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"Poli-tabloidization" and the Media in Central and Eastern Europe

If one may be forgiven a few liberties with English (and indeed Greek), then perhaps the neologism "poli-tabloidization" could best encapsulate the multitude of processes sweeping the media and the social environment in which they operate in Central and Eastern European countries. And, as Lilia Raycheva shows in her wide-ranging overview, media change in a post-Communist country (Bulgaria, in this instance) is a dynamic and far-reaching process.

First, the term telescopes into one word the two concepts which sum up what is happening to those media: "politicization" and "tabloidization". There used to be a time in the 1990s when the relative impact of politics and the market on media systems in post-Communist countries could be considered a measure of a country's democratization: the less politics and the more market, the more advanced democratization could seem. And conversely, if party politics and politicians were the predominant determining factor, then it was obvious that democratization and media freedom and independence still had a long way to go. In the present issue of Global Media Journal's Polish edition, Oleg Manaev's contribution describes the situation in Belarus where this is still clearly true.

There are, of course, as many paths of post-Communist transformation as there are post-Communist countries. War-torn, ethnically divided, post-conflict societies pose especially complex challenges for the media and for media policy, all the more so when you add into the mix the so called "International Community," often pursuing wrong-headed policies ill adapted to the realities on the ground. Tarik Jusić and L. Kendall Palmer unravel for us the process of establishing public service broadcasting in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They deal with (consotiational and integrative) "power sharing" arrangements that needed to be developed to accommodate the many players involved, all with vital interests at stake. This is pure politics and though the objective was public service broadcasting, common public interest did not necessarily feature prominently in the process.

Secondly, "poli-" stands for the Greek-derived "poly-", the prefix meaning "more than one, many, much, more than usual, excessive". We are certainly seeing excessive and near-universal tabloidization of practically all the media in the region. Many CEE media scholars now more often identify businessmen rather than politicians as the main reason for what they consider disappointing media performance. In the present issue, Jirák and Köpplová, in their analysis of the how Czech media have been commodified and are not " restrained by any feeling of responsibility towards society, whether at the economic, cultural or ethical, let alone aesthetic level," provide a good example of this approach.

Peter Gross takes us on the example of Romania "Back to the (Uncertain) Future", and deals with media as affected by both politics <u>and </u>business. Politics, when mixed with business, usually produces oligarchs. He finds plenty of those in Romania, highlighting the difficulties that a young democracy has with separating what Linz and Stepan (1996) call arenas of democracy (in this case: political society and economic society), to create breathing room for an independent public sphere and independent media. There is commercialization and tabloidization in Romania, too, of course, but Gross sees the collusion of politicians and their businessmen friends as the stranglehold that prevents the media from performing their role in democracy properly.

And finally, with more apologies for mangled English, "poli-tabloidization" is intended to signify tabloidization of politics, as it is mediatized and as populism triumphs in many post-Communist countries (though they are by no means alone in this), affecting their political process , as shown here on the Polish example by Jakubowicz, for example.

The present issue of <u>Global Media Journal</u>'s Polish edition is intended to focus on the political process in Central and Eastern European countries and its impact on the democratic performance of the media. It certainly does that. However, it also ranges further afield. Inevitably, it poses broader issues involved in the post-Communist transformation process and in the integration of the new democracies into " Europe" (a term in inverted commas, as the EU has usurped it to describe itself, though geographically and culturally Europe naturally goes far beyond even the enlarged EU).

The first issue is raised primarily by Jakubowicz (though it is implicit from all the papers), and it is: what are the prospects for the democratization process, and by extension also for the media, in post-Communist countries? Carothers (2002) announced the "end of the transition paradigm" only at the beginning of the 21st century, but in fact it was rejected already

in the early 1990s (see Jakubowicz, 2007) as an idealistic and impractical vision of easy, quick and trouble-free transition of former Communist societies to liberal democracy and market economy. It was clear that the democratic outcome of transition was by no means pre-determined, and that in any case that the process of democratization, where it was engaged upon, would be neither quick nor easy.

