Media and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe: The promise of 1989 revisited

Eva Polonska-Kimunguyi

Eva Polonska is a lecturer in European Studies at Monash University. She has a PhD in Media and Communication from Melbourne University and MA in Journalism and Political Science from the University of Warsaw, Poland. Earlier she worked as a journalist for radio and national television in Poland.

Abstract

Following the collapse of communism in 1989, Central and Eastern European countries entered a new decade with plans to fully redesign their media systems. The undertaking required introduction of freedom of expression, freedom of the media as well as introduction of market economy into the media system. They also needed to catch up with the technological evolution of media systems in more developed countries with which they had missed out on under communism. Another challenge was to integrate their media systems into the global market. The "fast-forwarded" transition of their media systems of the 1990s was immensely entangled with, provoked and determined by political, economic, legal and institutional transformations taking place in the region at the same time. This paper evaluates two decades of media's democratic transition in Central and Eastern Europe. It traces the political, institutional and legal developments in the region's media sectors back to 1989, the year of democratic revolutions. Starting from theoretical approaches to democratic transition and media's role in a democratic system, the paper looks at the introduction of free media in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, the three most advanced democracies in the Region (Freedom House, 2010). It concludes that today, twenty years after the change, media in all three states, regardless of the level of their democratic maturity, still face similar problems. Politicisation of media, frequent government attempts to control content, financing and ownership are still major setbacks in Central Europe today.

Introduction

Following the collapse of communism in 1989, Central and Eastern European countries entered a new decade with plans to fully redesign their media systems. This undertaking required the introduction of freedom of expression and freedom of the media, as well as the introduction of a market economy in the media system. There was also a need to "catch up" with the technological evolution of media systems in more developed countries, which they had not advanced under communism. Another challenge was to integrate their media systems into the global market. The task included the development of a response to international requirements under the United Nations Charter of Human Rights, World Trade Organization's (WTO) rules on free trade, and international regulations on intellectual property, to name but a few. Those states that applied for membership in the European Union (EU) in the early 1990s were also facing the challenge of complying with the *acquis communitaire*, the EU's vast body of law. The accelerated transition that these countries' media systems underwent in the 1990s was provoked and determined by, not to mention entangled in, concurrent political,

economic, legal and institutional transformations taking place in the region (Ociepka, 2001).

As the second decade of transition draws to a close, a new report prepared in Brussels by the Open Society Institute (European broadcasters face political "counter-reformation", 2009) warns that broadcasting across Europe, particularly in the East (but also in Italy), is undergoing a "counter-reformation"—a backsliding towards overt political control present in the immediate post-Cold War period, when leaders relaxed their grip on radio and television. Many public broadcasters, the report says, are heading into the economic crisis severely under-funded and, thus, are unable to meet their public service requirements. Political elites are returning, like in the early period of their democracy-building process, to appointing their own supporters to key positions, convinced that no sanctions from the European Union await them for doing so. "Professionals are being replaced by loyal mediocrities", the document says, adding that politicisation and the lack of funds are undermining quality cultural content and critical journalism:

> Local realities . . . are disappearing again; lost in the bland excesses of reality television formats; lost in the sickly sweet programmes that distract; lost in the news that never investigates and never takes a stand; lost in the routine political control by self-interested cliques. (European broadcasters face political "counter-reformation", 2009)

This paper evaluates two decades of the media's democratic transition in Central and Eastern Europe that started in 1989. Drawing on theoretical approaches to stages of democratic transition and the media's role in the democratic system, it looks at the process of the introduction of free media in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, these being the three most advanced democracies in the region (Freedom House, 2009). It concludes that all three of them, regardless of the level of their democratic maturity, still face similar problems in their respective media sectors. The region is still contending with the issues of politicisation of the media and frequent government attempts to control content, while financing and ownership controversies continue to give cause for concern.

Transition to democracy

"Transition to democracy" is a complex term that may encompass a variety of problems. It is characterised by institutional fluctuations and uncertainties, in which confrontation of interests, programs and strategies of different political actors occur (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2006). Competition amongst numerous players to occupy the emerging positions within the newly developing political stage is fierce. Brzezinski, by looking at the major political, economic, and legal changes, breaks the transition to democracy into three stages: the "breakthrough", "change takes hold", and "emergence of a stable democratic system" (Brzezinski, 1994).

