How Media and Politics Shape Each Other in the New Europe

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Abstract:

Denying the huge influence of 'new' media over politics in our times would be foolish: and since politicians are no fools the development of the new media seems to be accompanied by the development of new strategies to control media contents and influence. While it remains undeniable that the social control patterns of a given society have a considerable influence over how the media system is shaped, I believe that globalization has opened the door to outside influences on a scale undreamed at the times of Four Theories of the Press.

Keywords:

Media, media freedom, captured media, censorship, Eastern Europe, democracy

Line of inquiry

How well do media theories from the developed West fit postcommunist Europe? Surely since the late eighties of the 20th century to nowadays the evolution of the media in Eastern Europe (EE) was spectacular and often unpredictable for media theorists. In their classic *Four Theories of the Press,* authors Sibert, Peterson and Scramm[1] famously claimed that 'the press has always taken on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates. Especially, it reflects the system of social control whereby the relations of individuals and institutions are adjusted'. How does this fit the role that media seems to play in prompting revolutions, insurrections and other forms of rapid political change, a role so obvious in Eastern Europe that it shaped the budgets of democracy promoters donors everywhere for the last two decades? The ascension of Al-Jazeera, ignored for many years by the American government also opened the door to fresh reflection on the influence of media. Some believe that have entered an age where electronic transnational media can be more influential than any government. It can mobilize or discourage government action, but can also play a role towards other politically influential groups: political oppositions, subversion movements and civil society. In American military academies media studies re-experience the flourishing of the Vietnam War days, the previous war lost by US in newsrooms prior to being settled in the battlefield. Media researchers side either with classical theory, which denies much political influence to the media, or new, post-CNN theory, which goes to great length emphasizing it. It is only fair to say that history moved faster than theory and there is considerable catching up to do by scholars in this field.

The history of the media in postcommunist Europe in the last two decades could find an equivalent in a history of the French media between 1788, with the invitation by the King to citizens to address pamphlets to the General States and 1800, with Bonaparte's law, which reestablished control. In-between, one can find moments of triumph and moments of agony, journalists rising to be heads of legislatures as well as journalists sentenced by revolutionary tribunals. One needs a broad historical framework to examine the relationship between media and politics before, during and after times of upheaval, or, depending on the point on the time curve a study focuses (ascending-revolutionary or descending counter-revolutionary) results may seriously distort the general picture. Alexis de Tocqueville famously said that the Revolution that began in 1848 was not another one, but another chapter of the one which had started in 1789. This sheds some light on what could be a good time frame to study revolutionary times.

The new era of media influence we entered with the 1989 revolutions is certainly related to technology progress. The main newspaper of the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, Ukrayinska Pravda, was an Internet based publication which had 1.5 million hits a day during the 2004 elections. When Serb authorities cracked down on Belgrade B-92 radio station it could move to the Internet and continue to broadcast. Classic media consumption may be path dependent of the national context[2]: however, it is the 'new' media which has a growing public, and the exchanges between the new and the old, as well as directly between new media and politics allow a media system presently to develop more independently from the local circumstances. This gives the media higher potential for playing an influential role and makes it harder to control by traditional means.

To understand the relation between media and politics in postcommunist Eastern Europe this paper builds on scholarship that presumes a two-way relationship[3] and discusses a circular model. It also looks at a broad timeframe, to cover revolutionary aftermaths as well as revolutions themselves. I attempt initially to propose a historical explanation for the birth of free media in postcommunist Europe, and the different paths that national media systems travel from a moment on, as well as the causes of this divergence and of change more generally. Once this framework established, I discuss the direct influence of media over politics looking at two different periods. For revolutionary times, and the influence of media on changing governments, I review briefly the role of the media in the recent 'colored' Revolutions in non-European Union accession countries Georgia and Ukraine. For aftermaths, and the role of media in 'normal' policymaking, I use a survey of cabinet members in ten (postcommunist) new EU member countries.

