

Television broadcasting in Eastern Europe: How much has changed after the 1989 revolutions?*

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SUMMARY

This paper analyses changes in television broadcasting in Eastern Europe after the break-up of communism. They are considered in the light of the socio-political changes that parallel them. It is argued that the changes were modest rather than radical. Two explanations we proposed to support the main argument. Firstly, changes in television broadcasting after 1989 did not mean a radical break with the communist model, because that model itself had partly changed before 1989, especially in the 1980s. Secondly, they were not complete because of the different legacies from the past that acted as serious obstacles blocking more systematic changes.

Key words: television broadcasting, Eastern Europe, communism, changes, legacies from the past

Introduction

The role of the media in the break-up of communism and transforming of Eastern European societies is considered very important by many scholars¹. Still, it stays out of their main research interests. Even media specialists, concentrated mainly on Western media, do not have much to say about trans-

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forming media in transforming societies. Although political and social changes in post-communist countries cannot be fully explained without taking into account the role of the media, and the media in Eastern Europe cannot be understood without putting them into the political context, broader theories, which would attempt to relate those two aspects of transformation and explain relationships between them, are almost non-existent. However, some scholars, Splichal (1994, 1995), Downing (1996), O'Neil (1997) and Sparks and Reading (1994, 1998) for instance, have realized necessity to bridge the gap between media theories and political science approach in studies of transformation of Eastern Europe.

The starting point of this essay is the same – the understanding of media changes in Eastern Europe requires placing them into a broader political context. Thus, the aim of the article is twofold. First, it is to answer the question – how much has television broadcasting in Eastern Europe changed after the 1989 revolutions. And second, to explain the socio-political context when necessary to understand the changes (or lack of the changes). I will argue that, although there were some significant shifts in television broadcasting practice after the break-up of communism, this did not mean a radical break with the past. Two main reasons will be presented. First, some changes have already started before 1989. Second, and more important, some mechanisms inherited from the past have continued to operate and impeded radical changes. The changes will, for that purpose, be defined as departure from communist television broadcasting model towards public television broadcasting model. The analyses will be focused on television, due to its special importance among the media. The examples and conclusions will mainly refer to Visegrad countries – Czech and Slovak Republics, Poland and Hungary, because of their relatively similar historical and current economic and political conditions. Bearing in mind significant differences amongst them too, the stress will be, however, on the more general conditions and processes, which they have had in common.

The communist model of television broadcasting: how much has changed before 1989?

The interpretation of changes in television broadcasting in Eastern Europe depends on their positioning in a broader theoretical framework of socio-political transformations. Sparks with Reading (1998) identifies four broader approaches to 1989 changes in Eastern European societies. They differ on two dimensions. The first one is similarity/differences of capitalist and communist societies; the second one is the type and pervasiveness of changes after the

revolutions. The dominant view in the West, according to Sparks and Reading, is the 'total transformation' thesis, which is most famously articulated by Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 1992). It claims both radical differences between the two social systems before 1989, as well as radical social and political changes in post-communist societies after the revolutions – the old totalitarian order was completely replaced by liberal, democratic capitalist one.

Of course, before any discussion about the changes after 1989, it is necessary to start with positioning towards the state of affairs before those changes took place, for conclusions always depend on a starting point for evaluation. So, I am first going to argue that changes in television broadcasting in Eastern Europe in many aspects did not mean a radical break with the past, because the role of the television broadcasting went through some significant changes *before* 1989. This contradicts the 'total transformation' thesis, which sees Eastern European societies before 1989 as totalitarian². Although it is true that differences between capitalist West and communist East before 1989 were significant, they were not same in the 1980's as they were in the 1950's. The tight control of the central, one party apparatus over the rest of society in the East has weakened over time, especially during the last decade of communism. Thus, it is maybe more appropriate to call communist societies in their last period post-totalitarian. There is a wide range discussion on the extent of social dynamism in communist era. I will focus on changes in media and, especially, television broadcasting.

