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 Book Review
 

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Zrinjka Peruško, Dina Vozab  
and Antonija Čuvalo  
**Comparing Post-Socialist  
Media Systems. The Case  
of Southeast Europe**

Routledge, London – New York, 2021, 301 pp.

Research made by Zrinjka Peruško, Dina Vozab and Antonija Čuvalo in their new book *Comparing Post-Socialist Media Systems. The Case of Southeast Europe* gives us an excellent insight into the connection between the political order, the media and the public. The provided data convincingly prove that the media were not a free-floating ship in the oceans of the global public, but that they operate, and thus depend on the political and social context that is taking shape within nation states. This, so to speak, founding thesis of media research enabled the authors to connect sociology, political science and communication science. They did it with a calm strength, which permeates the whole book. Calmness stems from the fact that phenomena are analyzed from various points of view, always in a social and political context, while strength stems from the fact that their analysis relies on an excellent knowledge of historical facts, sociological and political science knowledge, as well as their own empirical research.

The book begins with a foreword by the eminent Italian communicology expert and political scientist, Paolo Mancini. He presented the research in the context of relat-

ed European media research, clearly showing how the authors' great methodological procedure makes them stand out in comparison to others. This approach, as excellent in the introduction and in the second chapter entitled "Explaining the Transformations of Post-Socialist Media Systems", is based on multidisciplinary, as explained by Zrinjka Peruško, who designed and led the research. At the center of their research procedures is comparative historical institutionalism, along with sociological, historiographic, communicological and political-science research methods. This approach allows the relationship between the media, the state and freedom to be presented in a new way. Namely, the value of the book lies precisely in the fact that the authors ask the central question of the social sciences and humanities – the question of freedom. Unlike some of the new research, Peruško, Vozab and Čuvalo clearly see that freedom is not opposed to the state, but, on the contrary, that well-established state institutions are a guarantee of freedom, and, of course, freedom of the media.

This research paradigm was applied to the countries of Southeast Europe, that is, the countries that emerged after the breakup of the SFRY. Therefore – naturally, taking into account global phenomena – the research focuses on the action of the institutions of nation-states with regard to the media systems that operate within them. Moving away from the usual approach that emphasizes democratic reforms, the research presented in the book focuses on the historical context, the development of the media market, the relationship between the state and the media, the influence of politics and the level of journalistic pro-

fessionalism. The research is, therefore, strongly grounded in historical institutionalism, which makes it possible to explain the convergence and divergence of media systems in three key time frames. Namely, the research model developed by Zrinjka Peruško distinguishes three historical periods related to the development of media systems: modernization and democratic revolutions from the 19th century to the end of World War II, the socialist period after 1945, and the post-socialist period after 1989. This multidisciplinary approach, which combines communication theory with political and social theory as well as historiographical analysis, has proved to be extremely effective.

After explaining the research approach and procedures, and after setting hypotheses and outlining the subject of research, the third chapter “Prelude to Modernity”, by using comparative historiographical analysis, depicts the modernization processes that affected society, politics and media of the studied countries: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. Their past is thematized by an excellent analysis of the state and political systems in which they existed, and it is presented through the periods of the Habsburg Monarchy, the Ottoman Empire, and the Kingdom of SCS/Yugoslavia. The value of this part of the research is based on the approach of social historiography which enables readers to get acquainted with the social conditionality of political processes. It also provides a legal and political framework in which the media operated and, most importantly, the features of a political culture that has been shaped by the level of modernization and the political context. In this sense, the

book is an excellent summary of the main factors that shaped the media at the time, as well as the media themselves – newspapers and radio – and their main features. A number of quantitative data are included, established by precise calculations and presented clearly and in tables. Again, their value and accuracy do not derive solely from the measurements themselves, but from theoretically well-established research. Being well acquainted with social and political theory – which helps to systematize the data obtained, the evidence of which can be found throughout the book – and using a combination of qualitative and quantitative procedures, makes this book not only a valuable contribution to media research, but also to the understanding of social history of the studied countries.

The fourth chapter “Media Systems in Socialist Modernity” looks into the history of Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia, reflected in the history of political institutions and in the relations between these institutions and media freedoms, namely, in the characteristics of the media during the socialist period. The question was boldly framed whether there was a common Soviet media system in Central and Eastern Europe at all, or else there were “long-lasting structures that determined part of the practice and media culture regardless of the change and characteristics of political regimes”. The authors also wonder whether socialism was the same in Czechoslovakia, Albania and Yugoslavia. They examine Herbert Kitschelt’s model that distinguishes three types of socialist orders: bureaucratic-authoritarian, patrimonial, and nationally-adjusted socialist regimes. By apply-

ing this model, namely by reconstructing the consequences of these systems for the very structure of the media, they enriched the classical approach of historical institutionalism which forms the basis of the research procedure in the book. The comparative analysis thus not only managed to convincingly point out the special features of self-governing socialism in relation to the states of “real socialism”, but also the specific features of each of the socialist republics that were part of the SFRY. For example, it turned out that the Socialist Republic of Croatia made significant modernization achievements. Despite a one-party dictatorship, the order ensured urbanization, industrialization, the spread of education, and even the integration of the Croatian nation. At that time there was a strong development of newspapers, radio and television. Although the media were undoubtedly in the service of indoctrination by official ideology, the analysis showed that they were also in the service of general social modernization. Their relationship is examined through the sociology of everyday life, which indicates the strength of informal relationships deviating from the official doctrine. With the help of Josip Županov’s theory of society and Ivan Prpić’s theory of politics, the authors showed how the order gradually lost its legitimacy due to the tension between the normative and the real, in other words, how everyday life devalued ideological dogmas, which was reflected in the media as well. Given the characteristics of the socialist orders, but also given the long-lasting structures from the time of the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire, different value systems were formed in the post-Yugoslav countries. In

Slovenia and Croatia, according to the authors, postmodernist values prevail, while in other countries predominantly modernist values are at work, which also affects the characteristics of the media.