Divergent Development Paths

The fall of Communism triggered intense processes of change across Eastern Europe, especially the part geographically closer to the West and subjected to greater Western influence. The transitions that followed were supposed to accomplish transformations from command economies to market economies and from authoritarian/totalitarian regimes to liberal democratic ones. In fact, even more complicated processes were initiated in order to accomplish these goals. These can be defined as nation-building (agreeing who belongs to the political community), state building (moving from despotic to

[1] Siebert, Fred. S, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Shramm (1956). *Four Theories of the Press.* Urbana. University of Illinois Press (1956: 1,2)

[2] Hallin, D. and C. Mancini (2004). *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

[3] For a review, see Robinson, Piers 2001 *Theorizing the Influence of Media on World Politics. Models on Media Influence on World Policy.* European Journal of Communication, Vol 16 (4) 523-544.

infrastructural power), and, last but not least, society-building. Out of the social standardization imposed by Communism new social categories were needed to emerge during transition, in order to build capitalism and democracy, the entrepreneurs, the politicians, the journalists. Politicians and journalists are therefore equally newcomers on the public scene of Eastern Europe, at least in the democratic framework, and both the political system and the media system had to be created from scratch.

To what end? Following the fall of Communism, nearly all East European countries embarked in the building of a new, free media. Countries that have made the most rapid progress with the reforms did also privatize the state media, took it off the budgets of the national and regional authorities, and pursued economic and regulatory policies aimed at creating an environment in which the media business could take hold. As in Western Europe, there was one great exception to this- state broadcasting. In the same time, an alternative, unau-thorized and unregulated media erupted in many of these countries soon after the fall of the wall, some-times preceding the privatization of state media.

By 2006, the Freedom of the Press survey captured a mixed picture of postcommunist Eastern Europe. Less than half of the former communist countries are free (EU new members plus a few Balkan countries), with the rest stranded between partly free and not free. If we look back in time, we find Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic evolving from not free to free in the space of only two years (1989-1991), with a year of 'partly free' in between. This is 'revolution'. Countries that secede from federal USSR (Baltics especially) or Yugoslavia also record the greatest evolution for the media during the political upheaval. But later the trends become more mixed, and even revert in some cases. Countries like Romania, Bulgaria, Belarus, the Ukraine have known alternate periods of progress and regress. So trends do not only vary across countries, but also over time for some of them.

Table 1. Freedom House scores of media freedom in EE

Country	Status 1994	Score 1994	Status 1999	Score 1999	Status 2006	Score 2006
Albania	PF	53	PF	56	PF	50
Armenia	PF	52	PF	56	NF	64
Azerbaijan	NF	70	NF	73	NF	73
Belarus	NF	66	NF	80	NF	88
Bosnia & Herzegovina	NF	70	PF	56	PF	45
Bulgaria	PF	43	PF	39	PF	34
Croatia	PF	56	NF	63	PF	39
Czech Republic	F	20	F	20	F	20
Czechoslovakia	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Estonia	F	28	F	20	F	16
Georgia	NF	73	PF	57	PF	57
Hungary	F	30	F	28	F	21
Kazakhstan	PF	60	NF	68	NF	75
Kyrgyzstan	PF	49	NF	64	NF	64
Latvia	F	29	F	21	F	19
Lithuania	F	30	F	18	F	18
Macedonia	N/A	N/A	PF	42	PF	49
Poland	F	30	F	25	F	21
Republic of Moldova	PF	41	PF	56	NF	65
Romania	PF	55	PF	44	PF	44
Russian Federation	PF	40	PF	59	NF	72
Serbia & Montenegro	NF	86	NF	81	PF	40
Slovakia	PF	47	F	30	F	20
Slovenia	PF	40	F	27	F	20
Tajikistan	NF	93	NF	94	NF	76
Turkmenistan	NF	89	NF	85	NF	96
Ukraine	PF	44	PF	50	PF	53
USSR	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Uzbekistan	NF	85	NF	79	NF	90
Yugoslavia	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: Freedom House 2004, www.freedomhouse.org
*Legend: Greater scores mean less freedom.*

By and large, we can identify two first phases common to all the countries, liberalization, or the passage from total control to limited pluralism, with censorship and repression replaced with self-censorship and partial control. The second phase is of deregulation, mixing planned and spontaneous elements. From here on, national paths travel in different directions. The explanation of these divergent paths far exceeds the role of the media and falls within more general democratization theory. The trajectory of a country is greatly influenced by its proximity to the West and all that derives from it (Western interest, affluence of FDI), and of its own social pluralism (development of civil society, itself influenced by a range of other factors). However, it is fair to say, as Way does[4], that a phase of *pluralism by default* of the early nineties (due mostly to *the inability of incumbents to enforce authoritarian rule*) is followed by a divergence of paths, postcommunist countries becoming either more democratic or, indeed, more autocratic. I do not discuss more distant traditions here, as none of East European countries, with the exception of the Czech Republic, had a serious democratic tradition. And yet, the European Union and Freedom House consider many of them accomplished democracies presently. Whatever it is at the source of path divergence in Eastern Europe, it is not *pre-Communist* tradition.

