

# Media and political society in Eastern Europe.

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This article dispels certain assumptions about civil society's role in the evolution of post-Communist media systems and vice-versa. In the highly politicised, pluralistic, personal, opinionated, and judgmental Eastern European journalism without shared professional standards and a democratic-minded culture not only represents civil society but is civil society.

There is general agreement that what quickly emerged from event-driven and enacted changes in Eastern Europe after 1989 was a 'political society,' civil society's 'other' form, and the market. The rapid and wild proliferation of political parties, media, voluntary and civil associations and groups, on the one hand, and businesses, on the other, were changes that paralleled those directed, supported and enacted by states or governments, that is, changes in laws, regulations and policies permitting these autonomous developments. Varied from country to country across the region, such enacted changes affected and were affected by event-driven changes.

The prevailing view among media scholars is that the new Eastern European media and their journalism do not represent, are not expressions of, and do not enhance the growth of civil society. According to this view, the region's media and their journalists are responsive, not to the public or to civil society, but to political parties, politicians and the new capitalists or the market. Consequently, the public sphere is seen as being dominated by politicians or political activists, by businesses controlled by former members of the Communist nomenklatura, by the newly formed 'Mafia' impudently operating in several of the countries, and by foreign owned or controlled media enterprises.

Despite their faults and shortcomings, their politicised and tabloid-like journalism, their initially close, even symbiotic relationships with politicians and political parties, and their overall lack of professionalism the post Communist media express and represent the existing political society. Moreover, they express and represent the extant political culture in a post-1989 milieu, and as such, they contribute indirectly and unwittingly to the re-moulding and re-socialising of political society. For this and other reasons, I believe that civil societies are indeed emerging in post-Communist Eastern Europe, however, fragile and unconsolidated they may currently be.

As the 1990s unfolded, and to this day, the range of those who directly or indirectly influence the media and who are covered by them has steadily widened to include, among many others, unions, religious organisations, educational institutions, associations of ethnic minorities, intellectuals, and professionals, businessmen and financiers, media audiences, and the journalists themselves. Without suggesting that their political impact or media influence has kept pace with their rapid growth in numbers, non governmental associations and organisations are a now a significant factor on the political, cultural, socio-economic and media scene.

It is virtually impossible for the Hungarian media, for example, regardless of their relationships with the government, political parties, or commercial forces to ignore the non-governmental organisations and associations, which numbered more than 30,000 by 1992 in this country of 10 million people. Even in the Slovak Republic there are more than 5,000 national non-governmental associations, groups and organisations, with thousands more at the local level. Not only has media coverage of these elements of civil society increased in the region, but so has the coverage of the issues important to them: human rights, women's issues, ecology, political corruption, labour disputes, the plight of retirees on fixed pensions, changes in the educational system, corruption, health issues, children's issues, ethnic issues, and on and on. Additionally, the new non-governmental entities have discovered, to varying degrees, the importance of public relations in getting their messages out via announcements and press releases at times published or broadcast verbatim by some media outlets.

Exemplifying the event-driven establishment of liberalisation, political competition, and, with them, diversification and pluralisation, even the party press provided journalistic coverage of segments of the growing civil society in the first few post-Communist years. Whether intentionally or not, this press reflected and served the collective and individual reactions and opinions of its audiences, however biased they may have, as well as elements of civil society, of political, personal, or other interest to a particular party or politician owning, controlling, sponsoring or influencing one or more of its outlets. Given that many of the post-communist political parties derived from the pre-1989 civil and social movements that fought to liberalise or overthrow the Communist regimes (e.g., Czechoslovakia's Civil Forum, Poland's Solidarnosz, and Hungary's Fidesz), they already contained elements of what is traditionally labelled 'civil society.' That is, they were voluntary, private associations or informal groups of individuals with varied social, political, civic and cultural interests. In this way, the emergence of competitive party politics in the region parallels that in Western Europe where political parties appeared 'as representatives of pre-existing organised interests in civil society'.

In those nations without such movements to bring about the liberalisation required to end communist rule, some of the political parties that immediately emerged after the abrupt collapse of the Communist regimes, became hybrids of political and civil or social movements for restructuring society, at least at first. For instance, in Romania, the Group for Social Dialogue, a collection of civic-minded intellectuals contributed ideas to the political dialogue and individuals to the leadership of some political parties. Similarly, the Civic Alliance, also an association of socially conscious, civic minded intellectuals, formed the Civic Alliance Party. They each had a media platform, a newspaper, the most noteworthy being the intellectual weekly 22, established by the Group for Social Dialogue. In Bulgaria, too, the Federation of Clubs for the Support of Glasnost and Democracy led by Petko Semeonov, Dimitur Ludshev, and Zheliu Zhelev, who became the first post-Communist president, the Committee for Religious Rights, Freedom of Conscience, and Spiritual Values, Ekoglasnost, and the Independent Association for the Defense of Human Rights, were all social or civil movements and at the same time political entities.

In the 1990-2000 transition period, the political parties in each Eastern European nation, numbering from dozens to hundreds, were the most potent elements among the private institutions of civil society. For the time being, they directly and indirectly represent, align themselves, or have sympathies with a vast array of political, ideological, and social views, and civic and cultural interests. Their constituents include ethnic groups, labour unions, churches, environmental organisations, organisations of former political prisoners and former landowners,

professional organisations, university associations, writers' unions, actors' guilds, and so on, as well as with civil rights and human rights groups, among many others. Parties exercising considerable influence are well covered by the media, although some parties have been marginalised for lack of members and, in a broader sense, constituents, and consequently receive little or no media coverage. That, too, is an intrinsic part of an open, democratic society where choice is freely exercised in accepting or rejecting certain political, cultural or socio-economic visions, programs, parties, and ideologies.