The fifth chapter of the book is entitled “Toward Democracy: Post-Socialist Media Systems and Digital Modernity”. This chapter also uses a research procedure based on a multidisciplinary approach, which, firstly, makes it possible to excellently reconstruct the features of the political order and, secondly, to clearly see the relationship of political institutions to freedom and ownership of the media. A comparative analysis of the democratic transition has shown that the values of public media policy in the post-socialist period generally depend on long-term structures, i.e. on political culture, but also on the strength and characteristics of public and state institutions. Thus, the policy of democratization of order and media in individual countries was reconstructed and it was pointed out where the construction of free media simply breaks down, not only under the burden of direct political party interests, but also of hidden interests related to media ownership. In this way, the thesis is put forward that the conditions for media freedom are not formed exclusively in the field of politics, but that both the media and politics depend on social circumstances – that is, on the ownership structure of the media and the policies pursued by media owners. The stated structural reasons can be much stronger than mere party interests. The book thus clearly proves that, with regard to the media, problems can come not only from the state authoritarian politics, but also from private interests that go beyond the usual party

policies, holding the levers of the state in captivity. Unfortunately, the book is somewhat unclear when comparing socialist politics with the politics of post-socialist modernization. In short, the fifth chapter predominantly focuses on the transition after 1990 and the consolidation of media systems in their present form. Yet, an interesting analysis of the impact of the European integration process on media systems in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe can be found there. The analysis of this process is excellently related to the process of state-building and building of institutions, pointing out their dependence on the political order, on the structures of long duration, that is, on the level of achieved modernization that shapes the political culture. With regard to the previous media research, it is proposed to shift the focus from the analysis of the relationship between the media and politics to the analysis of the wider social context, in other words, the factors of the “wider media landscape”. This is exactly what has been successfully done in this book: it shows the power relations between the media, politics, cultural and economic hubs of power. In that respect, it has been proven that the power of the media and the power over the media is established in a complex social process.

The sixth chapter, “Why the Media Systems Are the Way They Are”, presents the features of certain modern media systems in the post-socialist countries of Southeast Europe. Media systems in the “digital age of modernity” are discussed by analyzing the characteristics of the media market, journalistic professionalism and autonomy, the impact of politics on the media, as well as by analyzing concepts important

for the “digital media scene”. The time frame explored in this chapter encompasses three post-socialist decades, and the processes of democratic and ownership change. The transformation of media systems has been examined through a series of variables that make it possible to assess the success of the transition from socialism to democracy (with respect to the media). Case studies for individual countries examine the characteristics of authoritarian regimes, the type of change in political systems, the relationship between new political factors, the types of social divisions that lead to internal conflicts and significantly affect the stability of the party system and order, and the impact of European integration environments, historical heritage, level of economic development and political culture. Despite numerous researched variables, the authors managed to systematize the research with the help of tables and clearly present its results. It turned out that the causes of a certain media structure differ with regard to countries, and that this difference is conditioned by a combination of a number of factors, among which the war was not decisive. For example, in the early 1990s FYR Macedonia did not experience a full-scaled war, but that circumstance did not lead to freedom and objectivity of the media. It is often difficult to find the deciding factor, but it is quite clear that the market and democracy are also not a magical solution that necessarily carries with it the freedom of the media. It turned out that institutional design is not omnipotent, because its result significantly depends on the level of modernization achieved by each particular country, which is determined by their political culture.

The processes of statehood formation, which blocked the liberalization and democratization of the order in Serbia and Kosovo, were also confirmed as important. The research revealed that the economic transformation of the media, namely, the appearance of private media and the privatization process, was actually the easiest task, but also that it did not guarantee their quality and freedom. In other words, given the transformations of the cultural field, as well as the different social and political values, the countries of Southeast Europe – naturally, at different levels – show shortcomings in terms of independence and quality of public media. The authors clearly point out that the media systems of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia, although formed in countries that were part of the same political order, have become very different from one another in terms of the level of media professionalism, the impact of politics, participation in global cultural trends, development of the media market, etc. Researching the conditions of media development at a very high theoretical level through three time periods and three fields of power – political field, socio-economic field and cultural-symbolic field – allowed the authors to point clearly and with a scientific basis to the causes of the way the structure of media systems has been established.

The greatest value that this book offers is a new theoretical approach and methodological framework to media research. The multidisciplinary research process, which combines communication science, political science, sociology and social history, has made it possible not only to monitor the development of media systems, but

also to excellently present all the main features of social, cultural and political development in Southeast Europe. It is an excellent book that proves that Croatian scientists can not only reach the quality level of European media research, but also that in many dimensions they significantly exceed it. I would like to emphasize once again a good knowledge of social and political theory, and a comparative analysis that successfully combines qualitative and quantitative research procedures, excellently presented in well-structured tables. In conclusion, it should be emphasized that this book will benefit not only communication scientists and other experts who analyze the media, but also sociologists, political scientists and even historians, in short, all those who want to systematize and improve their knowledge of politics, society and the media.

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