Communist tradition seems to matter more, and indeed different types of Communism operated in Eastern Europe. Censorship in Soviet Union, Romania and Albania was far harsher than in Poland or Yugoslavia, and this impacted on the formation of a class of real journalists with aspirations to be more than just propagandists for the party. Otherwise, censorship was a general rule, broken only by Gorbachev's decision to replace outdated apparatchik-censors with professional editors with the task to urge self-censorship from journalists themselves.

The first two phases, from full control to partial control during glasnost, and then next to deregulation, either partial or total were common to most postcommunist societies, excepting some Central Asian countries. The fall of the Berlin Wall brings fast deregulation and anarchy, with underground newspapers surfacing without license, pirate radio stations and a strong Western pressure to liberalize the media. The state media is first de-monopolized, and then liberalization follows as state frequencies are offered for the bidding of the private sector. The deregulation went faster and deeper in Central Europe than in former Soviet Union, except for the Baltic States, where freedom of the media was inseparable from the nation building process. In any event, more decisive steps were taken to protect the new nascent free media in countries where anticommunists won the first round of free and fair elections. As shown in Figure 1, from deregulation on following the demise of Communism, three different paths were available, so as national political systems traveled different journeys so did the respective media systems. In some countries, politics became more and more competitive, and the media more and more pluralistic, although it has remained a complex mixture of professional with partisan media. In others, control of the media returned, as the media was captured again, either directly by governments or by vested interests networked with politics.

At the extreme end of path 2, in some FSU countries, the media, even after a promising beginning, ended up captured. On the other end, in countries with very competitive politics, the media landscape has become gradually more plural and mostly free, with considerable partisanship and only limited capture. The freedom of the media score computed by Freedom House and presented in Table 1 correlates strongly with the corruption scores of postcommunist countries also given by Freedom House within its *Nations in Transit* project[5]. This means that in an envi-

Figure 1. Divergent paths from Communist media control
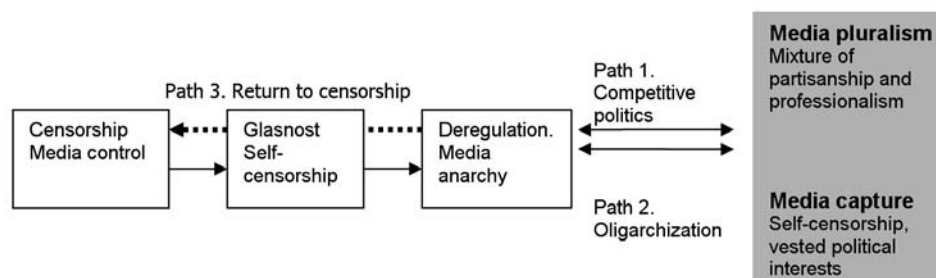
[4] See Lucan A. Way **'**Authoritarian State Building and Transitions in Western Eurasia'
A paper prepared for the workshop on "Transitions from Communist Rule in Comparative Perspective", Encina Hall, Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, CA. USA, November 15-16. 2002.
[5] Correlation between Nations in Transit Corruption Score for 26 postcommunist states (scores range from one to seven, with seven the most corruption) and the FH Freedom of the Press scores (scores ranged from 17, for Estonia and Latvia, as the most free, to 96 for Turkmenistan and 86 for Belarus, where the greatest infringements of media freedom were found. The correlation was highly significant with a Pearson index of 0.81. The two scores are both 'subjective', but as they are computed through two different methodologies they can be correlated.

ronment of systemic corruption we are likely to find a captured media alongside a captured state. By media capture I mean a situation in which the media has not succeeded in becoming autonomous to manifest a will of its own and to exercise its main function, notably of informing people, but has persisted in an intermediate state, whereas various groups, not just the government, use it for other purposes. State capture in a postcommunist context designates the situation in which the postcommunist state has not succeeded in becoming an autonomous actor towards interest groups or vested interests. Media capture in postcommunist Europe is therefore not necessarily captured *by* the state. As the groups which capture the media either have already captured the state or seek to do so, capture of the media (either public or private) should be seen as a companion of state capture, a complementary phenomenon. Among the features that make the landscape of media capture we can count concentrated, nontransparent ownership of media outlets, with important political actors controlling the media, a strong linkage between media and political elites, and important infiltration of the media by secret services. Indicators of media capture can give us important information on the trend the media is on, towards more freedom or more capture. We can find precise indicators to measure capture, although indirectly. For instance, a large sector of nonviable media living on covert sponsorship[6] indicates a captured, not an autonomous media. The expectation towards media in democratic countries is of economic viability, if not of clear profit.

