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European Union and Media: an 'Enlarging Role'

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Sažetak

Međunarodni institut "*Jacques Maritain*" danas djeluje u 15 zemalja na 4 kontinenta, a osnovan je prije 30 godina sa željom da se doprinese raspravama o suvremenom društvu u skladu s učenjem toga znanstvenika.

Mediji su značajan čimbenik u razvoju integrirane Europe, ali i zemalja u tranziciji. Zadaća civilnoga društva, te nacionalnih i europskih institucija jest promovirati i ohrabrivati kritičko razmišljanje među ljudima, kako na Istoku, tako i na Zapadu, i to koristeći se novim informacijskim tehnologijama.

Obrazovanje novinara je ključno kako bi se razvila svijest o ulozi medija u proširenju EU-a.

Ključne riječi: mediji, europska integracija, civilno društvo

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The International Institute *Jacques Maritain*, which is today present in fifteen countries on four continents, was first set up more than thirty years ago with the aim of contributing to the discussions on the important issues of contemporary society, in line with Jacques Maritain's thought which considers the person, his/her need to live in a community and his/her aspiration to freedom at the centre of all social and economic development processes.

In this framework Institute has been working between Western and Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans for ten years now, promoting studies, research work and debates favouring meetings and dialogue between what John Paul II defined "the two lungs of Europe", trying to find a way by means of political, economic cultural and religious tools to create the conditions for a society thriving on its diversities.

It goes without saying that the media system, which is one of these tools, plays a vital role in this process.

This is an age in which parties and traditional forms of political involvement are becoming less and less important while the role of the national and international public opinion is indeed growing and becoming more delicate, all the more so in countries which after forty years are now experiencing a transition period towards a system fully based on freedom and democracy.

Therefore, as we will see, what is of fundamental importance today is to monitor the effective autonomy of this system and to promote the training of professional operators, free from conditionings and with strong European views.

The recent past

To better understand the importance of this process and to what extent the prospects for transition towards a real European cultural identity passed and pass through a radical change in the media, we should take a step back.

The analysis of the conflicts and the recent history of Eastern Europe and the Balkans teaches us that, together with education, communication and

mass-media have been an exceptional instrument of social manipulation, a key to divisions, a way to sharpen historical differences and intensify hatred to such an extent that families, communities, whole countries were ripped and torn.

“Had it not been for the mass media and the television in particular, the war in former Yugoslavia would not have been possible”: this was the terrible verdict pronounced by the former director of “Sarajevo TV”.

This sentence dramatically introduces the reflection on the role of those extraordinary instruments which shape public opinion (and therefore culture): that is the means of mass communication. Tadeusz Mazowiecki, author of a special report on mass media for the UN Commission on Human Rights wrote in the Nineties: “the means of mass communication in former Yugoslavia have been one of the most important instruments contributing to the propagation of the military conflict in this region. They actively participated in the conflict, causing numerous violations of human and humanitarian rights”.

Of course, not everybody conformed in those years. Some paid for their courage with exclusion, by losing their freedom, or with their lives. Especially under Milosevic, the regime carried out the systematic control or the elimination of those who voiced their opposition and only a very few exceptions (just think of the extraordinary experience of radio B-92 which is now a multimedia network) managed to survive, but at an extremely high price. And let us not forget what happened to the television building in Belgrade on April 23 1999 when those who were killed under the bombings were certainly not the journalists of the regime but rather the young and inexperienced who were guiltily left there as targets.

The challenges of today

So, today we are facing two parallel challenges: for a modern and pluralist mass media system and for a Europe “united in its diversity”. Territorial, linguistic, cultural and religious differences need to be safeguarded within a network of local public and private bodies operating also in a truly European context, sharing and promoting a common European project.

This challenge which Europe faces, a continent representing a world model, capable of promoting at the same time economic development and social cohesion, will pass also through the image that communication operators will give it. Also the recent referendums on the European Constitution, for example, highlighted the difficulties in providing correct information to European citizens on the choices they are called upon to make in the near future, and on their repercussions.

So, the objective of civil society and national and European institutions is to promote and encourage a critical attitude in the population, of both East and West, also through the new tools of recent technology.

In fact, the internet and access to satellite platforms have made it possible for a large number of citizens (especially Eastern Europeans) to exponentially increase the amount of information at their disposal in a few years and at a low cost. The objective that has still to be reached is to make it possible to make a selection within this large amount of information: make citizens able to choose the most useful information in a balanced and objective way.

A decisive subject for these tools is certainly the enlargement of the EU (still unaccomplished if you think of the Western Balkans) as well as the cultural integration of geographical areas which have been divided for too long.

Particular attention has to be paid to a special target, young people, in this process of enlargement of the EU. In fact, I would like to stress that this generation of young people is the first one that can be considered fully European (even if, often, they have not yet got common cultural and communication tools).