Unlike in the West, where the independent media are seen as a necessary prerequisite for the limitation of the state potentially unlimited power, the main role of the communist media were to spread out ideas of the new communist order, and the role of the party leadership in achieving the revolutionary goals – '[t]he Leninist model sees the media [...] as really an arm of the state; it is the sector of the state that aims to secure legitimacy by enlightening the people as to what their needs really are' (Downey, 1998, p. 53). Besides the tough central control of the way the reality was presented, there was an important complementary condition to secure the task of legitimating the communist system – the availability of alternative sources of information had to be minimized. Communist authorities controlled a free circulation of information by different means – from restrictions to travel outside the boundaries of communist countries, to limitations of possessing telephones, fax machines or videos only to party apparatchiks. Needless to say, besides official, no other media were allowed.

But, it proved to be impossible to control the media completely. The late 1950s witnessed emerging of samizdat, the illegal independent printing. The new media were even more difficult to control. While restrictions of spreading

alternative information sources were, intentionally or due to economic backwardness, facilitated by the slow introduction of new technology in communist countries, the opposite trend, an expansion of the new media, contributed significantly to opening of the communication space. In the early 1950s, the United States set up two radio stations that could be listened in Eastern European countries: Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe (Holt³ in Goban-Klas and Sasinska-Klas, 1992, p. 80). 'Since that time, foreign transmissions, not exclusively from Radio Liberty or Radio Free Europe but also the BBC World Service, Deutsche Welle, Radio France Internationale, broadcasting in vernacular languages, were continually present in Eastern Europe, affecting the knowledge and attitudes of its inhabitants' (Goban-Klas and Sasinska-Klas, 1992, p. 80). Jamming the signals by communist authorities proved to be insufficient in preventing the spread of alternative information. Another challenge to official information came from illegally produced and distributed audio and video tapes (ibid., pp. 80-84). Also, in some countries television programmes from neighbouring states could be seen without obstructions. 'Unlike radio transmissions, there was never any attempt to jam or obstruct television signals even where they were quite widely available. Terrestrial signals from Austria and Yugoslavia could be received by around 30 percent of the Hungarian population' (Sparks and Reading, 1994, p. 251), and roughly 90 percent of East Germans watched West German TV (Downey, 1998, p. 53). Since the mid-1980s, bureaucratic and legal obstacles for import of video equipment, personal computers and printers, as well as for introduction of cable television have been removed (ibid. p. 251; Goban Klas and Sasinska-Klas, 1992).

However, although its importance is certain, one cannot say that the expansion of new technology caused the opening of the communication system in communism. There were other major changes in Eastern European societies that contributed to weakening of the central party control over communications. There were growing economic problems and dissatisfaction with the system among the citizens.

Jakubowicz stresses the inability of the communist system to maintain inner cohesion and logic. That produced continuous power struggle, which then also influenced the media. 'The twists and turns of political events always had an immediate effect on the media, in that concepts, ideas and elements of ideology were introduced or withdrawn, defined and redefined in a totally arbitrary manner. Periods of relaxation automatically meant greater freedom of speech; the screws could be turned on again, but the propaganda that followed had much less credibility and was much less effective' (Jakubowicz, 1994, p. 273-274). The result was growing distrust and hostility to the system, which,

from the authority side, led to sacrificing ideological goals in favour of tactical political gains (ibid. p. 274).

One such tactic was introducing of foreign commercial, entertainment programmes. Despite the preference for domestic production and import from other socialist countries and quotas on import from the West, by the 1980s the nature of the broadcasted programmes departed substantially from the classic propaganda model. Even in a closed system like Czechoslovakia, 12 percent of total programming was imported from non-Eastern European countries. In more open Hungary, almost 70 percent of the programmes were from Western sources (Sparks and Reading, 1992, p. 250). Besides openness to foreign signals and nature of the broadcasted programmes, Sparks and Reading mention the third area of departure from the alleged norm of the communist television broadcasting model – readiness to carry advertising. That move towards the market model was introduced under growing economic pressures. Although the amounts carried were almost inconsiderable, the very presence of advertisements ‘[...]signified a very small but real adjustment of broadcasting away from political and cultural ends towards those dictated by its economic position’ (Sparks and Reading, 1992, p. 51).

The presented arguments about changes of television broadcasting before 1989, however, are not to suggest that those changes meant a radical transformation of the communist model. As Sparks and Reading point out, communist broadcasters ‘accommodated to political changes, to popular discontent, to official cynicism, and to plain old penury, with a considerable degree of adaptability. What, however, remained completely out of agenda, and for which there is no evidence whatsoever that it even began to take place, was any change of the system’ (Sparks with Reading, 1998, p. 70).

