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EASTERN EUROPEAN MEDIA. AN OVERVIEW

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Review of Marta Dyczok, Oxana Gaman-Goluvina (eds.), *Media, Democracy and Freedom. The Post-Communist Experience*, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009).

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This book consists of a selection of papers written by an international group of scholars. They examine the role media have played in the transition period in Eastern Europe. They present theoretical arguments and empirical details related to four main topics: state-society relations; the weight of the past; the usefulness and limitations of the comparative perspective; the complex and contradictory role of the market. The studies offer a better understanding of the social, political and economic contexts of the post-communist societies, as well as of the media influence in the construction of a new social structure.

In the first study, Marta Dyczok looks at the evolution of the media in Ukraine and their impact on the social and political system of the country, from the liberalization from the Soviet system brought about by the *glasnost*, until today, trying to shed new light on this blurry topic. The article presents us with a short historical introduction, separating the recent developments in the media in four main periods. The first is Gorbachev's aforementioned loosening of the reins on the entire Soviet press. The next steps are similar to what can be recognized happening in Romania. After the 1991 declaration of independence, the now private media started to grow very fast, surpassing the actual need. Then came the period of stabilization, when many media institutions slowly disappeared as they became irrelevant. The most recent period is that of the Orange Revolution, when the media, controlled by the party then in power, proved not to have enough power to control the vote of the majority needed to win the elections.

Oxana Gaman-Golutvina's article on Russia's system provides a much more historical overview, looking at the relationship between freedom and development, going back to the time of the czars. The phenomenological analysis shows that Russia during the last few centuries was based on a mobilizational development type. That is, the state has always had a lack of resources and, due to this constant shortage, it has always had to exploit them to the maximum. This leads to a relationship between freedom and development dependent on the ratio of the goals and the means available to achieve these goals. In its history, Russia has often had to trade freedom for security and development. Even though the state now rejects the mobilization model, the media seems to be subjected to it. After the fall of communism the media have developed, but they have never reached a satisfactory level of independence, being controlled by those who control their welfare.

Russia, the West and 'The Special Path' is Boris Dubin's analysis of the way the Russian people's views have changes after the fall of the Soviet Union. It concentrates mostly on how the Russians see themselves in relation to what is outside their country rather than inside. One can feel the remnants of the Iron Curtain still separating them from the rest of the world, expressed in a kind of nostalgia for the former Soviet regime. What is very interesting to find out, though, is that Russians do take into

consideration becoming a part of the European Union, but at the same time they miss the special status they had before. For example, most Russians do not see Ukraine as a separate country, but a part of their own, and have difficulty imagining Ukraine joining the European Union before them.

Masha Lipman provides another perspective on the status of media in Russia. The author observes the evolution within the system that has happened during and after the 1990s. Initially, with the liberalization of the press came a struggle for independence and professionalism. In time, this gave way to the more pragmatic quest for profits. Another problem of Russian media is state and economical control. The state owns a big part of the most important media channels. That which is not controlled by the state has very vague private ownership that protects owners from external attacks, but still gives them internal control. An interesting fact is that the state-owned company Gazprom, dealing originally with energy production, has also been involved in financing and sustaining their own media channels becoming major players on the market.

In opposition to most post-communist countries, in which, even if the goals are not yet reached, the freedom of the press is developing positively (if slowly), Belarus seems to be in a special situation. Stefan Jarolimiek carries out a three-level analysis of the Belarusian media system, on constraints, content and actors, and draws a bleak conclusion. After its 1991 independence, the press in Belarus has evolved for a while, through the first democratic presidential elections, probably reaching its peak before the 1996 referendum for constitutional amendment. Unfortunately, this strive for liberalization has suffered from a counter-attack, which has led to a new era of authoritative media control, sending Belarus back in what the freedom of media is concerned, and stifling the country's development.

Oleg Manaev's tribute article to Samuel Huntington, presents Belarus as an area of contrasts and paradoxes. This is of course because of its position at the place where two major civilizations clash: the western and the Russian one. This makes, for example, a population not as affected by communism as other former soviet republics have been (still religious and willing to accept change) be very submissive in the face of authority, thus limiting evolution. This is one of the reasons why presidential control in Belarus is great. The balance in the fight of the two opposing civilizations is in a delicate balance. Half of the people do not consider themselves European, but the percentage of those who do (37%) is not very far. This may also be due to the fact that most of the media in Belarus is still in Russian, not in the national language. But despite all this, the country seems to be moving slowly towards the West. This is also helped by external factors. For example, both the US and the EU have invested in media institutions in Belarus, possibly aware of the balance and trying to tilt it towards themselves.

The study carried out by Inta Brikše on Latvia's media system also proves to provide an interesting perspective. The issues discussed in the article are not, in contrast with the other countries, very problematic in what the legislation is concerned. Latvia seems to be ahead in the freedom of the press race, from a legal standpoint. The main problem is in media practice – the lack of journalistic education and experience, for example. Latvia also faces the problems of other, more developed countries, as the control of the media passes from the political to private, independent ownership. The content of the media is dictated more and more by commercial aspects, affecting the way information and entertainment are presented and separated.

The situation in Albania, as Robert Austin presents it, with the detachment of an external point of view, is very similar to that of other post-communist countries. After gaining independence, the media have had a very rapid evolution, and the corresponding legal framework has developed with it. It has been faced with the, by now common, cases of journalism harassment, it has been slow and uneven in improvement, reaching a plateau. The current situation shows us an overly-mediatised country with the most daily newspapers per capita in Europe, but all with very low circulation. The ratio between the number of media institutions and the funds available (especially from advertising) shows a discrepancy, pointing towards the fact that the funding actually comes from less 'orthodox' sources, namely political sources that control the information in exchange for financial support. This turns Albanian media more into a tool for propaganda than for objective information.

A view of Georgian media by Tamara Berekashvili points out some more issues of the system in this country. She focuses on the fact that, because of the rapid change of paradigm after the fall of communism, the media has been left without much of its human resource. The experience from before the change became less valuable, and experience appropriate to the new situation was non-existent. Moreover, even where the previous experience was important, most people left the press, creating a void behind them. This left Georgia in a crisis of media professionals that can only be solved by time and education. However, the media in Georgia are still the most trusted institution, before the state and political organizations.

The last article in the book, by Vicken Cheterian, provides a view over several countries that used to be communist states, and that have experienced political change in similar circumstances at similar times. These changes are known as the Colored Revolutions and have relatively synchronously happened in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. The first article in this book, about Ukraine, somewhat minimized the role of the media in their Orange Revolution, as it was mostly controlled by the opposition. But, in fact, the actions, in all these countries started exactly because the media were being stifled and excessively controlled. So, it

seems that the role the media played in these Revolutions was a weightier one, but it was not the role of an attacker, as could be perceived from the outside, but rather of an active defender. The effect was not an expected one either. After the political changes that the media brought about, the expected evolution of media did not come. On the contrary, the systems mellowed down, and became less militant, approaching a plateau.

This book is an important record in analyzing what role media has had in the larger context of the states that are now still recovering from communist regimes. It takes into view the influence of media on politics, economy and social issues, but also the way these factors themselves influenced the media. The views are diverse, coming both from people who have experienced these phenomena as insiders, but also from what one might call outsiders. The articles discuss a few concrete examples of the situation of the media in several countries, including Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia. When gathered together, the works of these authors provide a wider perspective on the media issue as it was and is, also suggesting possible future evolutions.