"Breakthrough" is the moment when the *ancien régime* still holds power, but demonstrates its willingness to change. Signaling often occurs through an "opening" in the regime's previously controlled political, economic, and/or social arenas (Rozumilowicz, 2002). This may include a willingness to accept open criticism, recognition of opposition groups and a readiness to talk to them, or the internal fragmentation of the ruling party. Formal or informal devolution of power to the forces of opposition takes place. The crucial factor that determines the nature and pace of future transition to democracy is the type of regime in place in the state, for the way the

regime holds and loses power, as well as the conditions in which it leaves its institutional and legal order behind cast a long shadow (Lowenthall, 1986; Linz & Stepan, 1996). Bunce (1997) maintains that a country's unique historical situation has as much, or even more, to do with its chances for a successful transition to democracy than the general political or institutional choices made. "Breakthrough" may not necessarily result in the next stage of transition, but leaves the door open for reforms. Once the government agrees to some measure of power-sharing, the transition is on its way.

"Change takes hold" is the stage of systematic change within the formerly authoritarian regime. While the previous regime may still hold political power, the transition culminates in the final destruction of the old system and the establishment of new institutional and regulatory structures. The military is removed from the function of governing and is placed under civilian control. When political parties are formed, fairly contested elections are held and new political institutions are established with the drafting of a new constitution (Brzezinski, 1994; Linz & Stepan, 1996, Rozumilowicz, 2002). Policy-making and implementation take centre stage. Policy initiatives are codified or set via precedent. The mixture of the two systems may result in what Attila Àgh calls "creative chaos" (1998). As the newly created legislative framework and institutions have been put in place, they need to be fine-tuned for the system to become a consolidated democracy. When the ideas of democracy are accepted and adhered to and the state has functioned in this manner for a period of time, "stable democracy" has emerged. Thus, consensus on form, content and the application of norms has been achieved (McConnell & Becker, 2002; Linz, Stepan & Gunther, 1995).

Democracy, the "point of arrival" of a democratic transition, is not a single set of blueprints, however, and no two democratic regimes look entirely alike. Literature on the subject struggles to provide a concise definition. Scholars generally agree that a *consolidated* or *stable* democracy is a regime that complies closely, although not necessarily fully, with certain criteria. A democratic state for Linz (1975) allows for:

> the free formulation of political references, through the use of basic freedoms of association, information, and communication, for the purpose of free competition between leaders to validate at regular intervals by non-violent means their claim to rule . . . without excluding any effective political office from that competition or prohibiting any members of the political community from expressing their preference.

Rozumilowicz (2002) looked at twelve definitions of democracy and identified two central common features: firstly, competition among political actors, providing legitimate electoral choice and holding elected officials accountable; and secondly, citizen participation to ensure proper constituent representation. Common amongst scholars, Rozumilowicz found, is also the belief that freedom of expression, freedom of the press and the freedom to organise all help to create a healthy political culture and more desirable political outcomes.

Although the above list of features of a democratic system is not exhaustive, it would strongly indicate that a key element of a democracy is the ability of political elites to communicate in the public sphere, thereby allowing them to gain legitimacy from civil society (McConnell & Becker, 2002). Granting citizens full rights to participate in public life, the right to free speech, information, association, and the right to choose their political representatives, is ultimately what makes a regime democratic. How then do elites and the public engage in this communication process? In modern democracies it is

through free media that this exchange of ideas and the establishment of norms can take place, with media watching over how power is used or abused (Habermas, 1989).

The media in democratic transition

Following from the earlier conceptualisation of a democratic society and the stages of political transformation, scholars have also outlined the major stages of media transition.