Capture distorts the main role of the media: captured media outlets exist to trade influence and manipulate information rather than to inform the public, a phenomenon hard to fit into the classic government-perpetrator and media-victim paradigm. This also indicates that media influence does exist, although it could not be further from the influence of professional journalism, be it more or less framed, measured in laboratories of Western universities. When media practices ranges from sheer disinformation to blackmail it can be remarkably influential in politics. An influential media mogul in Romania created a small party, and despite its never passing the electoral threshold he managed to participate in both left and right government coalitions. He has even managed to prevent the first nominated Romanian

politician to become an EU commissioner, claiming – without any foundation – that he was an informant of Communist secret police. Disinformation wars raged 'transitional' Russia and are frequent in other countries as well.

The extent of media capture varies across the spectrum of countries taking path 2. Scandals have surfaced even in the most advanced democracies in the region bringing evidence to document 'capture' attempts. In the Polish Rywingate scandal, director of *Gazeta Wyborcza* Adam Michnik, who needed a change in legislation so to buy TV network Polsat was offered an informal 'deal' by a government intermediary. Such deals are actually carried out in other countries and nothing more is heard of them. Path 2 and Path 3 (simple regression to censorship) can go separately, or can coexist, for instance the private media takes path 2 and the public one returns to path 3. Ukraine and Russia are countries where the system has been 'mixed' during most of the transition. Prior to the 2004 Orange Revolution, the Ukrainian government had fallen back to 'temnyky', written indications for the media to know how to interpret the news. In the leaked transcripts of the 2000-2004 Romanian government meetings, two major government characters compared the two types of control: capture (indirect control) and open censorship (direct), to find the latter much more effective. In their words: 'I keep wondering why do we continue to support the media with the old tax breaks, with sponsoring and advertising, while what we get in return is just some vague, individual reprieve'[7].

Governments unable or unwilling to resort to direct media control contribute to media capture either directly or indirectly. State subsidies, bailouts in case of debts, preferential distribution of state advertising and tax breaks for media owners are traded in exchange for favorable treatment of the media. In the case of public broadcasting, anticommunists and post-communists alike showed remarkable firm beliefs in direct media effects[8]. Inheriting a system in which public broadcasting was legally and financially depending upon government, they have slowly reformed it so to make it dependent of the political majority in Parliament, practically legalizing political control, a model also found in some EU countries. Tenure of top executives, for instance, general manag-

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[6] Belin, L. (2001). "Verdict against TV-6 is Latest Warning to Opposition Media," in Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty: *Russian Political Weekly*.1: 25.

[7] *The Standing Committee of PSD, Oct 20th 2003. Stenogramele PSD*. Editura Ziua, 3 volumes, Bucure?ti: 2004. The leaked transcripts of the Romanian then government party Social Democrat (postcommunist) were under investigation by national anticorruption Prosecutor beginning 2005. Former Affairs Minister Mircea Geoana was quoted by BBC World Service acknowleging the transcripts are genuine. Several others PSD members made similar statements to the Romanian press. The Prime Minister Adrian Nastase (after January 2005 chair of the Chamber of Deputies) denied their authenticity. See the review of transcripts in *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, fall 2004, pp 54-56, www.sar.org.ro/polsci/

[8] See Sukosd, M. and P. Bajomi-Lazar (2003) *Reinventing Media. Media Policy Reform in East Central Europe.* CPS Books. Budapest: Central European University Press: 2003: 11 and Hall, Richard A. and O'Neil, Patrick (1998) "Institutions, Transitions, and the Media: A Comparison of Hungary and Romania", in O'Neil, Patrick (ed.) *Communicating Democracy: The Media and Political Transitions.* Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers: 143

er and news director, was less than a year during transition excepting the Baltic States and legislation has often been revised to provide fresh opportunities to dismiss executives who were not obedient enough.[9]

By and large, a model summarizing the complex relationship between press and government in transition accession countries is approximated in Figure 2. The government regulates media through

