through both institutional and cultural analysis. Institutionally speaking, many things (codes of ethics, institutions of media self-regulation) in the fields of CEE media seem to be in place. However, although established as democratic institutions with all the necessary and recognised attributes, the mainstream media in CEE do not meet most of the conventional prerequisites for professional performance. Liberalisation of markets, and privatisation, accompanied by other rapid developments such as technological diffusion and cultural globalisation have indeed sped diversification of media structures and pluralised content, these developments, however, disclose only one side of the coin. As shown in media democratic performance studies, specifically in those where media performance was examined regarding its inclusivity, impartiality and watchdog characteristics, the CEE media most often scored lowest among all countries assessed (Trappel and Meier, 2011; Trappel et al., 2011). When compared to professional journalism traditions and performance in most Western countries, the media in CEE are generally speaking, assessed as lacking autonomy and specifically as clientelist institutions (Roudakova, 2008; Ornebring, 2012); their professional identities and journalistic ideals are also identified as weak (Lauk, 2008). Obviously, such performances could be discussed only as generalisations since there are so many variations in CEE media developments and applications. The question remaining unanswered is why?

In relation to society's democratisation, its culture – or the cultural ways of doing things – seems to be crucial. If formal conduct could be studied through legal frameworks, regulation and document studies (by looking at explicitly defined rules and norms in documents and available policies) and comparative historical connections could be found in moments of political thinking, then informal conduct (such as all patterns of interest formation and of influencing decision-making) does not allow such transparency of research.

The culture of democratic institutions (media inclusive) is particularly significant since they must become the medium through which society attempts to process and solve its problems. As a matter of fact this idea forms the basis of this chapter, since it views democratisation as a social and thus historical (and not only a political) ideal. Democratisation and citizenship presumes some determinate community or civil society with connections and networks between people and norms and values that provide meaning to their lives. Such a perspective puts a very strong stress on collaborations between individuals and community, and in the feeling of the achieved (common) good of acting together. However, it is seen across CEE that individual consumption, and the increasing individualisation supported by both governing cultural particularities of the region (the dominant political thinking and values of their elites, weaker economic conditions, dispersed professional characteristics of media) and more general social trends (technological diffusion, audience changes), destroys all this. Particularism, which is observed in many transitional societies in the region, goes hand in hand with increasing liberalisation, marketisation and, consequently, individualisation.

It seems to be true that in transitional societies all changes and transformations, and the severe consequences of increasing individualisation, are occurring more freely. As identified earlier, this may be caused by several factors, particularly by those contributing to the rising individualism, to social ignorance, to the weakening of the idea of what a good community is. Although variations are seen in different countries, Central and Eastern Europe, generally, manifests relatively heterogeneous, weak associational and civic cultures. Journalistic professionalism in CEE countries is also described as low – as argued, in most of CEE the mainstream media is attached to and closely integrated with webs of complex social relations and partnerships with dominating elites. Public service media has a weaker position in CEE (both economically and culturally). Surely, alternative and non-mainstream media forms, however, are extensively used as new hotbeds for meaning making and (political) socialisation. They indeed contribute significantly to pluralisation in CEE – although some of those new forms score low in terms of professional journalistic ideals of impartiality and objectivity. Thus it needs to be said again that the threats to democratisation (also to media freedom, its autonomy and independence) in the region, stem not from a lack of adequate institutions and appropriate legislation (i.e. formal institutions), but rather local practices shaped through a complex variety of cultural and contextually-bound features and processes (such as oligarchisation and politisation, the rise of life-style politics, clientelism and favouritism, but also others, such as extreme individualism, ignorance, and loss of sensitivity).

Generally, the new social settings and social conditions of life of those 'people having only very little in common' are exceptionally appealingly visualised by Leonidas Donskis:

> "Perhaps we are trapped in the new barbarianism which is still on its way in the West – capitalism without democracy (…), a free market without freedom, the strengthening of economic dictatorship and the accompanying disappearance of political thinking, and the final transformation of politics into a part of mass culture and show business, with the real power and governance falling into the hands not of publicly elected representative but of someone chosen by the most powerful segment of society, lying outside public control – the heads of the central bureaucracy, business and the media?" (Bauman and Donskis, 2013: 128).