Pre-transition stage is the phase when the old regime is still in place but the groundwork for subsequent change is gradually being undertaken. During this stage, constrains upon the media become more relaxed as the regime signals a greater willingness to tolerate criticism and alternative views. This liberalisation of the media has been the principal form of deregulation in authoritarian regimes, and has played a role in the process of political change, as the diversity of political messages that the media carry serve to undermine the legitimacy of non-democratic regimes (Gunther & Mughan, 2000). In some authoritarian regimes, the media may exercise a degree of autonomy. In Franco's Spain, for example, the media were relatively free to report on political matters in other Western European states (Gunther, Montero & Wert, 2000). Although under state ownership, the media were allowed to carry stories on foreign views and opinions and on alternatives to the authoritarian-state forms of government. This had the effect, ultimately, of contributing to the de-legitimisation of Franco's regime and instilling Spanish society with democratic values (Bennett, 1998).

This was not the case in totalitarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. As O'Neil (1997) argues, the media were used as a "transmission belt" and their role was reduced to transmitting the message from the Communist Party to the public, to control the content and presentation of information and to suppress alternative views. Despite the many differences between totalitarian and authoritarian systems, there are common elements: strict censorship, repression of freedom for journalists, limited or refused access to information and to its alternative sources. Bennett (1998) outlines two important roles that media play in the pre-transition stage: "witness role of the media and the reifying or conforming role". The witness role is the process of making public the transformations taking place in society, as the old regime starts to lose its monopoly on power. The reifying role of the media is to confirm and legitimate the changes by providing a variety of images and information that coincide with one another, which in effect makes the change seem "real". *Glasnost* and *perestroika*, introduced in the Soviet Union in mid-1980s, may not have caused the fall of Communist totalitarianism in Central and Eastern Europe directly, but it did spur on forces already at work by promoting active opposition to the communist system (Paletz, 1995).

Although the literature distinguishes two phases in the *Transition stage* (primary and secondary), it diverges radically as to during which phase the collapse of the old forces occurs (McConnell & Becker, 2002; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2006; Rozumilowicz, 2002). Therefore, under the broad term of *Transition stage,* this article examines the nature of media transformation into a democratic system. The *Transition stage* merges Brzezinski's (1994) political "breakthrough", with "change takes hold" stage. It is a period of change that initially occurs under the authoritarian regime, when statutes on access to information, ownership and defamation are passed and the culture of censorship is disrupted. As Bennett (1998) argues, when the historical moment emerges and the old regime finally falls apart, the forces that help bring about its

downfall may not always be prepared to work towards democratic consolidation. Thus, this phase is characterised by a high level of political instability—Attila Àgh's (1998) "creative chaos" reigns—and the situation may look like a political free-for-all, or even a power grab. Both old and new elites want to secure access to the media and have them on their side as allies to "gain strength of voice and therefore support and legitimacy" (McConnell & Becker, 2002, p. 10).

The most important aspect of media transformation is gaining freedom from state control—from acting as a supplement to or an extension of the ruling party, and becoming a separate, autonomous actor on the political stage. This process called by Jakubowicz "autonomization" of media (1995a, p. 74), takes place on several levels. At the *political* level, the focus of this paper, the media attain independence due to the breakdown within the totalitarian or authoritarian ruling elite. *Economic* "autonomization" occurs when the media terminate their economic dependence on the authorities and become dependent on their audiences and readers, which then marks the transformation at a *social* level. *Technological* transition sees the media adopting new technologies and, finally, at the *professional* level, journalists and editors start separating facts from commentaries and aim at presenting impartial information. All these levels are entangled and dependent on one another.

During the *Transition stage*, politicians and journalists undergo professional training and start functioning in the new institutional and legal order. Journalists receive guidance on responsible and investigative journalism. Grievances and conflicts that the earlier regime suppressed now surface. Audiences with no previous exposure to such an abundance of voices and political views may find themselves lost in the breadth of the political spectrum. The situation is very delicate and without a clear media policy, as Bennett argues (1998), a free press may do more harm than good to the emerging democracy. Bennett continues that in this environment media are called upon to educate the public, promote social and political cooperation, and present competing political messages in a fair manner. As Gunther, Montero and Wert (2000) discovered in the Spanish case, the change began to take hold, media helped to advance the re-socialisation of the citizens to democratic processes by providing information on basic democratic values and acknowledgement of the new regime, thus serving as the primary channel for the new political arrangement. As the media normalised tolerance for differing political views, the public became accustomed to democracy, which in turn became an attractive alternative to authoritarianism.