Figure 2. Context of the interaction media-government
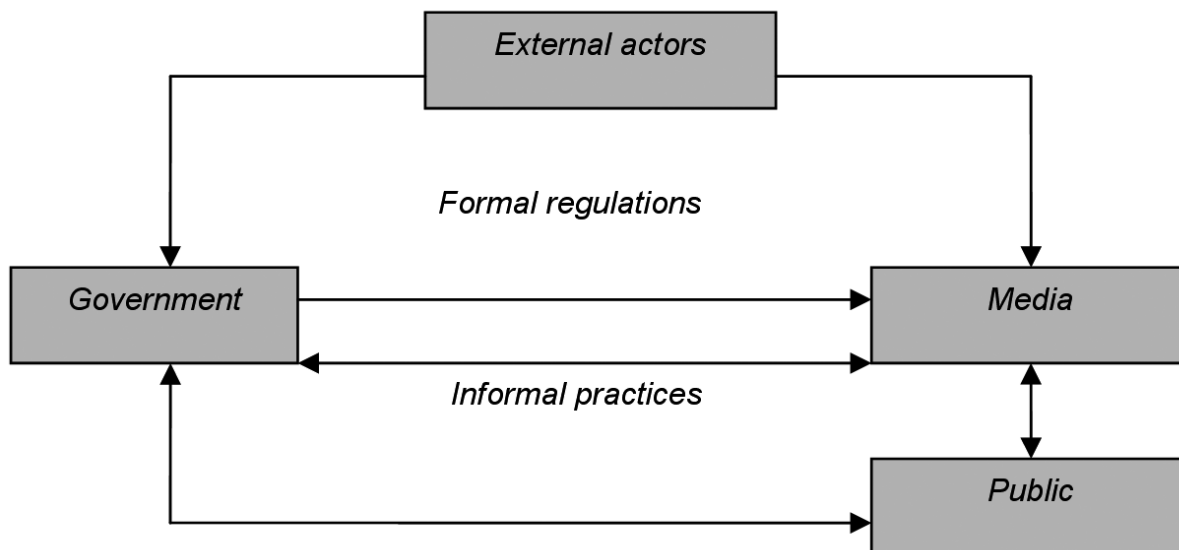
formal regulations, but as those are influenced strongly by international actors, it also uses less overt means to control the media. External influence of various types varies greatly across the countries. Unlike for other regions of the world, however, Western influence mattered enormously in postcommunist Europe. First, for providing an accessible cultural model to be followed by journalists and politicians alike; second, for the conditionality related to Council of Europe, NATO and EU accessions; third, through the permanent channels of communication between professions, contributing to the re-socialization of Easterners according to Western standards. This third influence is mostly exercised directly on the media, through training and assistance programs.

A mix of incentives and penalties, conditionality played the most direct and impressive role. President Francois Mitterand famously called Romania's President Ion Iliescu in the summer of 1990 when opposition newspapers were closed to argue for a softer handling of political opposition and the media. International influence tuned Ion Iliescu into an EU accession promoter and this conversion eventually changed the path of the country. No such call on record exists for Alexander Lukashenko, the Belarusian President, already elected four times (Mr. Iliescu stepped down after a third mandate). International conditionality seems to be powered only by strong incentives, such as a prospect of EU accession, which

converts captors into more or less convincing pro-Europeans. Most of the behavior described here under 'media capture' falls in the realm of 'informal practices'. Practices can complement formal regulations, but can also be competitive or substitutive in others, where formal freedom (as enshrined in the Constitution) is effectively sabotaged by capture or direct control.

The public has an important feedback, to the media via audience and circulation, to the government through elections or opinion polls. The question is why should governments care about media, if they can buy or bully it at their will? The model suggests two important answers to this question. The first is on the role of the international community. As EU accession progresses or non-EU countries ask for foreign assistance (such as grants from Millennium Corporation) the cost of repressing the media grows and becomes unaffordable for any government but an isolated one, which either does not care for the opinion of the international community or is able to buy a good one by resources (such as oil or gas). Capture develops as a substitute, but Freedom House Nations in Transit or IREX Sustainability Index developed precisely in order to be able to look more qualitatively at media freedom. The second explanation refers to the direct feedback of the public to the government presented in the model. In electoral democracies or in times when revolutions occur as 'waves'

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[9] See Mungiu-Pippidi, A. (2004). 'State into Public: the Failed Reform of State TV in East Central Europe', Shorenstein Center on Press and Politics, Harvard University, Working paper 2000#6, http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/presspol/publications/pdfs/alina.PDF

defying the media can only be afforded by popular governments. Some governments, such as Putin's or Lukashenko's had enough resources to subsidy household energy and come up with a variety of perks for the public. These governments will not be brought down by the media, as they are genuinely popular. The largest share of the budget of the city of Rostov, in Southern Russian Federation, is used to cover utilities bills from private households: the majority of inhabitants are beneficiaries. A comparable city, Bucharest in Romania dedicates less than 3% to the same purpose, at a comparable purchasing parity power of the population. But most countries cannot afford such strategies, they do not have the natural resources. In those countries the voters' feedback is likely to work and the media can be very influential.