In this context, any training process (also those specifically targeted on journalists' professional skills which we are talking about today) needs to offer tomorrow's citizens (and journalists) an overall vision of the future of a united Europe, the means to reach stable conditions in diversity, and an occasion for a debate on how to shape a common European identity.

What kind of professional competence is needed for the enlargement?

For these reasons in our courses we stress that the journalists should report the European enlargement process taking into consideration all the different aspects: political, economic, social, cultural and historical.

In fact, although politics and economics are important, covering EU enlargement from these angles only is not sufficient. It is also up to the media to launch a public debate about the responsibility and future of Europe in a more general sense. This debate should stress that EU enlargement is not just a mechanical process that depends very much on the results of the scrutiny of the legal framework or the condition of applicant countries' economies - it is also an important cultural and historical long-term process, without which it is impossible to create a common European identity.

Flat, simplified coverage of European integration will result in an artificial Europe, based not on values coming from our civilisation, but on the lack of any culture. Such a construction of Europe, even armed with the euro currency, will have no chance to become a solid structure, which can survive in times of crisis.

The media's role is not only to report on a daily basis what is happening in Brussels, but also to constantly raise both difficult and in another sense, simple questions such as: How can we define Europe? Is Russia part of Europe? What does Europe have to do with the Balkans? Does the EU mean the new division of Europe or unification of the continent? What are the full objectives of the EU?

The politicians have still not answered these questions in a sufficient way. By asking questions, journalists should reach for the principle answers and help people of the different countries to look for what they have in common. Mirroring the expectations of the people, journalists have to keep in mind that the nations of central and eastern Europe differ in their expectations from the West. For eastern and central Europeans, who suffered for years under a totalitarian system, entering the EU means in the very first place securing their young democracies and, in some cases (e.g. the Baltic countries), newly established independence.

But people of the former Soviet bloc countries have also different

fears regarding the access of their countries to the EU: they are afraid they will lose what they have gained in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union - their rediscovered national traditions and national identity which is often overestimated and mythologized in the national media.

Journalists should be prepared to explain that the EU is not a monolithic and authoritarian structure which dictates to the applicant countries the preconditions of their entry into the EU as it is often pictured in candidate countries' media, but rather a flexible, democratic organisation, which negotiates the deal on the partnership level and expects from the prospective candidates an active role in creating the global policy of the EU - especially toward Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. It is important to stress in the media, that central and eastern European applicant countries can give a valuable input in constructing a new way of thinking about the East which might enrich western European culture with the preserved elements of their traditions and value systems.

Should the media educate people about the EU or should they just inform? To be frank - informing also means education. Journalists should play the role of teaching people about present day Europe and its problems, problems which are often deeply rooted in the past. They should combat the national stereotyping and hatred, which only leads to conflict and violence. They should, as actively as possible, assist their audience in meeting the challenges of the new millennium - a stabile, safe and peacefully united Europe, which for centuries has been one of the world's trouble-makers, starting wars and inventing communism, fascism and ethnic cleansing.

It will be the role of the journalistic initial or mid-career training projects like AEMT in the East and the West to assist journalists to conduct their duties in a proper and professional manner. Therefore, these projects must stimulate interactive contacts on various levels between the journalists from the old and the new member states of the EU and initiate training activities based on the needs and problems (probably some of the greatest challenges for Europe) which have been discussed and identified during this conference.

In conclusion, just a few words on the weaknesses of the media system in the New Europe. We can see that with deregulation of the media market, the role of market forces and institutions driving liberal economics has been increasing in importance. On the one hand, numerous publications

and television and radio programmes which appeared during the heyday of early democracy in 1989-91 turned out to be economically non-viable and simply could not live up to expectations of an increasingly more objective and versatile media.

On the other hand, with the survival and consolidation of some large Eastern European press and broadcasting companies and the arrival of even larger Western ones, there are still lingering fears that the tyranny of the State may easily be substituted by the tyranny of the market (also with the consequent risk of a drop in quality). Although competitive and private media may not always be at ease with the democratic process, diverse and independent media undoubtedly contribute to the consolidation of democracy. The media can play the role of the “Fourth Estate” alongside other state governance institutions. However the media can perform this function only if it is endowed with several key characteristics and is able to satisfy certain societal needs.

Most importantly, the media should:

1. be pluralistic and free of excessive governmental or private ownership control and censorship;
2. provide citizens with information about political candidates and events;
3. be vigilant against corrupt practices and tendencies;
4. keep public figures accountable in the public realm;
5. scan information and set the agenda for politicians and citizens in the domestic and international arena;
6. open communication channels and organise a dialogue among the various elements of society concerning everyday problems, chiefly with respect to the protection of ethnic and minority rights.

Finally, with the rapid professionalization of, and exposure to, foreign know-how and capital, both the printed and broadcast media in post-communist Europe have shifted their attention from the needs of the population to the strict requirements of the global media market. Although it is difficult to combine the public interest with the competitive market element in the content of media programmes even in established Western societies, it is nevertheless crucial to aim towards this goal if one is to maintain a high-quality democratic regime.