In the *Late* or *Mature stage*—the final stage of media reform—legal and institutional arrangements are resolved. Training opportunities for politicians and journalists are well established and both sides respect the rules of free communication. Support for open communication goes beyond media professionals and politicians, and is incorporated into primary and secondary schooling. Media freedom and independence become regular features of the democratic system.

The media in democracy

Having arrived at democracy and achieved independence from government, however, one must ask what the new freedoms that media now have entail. According to UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Communication and Information, Abdul Waheed Khan:

> Vibrant democracy needs independent and pluralistic media. Here, the word *independent* refers to independence from governmental, political or economic control, or from control of

> materials and infrastructure essential for the production and dissemination of media products and programmes.
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> By pluralistic media, we mean the end of monopolies of any kind and the existence of the greatest possible number of newspapers, periodicals and broadcasting stations reflecting the widest possible range of opinions within a community. (UNESCO, 2005, emphasis in the original text)

Media freedom and independence of the media are multifaceted concepts and there is limited agreement among analysts about how they should be characterised. For some they are components of, rather than conceptually distinct from, democracy (McConnell & Becker, 2002). For most, the democratisation process in the media sector relates to freedom of speech and information, media pluralism, access to media by minorities and the independence of the media. Rozumilowicz (2002) explores the concept of media independence in great detail. To her, it is the outcome of a process of media reform, which means that there must be a diffusion of control and access supported by a nation's legal, institutional, economic and socio-cultural systems. A free and independent media must exist "within a structure which is effectively de-monopolized of the control of any concentrated social groups or forces and in which access is both equally and effectively guaranteed" (Rozumilowicz, 2002, p. 14). A media structure that is free of interference from government, business, or dominant social groups is, according to Rozumilowicz, "better able to maintain and support the competitive and participative elements that define the concept of democracy and the related process of democratization" but, as she argues, there is a limit to media freedoms:

> Free and independent media are not a good in themselves, but only in as much as they support other, more intrinsic values and goals (that is democracy, a particular economic structure, greater cultural understanding, general human development and so on). In a certain sense, free and independent media buttress these greater societal objectives and are, therefore, subordinate to them. (2002, p. 12)

The ideal media environment in consolidated democracy consists of two sectors, a market- and non-market-led sector. Within the market-led or private sector, programmers are free to provide content of their choice, advertisers can present their goods to target audiences, and audiences are informed and entertained to the extent that the market allows. The non-market or public service sector provides balance and ensures that the needs of minorities are also met. It creates a forum in which a common discourse emerges and which allows people to function within a society (McConnell & Becker, 2002, p. 4). For both sectors to co-exist there must be legal and institutional as well as socio-cultural support in place. For example, the market sector must be protected from government interference, and audiences against media abuse. Legal support must produce defamation laws, anti-trust legislation, laws limiting ownership concentration, licensing laws, rules on harmful content and advertising must be created. Citizens must be guaranteed the right to information, and various voices in society must be guaranteed freedom of expression and the right to communicate. The socio-cultural base for a free media must include training for journalists and politicians on the functioning of a free press and open society, as well as a general education system that encourages values of tolerance within society.

Democratising the Eastern European media: mission accomplished?

Today, there is no general consensus when exactly the "new order" came into existence in the field of media in Central and Eastern Europe. It could be that *Glasnost,* or political

openness, initiated by Gorbachev in the mid-1980s, paved the way to directing more pointed criticism of the ruling Communist Party in the USSR and ultimately in the entire Eastern Bloc. It could also be the year 1981, when the communist Radiokomitet[1] in Poland started working on new legislation for radio and television. Some sources believe that it was 1989, the year of "velvet revolutions" that swept across the region and shook the Soviet regime until it culminated in its collapse two years later (KRRiT, 2004). Starting from a position of state monopoly of the media and all that this entailed (full financial control, allocation of frequencies, pre-publication censorship of content and a ban on opposition media), the Central and Eastern European states began to dismantle their control of their media systems in the 1980s. Mass communication, which under communism was part of a larger project seeking imposition of thought control and assimilation of the totality of culture (Goldfarb, 1989), was now to be set free. Full subordination of the media industry to the ruling party resulted in the direct dependence of journalists upon the authorities. Centralised ownership and minimal or a total absence of media regulation gave the state full political and managerial control over the news and programming. It had the effect of making the post-1989 restructuring of the media system extremely difficult.