The three paths of the relations between media and government in Figure 1 thus amount to three government strategies: 1. direct control through repression 2. indirect control through capture 3. accommodation. The third strategy might be inspired by genuine concern on how to sell policy acts to the media or incorporate the views of public opinion into policy, as well as by rational calculations of how to 'look good' to the media.

Media Strikes Back

The overriding concern of the first years, both in Eastern Europe itself and the West, was on securing media freedom in postcommunist Europe and establishing it on a firm legal and economic basis. But even prior to setting up media as an autonomous actor – a process completed only partly in some countries - media had been at the center of political change in Eastern Europe, right from the very beginning. Starting with the 1989 Romanian Revolution, public television became not just a mouthpiece of government or the victim of abuse, but also a crucial actor. In 1989 Romania, public television extended what could have arguably been a manageable revolt in Bucharest only, into a national scale collapse of Communism, by broadcasting the news that Ceausescu had fled. One year later in Bulgaria, a shift in the attitude of journalists working in public television led directly to the fall of Communist PM Petr Mladenov, and opened the door to radical political change. Seen as the main reason why the Milosevic regime was still popular in rural areas, Serb national TV was bombed by NATO in 1998, on charges of … disinformation.

Two more recent examples illustrate how media can help prompt decisively a breakthrough for radical political change. The Ukrainian Orange revolution had its origins in the President of the country losing his

patience with a journalist. A tape alleging that the President was involved in the killing of investigative journalist Georgy Gongadze, recorded by a former presidential bodyguard was posted on the site of his newspaper, Ukrayinska Pravda, turning this small Internet publication into number one rated Ukrainian media website. This also made the support for the regime an 'immoral' option. During the electoral campaign the number of Internet users tripled in Ukraine, as official censorship pushed voters to Internet cafes in search of real news. Only three days before the first round of elections 40 journalists, representing five TV channels, publicly declared that they would not work under "temnyky." Later representatives of another 18 TV channels and media companies joined the petition. The breaking point was November 25, when the system of censorship and capture fell like a house of cards, in the words of a journalist[10]. On the day when official results were to be reported by the central election commission the sign interpreter Natalia Dmytruk ignored the text of the main presenter about the outcome of the election. Instead she gestured to her deaf viewers: "The official results by Central Election Committee are falsified. Do not trust them. Yushchenko is our president. I'm really sorry that I had to translate the lies before. I will not do this again. Not sure if I will see you then." Her statement triggered others as well.

Georgia's Rose Revolution was another bet won by donors who believed in the power of the media. The key actor was a provincial TV, Rustavi-2, founded in 1994 in the town of Rustavi, not far from Tbilisi. It was initially a tiny private local TV station. Its main founder, with help and advice from the U.S. media assistance Internews (USAID backed), built it into a professionally sound media company, both in economical and journalistic terms. In the space of mere two years Rustavi-2 moved into Tbilisi, survived two attempts of the regime to close it, was made stronger by the assassination of one of its journalists and became a national model where other stations and journalists looked for inspiration. Current President Michael Saakashvili, then the challenger, later said that '*Most of the students who came out on the streets were brought out by Rustavi* [11]*"*. Its role became crucial on elections' day, as it ran a scroll at the bottom of the screen 24 hours a day showing the official results compared to a credible NGO exit polling and parallel vote count."

The assembled evidence that democracy promotion of this kind can be more effective than embargos or military interventions, has by now persuaded the donor community and endowed it with a strong argument when facing policymakers[12]. In the ten years leading up to the Georgian revolution, the U.S. gov-

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[10] Based on Olena Prytula, *Journalism at the Heart of the Orange Revolution,* an address to Knight Fellowships Reunion and Conference, Stanford, California, July 9, 2005

[11] See David Anable 'The Role of Georgia's Media—and Western Aid—in the Rose Revolution'. Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy Working Paper Series 3:2006 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University

[12] Idem note 11.

ernment spent just over $154 million on democracy assistance projects in Georgia, most of it under the Freedom Support Act of 1992.[13] In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union as a whole, $350 million has been spent since 1991 specifically to develop independent media.[14] Some critical reservations were made that following the victory of opposition in electoral revolutions, media again did not show much autonomy, but instead became more partisan. This is in all likelihood true, and the concern is justified. Good media is autonomous media. Partisanship, however, is an indication that pluralism exists, and pluralism is superior to autocracy. There is another evolutionary cycle to go from pluralism to substantial democracy.