Similarly, in recent years, as seen from most recent enquiries by Western scholars, many social trends and consequences previously exclusively identified with the younger democracies and transitional societies of CEE, appear to be an everyday reality in many countries around the world. As expertly argued in a number of studies (Nieminen, 2010; Bennet, 2012), since the last century alone numerous public policies in Western European states have undergone significant transformations. As a result of liberalisation, many of the ideals of the previously dominant logic of the social contract were marginalised or entirely disregarded. While transferring certain activities that were previously taken care of by the government (such as education or health care) to the market could have seemed reasonable in certain cases, the predominant optimism that was primarily committed to such an idea is seriously scrutinised today. As Starr (2012) succinctly shows, the primary mistake under such thinking in the media field was its ignorance of the fact that journalistic product (such as news) is a public good and that public goods tend to be systematically underproduced in purely market-driven circumstances.

Naturally, in such a situation it seems plausible to ask what could be done, by whom and, if possible, how to change this circle of relationships and affairs. According to the classical visions of country's democratisation, the effect of socio-economic modernisation appears to be especially significant (Roberts, 2010), namely the extent to which society consists of educated, urbanised, middle-class citizens. This perspective, although clearly having strong connections with media performance and economic conditions, does not seem to be sufficient in the case of contemporary CEE. As discussed, increasing communication opportunities, the growth of new alternative online spaces and the public migration of those predominantly educated classes to these alternative (and individual-interest focused) media sites further contributes to social polarisation and the weakening of the idea of the common good (which in CEE countries is already weaker because of well-rooted and very strong particularism and reliance on group or individual interest-focused and clientelist networks and social relations). As imagined, the situation can improve only through changes in the overall culture of both the ruling elites and the masses.

4. Conclusion and a way forward

It seems that economy is still a strong determinant of a healthy media climate, particularly its independence – according to Freedom House data, higher GDP scores correlate with higher media freedom results. As argued here, the political thinking of elites appears to be important too, predominantly in the design of economic policies (such as subsidies, VAT exemption etc.) which also define and determine the condition of media markets (Stetka, 2013) – a country's openness to international investors, and various types of media public support obviously contribute to the creation of more favourable conditions for the media to perform its democratic functions. These conditions, as can imagined, need to be supported by certain ideals and norms of life. As briefly mentioned here with the Estonian example, although with varying consequences and outcomes, individualisation seems to be crucial.

There is a mounting rhetoric of frustration maintained by an increasing number of scholars who, by emphasising all consequences of contemporary life (loss of community feeling, increasing commercialisation and consumerism), warn about the growing downsides of the new modernity and capitalism. Various such features can be detected in many countries around Europe, not just the transitional societies of CEE. Although it may seem that many of the latest social arrangements and consequences, particularly liquidity, individualisation and marketisation, are charged with novelty, many have resulted from the complex social developments and transformations of various CEE countries for quite some time. The erosion of the idea of the common good and the decline of moral and public interest-focused thinking, the weakening of public connectedness and decreasing support for the ideals of public service as well as other developments tending towards individualisation, marketisation and personified consumption, are among the most collectively recognised social and cultural features paralleled with the spirit of change, transformation and other particularities of the second modernity (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2007).

Going back to the argument at the beginning of this chapter, that CEE countries and their media could be envisioned as perfect laboratories of European change, a comment by Zygmunt Bauman seems particularly timely and significant. In the words of one of the most influential thinkers and visionaries of our times, all outcomes, worries, uncertainties and crises which challenge people and organisations and that they are constantly talking about, can be regarded as emblematic characteristics of contemporary life (Bauman, 2000). In the condition of new modernity and liquidity no social forms (routines, individual choices, patterns of acceptable behaviour) can keep up their behaviour for any length of time. They decompose, melt and disappear faster than the time it takes to get used to them, than the time it takes to develop and adjust to routines and lifestyles. Similarly, the past two decades of changes in CEE could be

considered as particularly distinctive in studies of their society's adaptations, for their multi-facetedness and all-encompassing character that transformed not only the selected fields of politics and economy (and media as well), but dramatically touched the social and cultural lives of ordinary people. The unparalleled and extreme acceleration of political, economic and social transformations left no chance for Central and Eastern Europeans to slow down, to think, to contemplate and to react. Consequently, the price those countries had to pay is the necessity of getting accustomed to the hurried life. In many ways, the dominating trend in such adaptations can be described as extreme individualisation.

All post-communist societies already have historical experience of approaching, dealing with and assigning meaning to 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, diversification and polarisation of contemporary European life. Thus it could also be disputed that the overwhelming nature of contemporary change and the complex and many-sided social transformations that are leading to a questioning of the new identity of Central and Eastern Europe, also pose serious questions about the future and the political, economic and cultural fate of the European Union. The latter in particular could turn CEE into a fascinating area for intellectual analysis and social research.

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