Television broadcasting after 1989 – the public television model?

One of the main goals of the democratic opposition in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s was freeing the media from the state control. Television is usually considered the most powerful amongst all the media. In communism that was especially true. While decentralization and limited pluralism were allowed for the print media (Jakubowicz, 1994, p. 275) in the late 1980s, television stayed tightly controlled by the state. That only added to the importance of restructuring of television broadcasting after the break-up of communism. After the revolutions, there was consensus amongst new political elites that television should be freed from the state influence, but, at the same time, that it should not become dependent on the extensive market logic. In other words, the public service model was advocated.

According to Sparks and Reading, the usual meaning of public service broadcasting consists of two aspects. The first one is broadcasting independent from the government influence, especially with regard to the news and current affairs. The second one is a pursuit of inclusive and diverse programme driven strategies, which then should be more or less independent from market pressures (Sparks with Reading, 1998, p. 155). As I will argue below, television broadcasting in Eastern Europe has not avoided the trap of neither political nor economic dependence. Ideals about building public television model backed away under political and economic pressures.

This is maybe not surprising, because those ideals are born in the context that made political and economic processes out of the state control framework difficult to understand. What is surprising is the fact that a 'third way' option was not even taken into account seriously (Jakubowicz, 1994, p. 271). The case of Eastern Germany is an exception. But with the reunification these efforts were superseded and Western capitalist model win domination over the Eastern Germany's media (Downey, 1998, pp. 58-59). In other countries in Eastern Europe, the opportunity for introduction of democratic public television was missed for 'internal' reasons. But, before turning to an explanation of that reasons, I will briefly state what has, and what has not, or not completely, changed in television broadcasting after 1989.

Significant departure is made from strict one-party control over broadcasting. The party lost the monopoly of presenting 'the only truth' and pluralism of opinion is introduced. The censorship was abolished. And last, but not least, there were substantial decline from communist economic model in which television broadcasting was state owned and funded from the budget. Private channels and advertisements were introduced as an important source of financing.

But, if one aims to look into the changes in terms of moving towards independent public television broadcasting, it could be said that the break with the past was indeed quite limited. Political interference has continued; the difference is that instead of the one party, different political actors' interests can be pursued. Broadcasting councils' members and chief officials have been appointed by parliaments or governments, and their appointment and dismissal has caused bitter political struggles, and even exceeding of legal authorization. Examples include disputes between the premier and the president in Hungary that were brought to Constitutional Court and consecutive attempts of L. Walensa to influence the appointment of the chief officials in Polish television (Price 1995; Sparks with Reading, 1998; Splichal, 1994). Only in East Germany, in the short period after the revolution and unification, the civil society

representatives were appointed (Downey, 1995; Splichal, 1994; Sparks with Reading, 1998).

Further, although formally abolished, censorship has occurred occasionally. For instance, Polish broadcasting law from 1993 'contained the condition that both private and public broadcasters should respect Christian values' (Downey 1995, p. 60). It is also worth noting that due to the negotiated nature of 1989 revolutions there were no extensive changes in personnel, apart from those on the chief positions (Sparks with Reading, 1998, pp. 99-100 and 131-132). As a consequence, the type of journalism has not changed significantly either. 'Media in Eastern Europe tend to rely on official sources and to under-report the 'why' and 'how' explanatory elements' (Milton in O'Neil ed., 1997, p.7). The personnel continuity also facilitated self-censorship of journalists and editors.

Finally, introduction of some market mechanisms occurred in special circumstances under which neither the efficiency of broadcasting operating was increased, nor was the independence from politics ensured. I will discuss this more in detail below. In addition, technological changes were also very moderate due to the economic difficulties in Eastern European countries (Splichal, 1994, xi). All listed phenomena from post-communist television broadcasting reality indicate that it is more appropriate to talk about certain continuity with previous practices than about a radical break with the past.

I will now turn more closely to exploring persistence of politics in television broadcasting and the reasons for that. According to Žižek, there are two main obstacles in introducing market economy and liberal democracy in Eastern European societies: '[...] on the one hand, the remainders of the old totalitarian forces that, although they lost the battle, continue with their underground machinations; on the other hand, national corporatism, obsession with national unity and with an imagined 'threat to the nation'' (Žižek, 1992, p. 26). The same general reasons worked as an impediment for introducing democratic television broadcasting. I will first consider the later.