What about 'normal', non-revolutionary times, for instance during and after EU accession, does the media still matter? Seeing the public trust in media (television especially) and government the likelihood is that media has a good position. It enjoys far more public trust than the government does. Around their accession date in 2004, even EE governments with a good record on EU accession were facing major popularity problems; after accession, a period of political instability followed in Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary. Television has more than double the popularity of government in most countries, three or four times in some. Television is a strong actor, and TV owners a force to be reckoned with.

Table 2. Trust in media and the government

Country	Print press (%)	Radio (%)	Television (%)	Trust in national government (%)
Bulgaria	35	51	70	19
Czech Republic	59	67	65	25
Estonia	52	75	75	45
Hungary	27	42	44	31
Latvia	52	67	68	28
Lithuania	55	65	68	31
Poland	50	59	54	7
Romania	57	69	73	36
Slovakia	57	71	68	17
Slovenia	54	64	62	27
ECE-10 (average)	50	63	65	27
EU-15 (average)	46	63	53	30

Source: Eurobarometer – Public Opinion in the Acceding and Candidate Countries, February-March, 2004

Influence on policymaking is, of course, much harder to prove than influence on revolutions. The study of the media's direct effects on politics generally looks at how media might influence who makes political decisions through the selection of political personnel; how media affects political styles and procedures, therefore how it influences political actors behavior; how media might co-determine about what decisions are taken due to their agenda-setting role; and finally, how media might affect the actual content of political decisions, via their directional coverage or framing through bias or partisanship. *The role of the media in elevating issues to the systemic agenda and increasing their chances of receiving consideration on policy agendas is subject of considerable controversy nowadays, after being nearly orthodoxy in the seventies[15]*. In their influential overview of agenda-setting research, Dearing & Rogers state that *"The mass media often have a direct influence on the policy agenda-setting process"*[16]. Reviewing a large body of research, Walgrave and Nuytemans[17] found that the media's impact on agenda setting depends on place, issues, political agendas, media agendas, and time.

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[13] Office of the Coordinator of U.S. Assistance to Europe and Eurasia, U.S. Dept. of State.

[14] O'Connor, Eileen and David Hoffman, *International Herald Tribune*, "Media in Iraq: The Fallacy of psy-ops" December 16, 2005.

[15] See Cobb, R. and T. Elder (1971). "The politics of agenda-building: an alternative perspective for modern democratic theory." Journal of Politics **33**: 892-915. Also Kingdon, J. W. (1995). Agendas, alternatives and public policies. Boston: Little Brown.

[16] Dearing, J. W. and E. M. Rogers (1996). Communication concepts 6: Agenda-setting. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage: 74

[17] Walgrave, S & Michiel Nuytemns (2004) "Specifying the media's political agenda-setting power. Media, civil society, parliament and government in a small consociational democracy" (Belgium, 1991-2000) Paper presented at ECPR's Uppsala Workshop Session, April 2004

What does evidence from Eastern Europe tell us? In 2003-2004 I participated to the organization of a survey in the ten East European EU accession countries asking cabinet members on the role of media on policymaking. Ministers were asked to provide their subjective views on the amount of media influence during their tenure, specifically in reference to *topics of cabinet discussions, amount of time given to media in cabinet discussions, presentation of decisions and finally substance of cabinet decisions.* These questions should be judged together to get a complete picture of media's weight. If the media influence government topics and prompt discussion in the cabinet, this means it influences agenda setting. The third question on presentation or wrapping up of cabinet decisions is more ambiguous, referring both to the communication skills of the government as well as to the media's influence. The fourth question, on influence over substance of decisions, which should provide the clearest cut evidence of impact, depends strongly of awareness of politicians of being influenced and their readiness to admit this publicly. While politicians love to present themselves as oversensitive to media's policy warnings, they do not want to give the impression that they are ruled by the media.