#### Dominance of the political

It is undeniable that political parties, belonging to a widening system of private institutions, have more than their fair share of power and influence in post-1989 Eastern Europe. There are reasons for their dominance in the transition period: they are crucial to the establishment of a political democracy and, even more so, to genuine democratisation and the creation of consolidated civil societies rather than merely elements of them. By the end of the 1990s, they managed to bring a modicum of stability to the party system and to the political process. In most, if not all, countries of the region, they have also limited the uncertainty surrounding the political scene because political 'actors know the rules and have some sense of how to pursue their interests.'

Thus, it is not surprising that civil societies as they now exist in Eastern Europe are predominantly political, nor that the media, focused as they are on them are politicised. Indeed, this new, post-1989 political life and the plurality of political parties could only have 'emerged' with the help of the media. Furthermore, civil society as political society is also an extension of the extant political culture, that is, the habits, customs, ethics, and operative definitions of citizenship. First the party dominated press and then, in a less obvious and more diluted way, the parties and the press in parallel contributed to, represented and served the political nature of society. The press continues to do so in the fledgling post-Communist civil societies, where the political, the civic and the socio-cultural are not clearly differentiated and there is constant overlapping. Yet it has also contributed to the introduction and enhancement of new, varied interests among its audiences, and in doing so, promoted the growth of the civil part of political society. Thus the position that a politicised, partisan media, 'whether private or state owned, are clearly not the best method to serve the creation of civil society,' merits serious reconsideration in Eastern Europe.

For instance, retirement pay for the elderly, welfare and unemployment benefits, taxation, university tuition, building codes in cities, land redistribution, health codes, abortion, education, and the environment are as much political issues as they are social, civic and cultural ones. Whether in the name of a party or in a politician's self-interest, to act on one or more of these issues is also to represent the interests of constituents and of non-governmental associations, groups and organisations. That these issues and the fight over them are presented and debated in the Eastern European media from political or personal perspectives and in less than professional ways signals neither a disregard for civic issues nor a lack of responsibility vis-à-vis the public. More important, the presentation of these issues serves to promote the formation and expression of opinions, leading to the organisation of new non-governmental groups and associations, and eventually, to the creation of civil society from the bottom up.

Thus the argument that pluralistic, highly competitive party systems inevitably lead to the demobilisation of civil society either directly or indirectly by reducing its influence to the narrowest possible channels,' namely politicised or market-driven media, also merits reconsideration. As the 1990s unfolded, media coverage of the political and social scenes, of various politicians, political parties and of social and civic movements significantly improved. For instance, continued deficiencies in their professionalism notwithstanding, the media generally covered elections in the second half of the decade in a more balanced way, more thoroughly and widely than they had in the first post-1989 elections, with opinion polls and surveys becoming a relatively regular focus of coverage. Such quantifying of opinions on a wide range of issues contributes to the formation of public opinion and the building of civil societies. If, indeed, civil society 'can express itself in a great variety of forms, from individual initiatives through social movements, clubs, associations and other organisation,' one could argue that the highly politicised, pluralistic, personal, opinionated, and judgmental journalism without shared professional standards and a democratic-minded culture not only represents civil society but is civil society.

The general expectation that civil society is essential to the evolution of the media, that it is needed to '...“deregulate” the dependence of the media on the state and/or the market, and to maximise freedom of communication,' is also off the mark. Post-communist Eastern Europe suggests otherwise.

'Deregulating' Eastern European media dependence on the state was successfully begun in the 1990s, spontaneously, as a natural rejection of Communist or authoritarian regulation by the state, and deliberately, as an expression of the ideational, practical, and professional evolution of journalists at a time when civil society existed only in the most limited sense. The drive for media autonomy was spearheaded by media personnel as well as by some politicians, political parties, human rights and civic rights organisations. The one exception is the new 'public broadcasting' system. Yet, even in this case progress toward greater autonomy has been registered. For instance, in December 2000 – January 2001, the news staff at Czech Television, supported by other journalists, and 'people of all ages from around the country' who held a mass rally in Prague 'to show their disagreement with alleged political interference in ...public television,' toppled the station's director, a political appointee (Jiri Hodac) who allegedly was to do the bidding of his mentors, the Civic Democratic Party.

In the wake of these events, the Czech parliament shifted the nomination to the council that runs Czech Television from political parties to civic associations. The reverberations from what some foreign journalists called the second 'Velvet Revolution' were felt in other Eastern European countries. In Poland, for example, the speaker of the Polish parliament said in an interview of Polish Radio that Poland should also 'take steps to de-politicise the country's television and radio committee.' Also noteworthy is the building momentum of the drive for enactment of media access and freedom of information laws, a drive almost exclusively led by journalists and journalistic associations.

The presumption that all elements of civil society stand for and encourage media freedom is faulty. They can also discourage or even attempt to suppress media freedom as in the case of Hungary where, 'Some of the movements are more in support of freedom of information,

openness, and media independence, and others tend to believe the media must be subjected to more social control.' This should lead to the reconsideration of the magnitude of civil society's importance to a free and professional media that mirrors society and facilitates an informed public debate on all issues pertinent to the functioning of a democracy. After all, the notion that a strong civil society is necessary for democracy may itself be an exaggeration given democracy's success in Japan, Spain and France where there are relatively weak civil societies, and the failure of the Weimar Republic which had an inordinately rich civil society in the 1920s and 1930s.