After the collapse of communism, Eastern Europeans faced multiple transition – from centrally planned to market economy, and from (post)totalitarianism to liberal democracy. That posed special difficulties to new political elites. In Western societies market developed first; democracy followed. The multiple transitions were without precedents and models to copy. At the same time, all countries faced problems connected with their new status that is independence from the foreign patronage. Some of them chose to be independent states for the first time in their history. That included rewriting constitutions and history and defining citizenship, statehood and nationhood. As some of these tasks are difficult, sometimes even impossible to reconcile, it was necessary to gain a broad support for the government decisions. The media, especially television

broadcasting, were once again assigned the role of promoting the common goals (Jakubowicz, 1994, pp. 281-182). Although national consciousness played an important role in freeing Eastern Europeans from Soviet patronage and undemocratic regime, introducing of new democracies were severely imperiled by nationalist sentiments, as the exclusive logic of nationalism contradicts inclusiveness as one of the main democratic principles (Linz and Stepan, 1996, pp. 16-38).

Not only national minorities' interests were suppressed in the new populist television broadcasting practices. The other democratic forces that could influence broadcasting policy were also soon squeezed out by daily politics. How has happened that television became an instrument of the new political elites? There were several reasons for that. The new political elites were mostly recruited from civil society activists, and the 'rebirth' of civil society during the last decade of communism occurred under some specific features. Due to the nature of communism, civil society was developed in 'vacuum' with no connections with economic and political society, which themselves were under the state control. It was also predominantly driven by groups of intellectuals, with no broader public involvement (if we exclude the 1989 events). These groups of dissidents have eventually formed political opposition and took over the power after 1989. But, once in the power, not surprisingly, they proved to have a little experience in governing (Schopflin 1993, p. 286).

According to Schopflin, the most severe damage done by communism was institutions' destruction. Official institutions were distrusted because of their role as an instrument of the party control and repression, and loyalty was instead personalized and attributed to individuals. The lack of faith in institutions was shared by the new elites as well. A combination of unrealistic expectations due to their inexperience in management, and distrust in bureaucracy, led them to blame their communist antecedents for inadequate achievements in pursuing policies, and to appointing 'trustworthy' personnel. The result was politicized bureaucracy (Schopflin, 1993, pp. 274-286).

Another consequence of inexperience of the new political elites was that they were unaccustomed to democratic procedures and bargain practices. As a result, they soon start bitter political struggle not only with their opponents, but also between themselves (Downey, 1998, p. 52; Kleinwaechter, 1998). Once like-minded in critique of the state socialism, the democratic opposition than 're -invented' television as an important mean for exercising political power. The political struggle was clearly manifested in disputes over television broadcasting legislation. As a result, the laws were passed with delay, which allowed informal practices and power structure to develop in the meantime.

So, even once passed, the laws were ‘placed under considerable strain in the daily practice of broadcasting’ (Sparks with Reading, 1998, p. 154).

Reasons why changes in television broadcasting in Eastern Europe have not taken a direction of implementing more features of market-oriented model partly overlap with the reasons stated above. On a normative level, there was a consensus about desirability of the public television model. One component of that preference was a genuine belief that the public television model is better suited for opening of democratic media space. The other was more dubious in nature. Television was considered too big and too important to be owned by entrepreneurs independent from politics (Sparks with Reading, 1998, pp. 146-147). As mentioned above, new political elites needed it for legitimating purposes. It could be also used to influence elections results.

But there were also important structural-economic constraints for introduction of the market model. Eastern European countries are generally small and, more importantly, poor measured by western standards. Advertising market is thus underdeveloped, despite the rate of growth after 1989 (Sparks with Reading, 1989, p. 144). For example, if we compare two of roughly equal size – Poland and Spain ‘[i]n 1993 television advertising expenditure in Spain was US \$ 4,846 million; in Poland it was US \$ 236 million’ (European Audio-Visual Observatory, 1995, in Sparks with Reading, 1998, p. 145). In addition, political and economic development was uncertain, which made bigger foreign investments highly improbable.