The results of the survey suggests that media

Table 3. Media influence as acknowledged by cabinet ministers

Country	Topics	Time	Presentation	Substance	Specific newspaper/TV channel
Bulgaria	44	24	44	44	16/16
Czech Republic	10	10	43	5	10/0
Estonia	56	53	66	33	33/33
Hungary	40	35	43	45	10/10
Latvia	53	48	48	43	25/23
Lithuania	70	59	65	56	41/27
Poland	56	53	56	27	22/7
Romania	49	73	27	24	46/33
Slovakia	23	64	9	14	0/0
Slovenia	33	57	24	19	38/24
ECE	47	49	45	33	25/18

Source: Project database.

in East Central European countries influence both agenda-setting and substance of policy decisions. From our pooled sample of ministers, 47% acknowledge influence over topics, 49% over discussion time, and 33% over content of decisions. Variation is minimal across political ideology and type of cabinet, and is significant by country only. The great exception seems to be the Czech Republic, whose ministers steadily denied influence of media, to the extent that none of them named an influential TV program. The countries where ministers acknowledged that media influences the substance of decision to a greater extent are Bulgaria, Hungary and the Baltic states. Lithuanian ministers come on top with the greatest participation of the media to their agenda, and Romanian ministers seem to lose considerable time discussing in cabinet meetings what they have seen on TV the evening before.

Answers show some inconsistency of respondents. Slovak ministers allow discussing topics raised by media a lot in the cabinet, but claim their choice of topics and decisions are their own. This makes us suspect that ministers are reluctant to admit that they are influenced by public opinion as expressed through media. The Czech and Slovak ministers did not indicate any specific programs and newspapers as more influential than others, although it is hard to believe that those do not exist. In other countries, with Romania on top, ministers acknowledge the particular influence of some newspapers or TV programs. Some governments seem more professional in passing their message to the media, especially the Czech and the Baltic ones. Countries which do better on freedom of the press seem also to be more careful in dealing with the media, while a great difference between the time allocated to discussing media (73, 64 respectively) as in Romania and Slovakia and the relative carelessness towards communicating to media (24, 14 respectively) might be because other informal means of handling the media are preferred. The survey of East European ministers seems to confirm what Robert Dahl wrote in his classic *Who governs*?: 'The more

uncertain a politician is about the state of public opinion or the more firmly believes in the 'power of the press' the more reluctant he would be to throw down the gage to a newspaper publisher'[18]. *In other words, power of the media in normal times depends on the extent that decision makers believe in it,* and this might explain the wide variation of media effects studies, as this belief varies greatly across national media environments, and from one moment in time to another.

Conclusion

Research often ends up in more questions. Rather than asking ourselves if the media is influential[19], and if investment in freedom of the media by the international community can bear fruit – it clearly is, and it clearly does - I suggest we focus on the circumstances that empower the media. This means that a comparative politics research design across a broad interval of time, rather than generalizations from the cross-sectional study of one country might provide better answers as to what specific set of circumstances makes a politically influential media. I also suggest that informal aspects of media control and media behavior should not be neglected in favor of classic ones, and that corruption of the media is an underrated and understudied phenomenon.

Does the history end if a country reaches the relatively happy phase of accommodation, and we witness far less interaction between media and politics, as in liberal democracies? By and large, judging by the EE experience I would say it does, but actors in the field might not agree. The media in most of the countries discussed here differ sharply in style from the rest of continental Europe. The violent critical tone and the poignancy of the investigative journalists in Eastern Europe (as well as their inaccuracy) are hard to accept in some Western European countries, such as France or Switzerland, with their mild media, and are closer to the British press only from 'old Europe'. One would be tempted to say that such governments deserve the media that they get, and the other way around. It would be an easy way out, though. East European governments rule through exceptional times, when the constitutional and economic order is daily overhauled to push transition further towards what their citizens black-humouredly call 'the light at the end of the tunnel' . Politicians are often amateur policymakers trying to acquire some skill during office. Publishers and journalists often picture themselves as better at the job of government and give strong indications what policy decisions should be taken. Some may even get a position in the next government. Until

the process of consolidation of new professional elites make such shifts between professions the exception rather than the norm, governing in Eastern Europe would remain a sort of athletic game in which spectators are allowed to throw in various objects and even descend from the amphitheatre into the playing field, while the results of the game are established by their open vote. It would sound anarchical and unprofessional indeed if the mere word 'democracy' was not born precisely on such amphitheatres.

[18] Robert Dahl *Who Governs?* New Haven: Yale University Press 1974: 259

[19] See K. Novak, 'Effects no more?' in U. Carlsson (ed) Beyond Media Uses and Effects, Gothenburg University: Nordicom, 31-40