By now, the issue has become even more complex: many scholars express disappointment with lack of further progress in the young democracies and elsewhere, with the difficulties faced by established democracies, and indeed with the "democratic rollback" and the "resurgence of the predatory state" around the world. Larry Diamond, who not so long ago believed democracy could triumph everywhere (Diamond, 2003), today sounds a little less optimistic: "most newcomers to the democratic club (and some long-standing members) have performed poorly. Even in many of the countries seen as success stories, such as Chile, Ghana, Poland, and South Africa, there are serious problems of governance and deep pockets of disaffection … Before democracy can spread further, it must take deeper root where it has already sprouted. … Struggling democracies must be consolidated so that all levels of society become enduringly committed to democracy as the best form of government and to their country's constitutional norms and constraints" (Diamond, 2008). That is very true, of course, but then Diamond displays touching faith in the ability of Western policy-makers to assist in this process by demanding more than superficial electoral democracy: "By holding governments accountable and making foreign aid contingent on good governance, donors can help reverse the democratic recession." If post-Commmunist countries are to more beyond electoral, in many cases illiberal democracy, then this will not happen because of Western donors or policy-makers, or even because of accession to the European Union, but because their civil societies want that and are prepared to fight for it. And here Gross is correct in pointing out in his contribution that the decisive factor in this regard is cultural in nature: the be-all and end-all of democratization is the emergence of the political culture of mature, consolidated democracy – and that, with luck, may take many more decades. If luck is not on our side, mere decades may not be enough. Then, Poland's (or any other post-Communist country's) bouts of democratic reversals may recur many times. In the meantime, the democratic process and the democratic performance of the media may will a great deal to be desired.

This assumes, of course, that they will be measured against the standards of the most advanced democracies. After all, there are many older, established democracies which do not significantly differ in those respects from the situation in post-Communist countries – and if so, then in degree and not in kind. And this raises a fundamental question which is at the heart of the transformation process: what democratic standards <u>should</u> post-Communist societies seek to apply and by what criteria should they assess their own progress and be judged by others? These dilemmas are implicit from Peter Molnar's interesting paper in this issue. At its simplest, the question is this: should post-Communist societies aspire to the exalted standards of the most established and mature liberal democracies, though it is clear that they will not be able to measure up to them for a very long time yet? Or is it "OK" for them to aspire to the more realistic goal of achieving the level of democratic development in the younger democracies of Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal, etc.) which, after all, are recognized as democracies in good standing (though perhaps with a weakness or two here and there) in the community of European nations? A corollary question is this: is it not hypocritical of the "international community" to impose (or reinforce) an "imitative" strategy of transformation, based on copying and transplanting "Western models", and thus to demand that post-Communist societies aspire to the unreachable goal of developing in a historically very short time the kind of democracy that others took centuries to grow? And conversely, should post-Communist countries accept the existence of "double standards", or a "two-speed" Europe, where that they could be treated as objects of special care?

It is not as if such attitudes were not apparent already. A recommendation on freedom of speech in the media adopted by the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (2003) notes that media legislation in some of [Western European] countries is outdated (for instance the French press law dates back to 1881) and "although restrictive provisions are no longer applied in practice [in the countries where they are in force], they provide a suitable excuse for new democracies not willing to democratise their own media legislation."

The striking feature of Peter Molnar's contribution is that he wants to institutionalize such attitudes. Taking as his case study the EU's and Council of Europe's revision of legally binding instruments regulating transfrontier television, he seems to share the opinion that because a strong democratic political culture would act as a barrier to such perverse use of the law, it is "acceptable" for Western European countries to adopt regulations which could

potentially be abused to legitimize curbs on freedom of expression. In the younger democracies, however, the potential for abuse is much higher, so special care must be taken to prevent this from happening. The conclusion he draws from this as concerns intergovernmental European organizations where both Western and Central and Eastern countries are members is that their legislation should be adapted to the standards of post-Communist countries, rather than to those of established Western European democracies: "Many of us in the post-communist countries unfortunately had to develop a special sensibility to identify censorship or the menace of it. Is this not a valuable source for common European policy-making?".

This seems to reverse the logic of what has been happening in the post-Communist world since 1989: at its crudest, this would mean that instead of pulling themselves up by their bootstraps as close to the level older democracies as possible, post-Communist countries should drag their Western neighbours down to their own level. This may not be the language that Peter Molnar would use to argue his case, but such is the implication.

There is no pat formula to resolve this dilemma of minimalism vs. maximalism, but this dilemma is certainly inherent in the process of post-Communist transformation. Practically every contribution to this edition touches on it. The question is most poignant in the case of Belarus, as described by Manaev. There, that part of the population which has access to, and uses, Western media, is right now being encouraged to engage on the road with the same signposts which the populations of neigbouring countries (except Russia) have found or, as in the case of Ukraine, are finding somewhat misleading. One can only hope that by the time Belarussians embark on this journey, they will have learnt from the experience of their neighbours that though the signposts seem to point to shortcuts to the Promised Land of liberal democracy and market economy, no such shortcuts exist in reality.

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