Relaxation under *glasnost* resulted in the Communist Party losing its absolute grip on the media. Before long, and much to the embarrassment of the authorities, the media began to expose severe social and economic problems that the communist governments had long denied and actively concealed.[2] Very positive media portrayals of the regime and its achievements were being rapidly dismantled and replaced with negative views of the Soviet bloc (Acton, 1995).

The transformation of the media sectors set off in different directions and at different rhythms, as the newly-created democracies consolidated their positions. Twenty years after 1989, assessing democratic reforms in the region remains controversial. Progress in the so called "triple transition" of political, economic and social spheres (Offe, 1991) has been very varied across the different states. Although the Central and Eastern European states are moving upwards on the list of nations in transition (Freedom House, 2009), their media systems still have a long way forward. Politicisation of the media and information systems is explicitly felt through government influence over national broadcasting councils and interference in the public service broadcasting sector.

Politicisation of national broadcasting councils

Initially, politicisation of mass media in Central and Eastern Europe was the result of the aspirations of political elites and, as such, constituted the legacy of the communist regimes (Lánczi & O'Neil, 1997, p. 83). More recently, scholars have argued, it has become a deliberate strategy of political parties and aims at "colonisation" of public administration institutions (Herbut, 2002, p. 110). As such, it is part and parcel of the

[1] "Radiokomitet", or "Radio and Television Committee" was a government body responsible for management and control of all state owned broadcasters between 1951 and 1993, later replaced by the National Broadcasting Council.

[2] Problems receiving increased attention included poor living conditions, alcoholism, pollution, obsolete and inefficient infrastructure, large-scale corruption, all of which the official media had ignored. Media also exposed crimes committed the Soviet regime under Stalin, such as the gulags and the treaty that Stalin had signed with Hitler during the World War II, which had been omitted from history books.

wider political process. The appointment of "trusties" was employed by ruling parties to control public institutions, local governments and other bodies of public administration. Through installing their own "trusted" people in key posts, it is easier for political parties to make use of all the resources of the state to promote their own interests, party leaders and programs.

Politicisation of the media is present in different forms in different countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and is dependent on the degree of democratisation. It affects, first of all, national broadcasting councils in the region, which regulate the market and monitor the enforcement of rules. Council members are appointed by state authorities, typically by parliamentary committees or by government or presidential commission. Politically "colonised" public institutions proceed to make political choices and co-opt supporters of their party to the council. They in turn nominate party colleagues to supervisory boards that then choose members for boards of directors of public service radio and television. One step further down the ladder of control, directors select their party affiliates to become program managers and directors who, in the end, decide on the content and political orientation of any particular television or radio station.

Poland is a good example of this process. Members of the Polish National Broadcasting Council (KRRiT), a body originally envisaged as an independent organisation to supervise media and media legislation, are often appointed as a result of political trade-offs behind closed doors. The council makes sure that public service radio and television are controlled by politically dependable people who can indirectly control the information content of broadcast material. Additionally, political decisions have a direct bearing on the financial situation of KRRiT. As Karol Jakubowicz, one of the council's members explains, consecutive parliaments have consistently cut the council's finances, making it difficult to fulfil its role and making it beholden to the largesse of the politicians who hold the purse strings (Karol Jakubowicz, Krajowa Rada Radiofonii i Telewizji (KRRiT), National Broadcasting Council of Poland, Warsaw, personal communication). Before the 2005 elections, the KRRiT, was composed almost entirely of left-wing nominees. The Radio and Television Act (2005), was intended to put an end to political influence on the National Broadcasting Council but the council was politicised again, this time by the right-wing presidential party and its allies. With the appointment of members to the broadcasting council in the gift of each new government, the council remains weak and exposed to political influences.