However, in all Visegrad countries at least one television channel was privatized, and mixed model was introduced. But, as Splichal points out, privatization is often not conducted for efficiency reasons, but to fill exhausted state budgets. Another aim of privatization was a redistribution of wealth and power (Splichal, 1995, p. 55), and allocations of frequencies for private broadcasting were intensely politicized. Thus, the privatization neither increased efficiency nor economic and political independence.

In fact, the result was that programme strategies moved even further from public service model. ‘[B]roadcasters [...] face a dilemma. One option will be to attempt to maximize their revenue from advertising, partly at least to distance themselves from direct financial pressure from the government. This strategy could be complemented by attempting to minimize programme costs by using a high proportion of imported popular programmes’ (Sparks and Reading, 1994, p. 265). As the first option, the time assigned to advertising, is limited by law much more in the case of non-private than private broadcasters, the second option is likely to take place. That means that the non-private broadcasters will effectively be acting as commercial broadcasters. Besides small advertising markets and legal limits to amount of advertising, Sparks and

Reading list the quotas for local production as the third obstacle for non-private broadcasters to free themselves from economic and thus political pressure coming from the government, since domestic production is usually more expensive (Sparks and Reading, 1994, p. 266).

To sum up, it can be said that 1989 did not bring radical changes in television broadcasting in Eastern Europe. Because of direct political or indirect economic pressures television stayed heavily dependant on the state. It seems that, although the state has significantly loosen the grip over the Eastern European societies after the break-up of communism, the legacy of the strong communist state which has aimed to penetrate in every aspect of social life, could not disappear overnight and its influence has remain relatively strong. The lack of democratic tradition, weak economies and inexistence of a strong middle class as a precondition for vibrant civil society work as impediments for opening of the democratic public sphere. Television broadcasting shares the legacies of the past that are still present on a more general level in Eastern European societies.

Conclusion

In this essay I argued that changes in television broadcasting in Eastern Europe that followed 1989 revolutions were modest rather than radical and that it is more appropriate to talk about continuity with the previous practices instead of a complete break with the past. I also argued that changes in television broadcasting couldn't be understood without reference to broader socio-political context in which they occurred. In doing so, it is important to bear in mind both structural and dynamic dimension of social processes.

It is very likely that the factors described as legacies of the past are eventually going to diminish, if not disappear completely. In the last decade Eastern European, and especially Visegrad countries, have made significant economic progress, and become more and more similar to western democracies. As they became EU members, those trends are likely to be continued and even intensified. Does it mean a possibility to introduce a public television broadcasting model is difficult to say. Television broadcasting systems are most probably going to advance technologically and become more market-oriented. Will it make them more independent from the state, dependant on market, both, or neither is still to be seen.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Some authors, for instance Brzezinski (1989, p. 254), even find the role of the media the key factor in the break-up of communism.
- ² It is worth noting that changes in television broadcasting do not coincide completely with broader social and political changes. Thus, the arguments about changes of television broadcasting cannot be used to prove or disprove theories about transformation of Eastern European societies. However, as the influence of social context on changes in television broadcasting is crucial for their understanding, I am going to use segments of different theories of social transformation to support my arguments. But, a systematic presenting of those theories, and their complex relationship with television broadcasting is out of scope of this paper.
- ³ Holt, R. T. (1958) *Radio Free Europe*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

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Maja Vadić

Televizija u Istočnoj Europi: Koliko se promijenilo nakon preokreta 1989.?

SAŽETAK

Ovaj rad analizira promjene u televizijskom emitiranju u zemljama Istočne Europe nakon pada komunističkih režima uzimajući u obzir i istodobne socio-političke promjene u tim državama. Smatra se da su one bile nepotpune, a istaknuta su dva glavna objašnjenja takve tvrdnje. Prvo, promjene u televizijskom emitiranju nakon 1989. godine nisu predstavljale radikalni raskid s komunističkim modelom emitiranja, jer se i on sam djelimično promijenio do 1989. godine, posebno tijekom 1980-ih. Drugo, bile su nepotpune zahvaljujući različitim nasljeđima iz prošlosti koja su predstavljala velike prepreke u provođenju korijentijih promjena.

Ključne riječi: televizijsko emitiranje, Istočna Europa, komunistički režim, promjene, naslijeđe iz prošlosti