Turning to the Czech Republic, a long-delayed process of licensing digital television prompted much political wrangling over licence regulation, allegations of attempts by politicians to increase their control of content, and lawsuits filed by failed licence bidders. In 2000 and 2001, Czech journalists organised widespread strikes demanding the de-politicisation of public administration offices, including the Council for Czech Television, the governing body appointed by the Czech Parliament. As a result of the strikes, the Council was dismissed (Kaca, 2001).

The Hungarian National Television and Radio Board (ORTT), a regulatory body with a board comprised of party delegates, monitors the programs of public and commercial broadcasters and grants licences and broadcasting frequencies. In 2008, the election of former privacy ombudsman László Majtényi as ORTT chairman was hailed as a positive development, given Majtényi's reputation for political independence and principled interpretation of the relevant legal framework. In November 2008, however, the Parliament was presented with a controversial draft media law that indicated renewed

desire among political elites to increase their influence over the media. Drafted behind closed doors, reportedly by representatives of the governing Socialists and the opposition Fidesz, the bill proposed a new body, the National Media Authority, to replace the Hungarian National Television and Radio Board. The bill would also have empowered the authority, on presentation of a court order, to conduct police searches at media outlets. The bill would have strengthened direct political control over public service broadcasters through a separate oversight body, the Public Service Financing Council, with members directly designated by parliamentary parties. After stinging and sustained criticism from all corners of the political scene, the draft was eventually withdrawn. In December, an amendment to the Law on the Media was passed that would have enabled the Hungarian National Television and Radio Board to extend the licenses for national television and radio channels without a formal application being made. Many, including new ORTT head László Majtényi, criticised the decision as being tailored to the needs of two of Hungary's 245 commercial radio stations, Sláger Rádió and Danubius. President Sólyom declined to sign the amendment and instead sent it to the Constitutional Court for review. His major concern was that the law contravened the court's practice on freedom of information issues, as well as the constitutional right to equal treatment before the law.

Politicisation of public service broadcasting

Public service broadcasting is, next to national broadcasting councils, another major target of the "colonisation" process. Public service radio and television are publicly listed companies. In most Central and European countries, the state holds 100 per cent of the broadcasters' shares, making it the *de facto* owner. In the case of the private sector media, it is the owners who decide on employment at top positions. Although they may not be willing to align themselves with certain political views or parties in order to cater to audiences from all sides of political spectrum, their fortunes, as Dobek-Ostrowska (2006) notes, are nonetheless dependent on public institutions that regulate the industry. It is their lot to navigate those choppy waters between a politicised public administration and their audiences.

In Poland, the relationship between public service television (TVP) and politicians is very close. TVP participates overtly in politics by supporting politicians it favours and on the flip side, politicians also manipulate TVP to their own ends. This political engagement in the activities of TVP has both a political and an economic impact on the broadcaster's performance. As Boguslaw Chrabota, Program Manager from commercial television Polsat explains, "TVP is so much engaged in the happening of politics in Poland that it has become an essential organ for the politicians. Because they need it, they protect it from attempts to reduce its funding. In the long run then, it makes our media market handicapped" (Bogusław Chrabota, Programming Manager, Telewizja Polsat (Polsat TV), private broadcaster, Warsaw, personal communication). Although Freedom House assesses the Polish government as one that "refrains from applying pressure to the media" (Krajewski, 2009, p. 401), the bold plans to depoliticise public service media through legislation have come to naught, as the President vetoed the Broadcasting Bill. As a consequence, key posts in state-run broadcast media are still held by open supporters of the previous left-wing government. Although public service

television is the most common target of government intervention in Poland, political influence also affects commercial broadcasters.[3]

In the Czech Republic, although there are constitutional guarantees of press freedom and no major media are state-owned, behind-the-scenes political and financial interference are still present (Druker, 2009). The Czech public service television's financial difficulties have made it particularly vulnerable to political and business interests. The Chamber of Deputies, which appoints Czech TV's supervisory board and controls licence fee revenue, exercises influence over the public service broadcaster through financial control. Beginning in 2008, Czech TV was banned from running advertising except during key cultural or sporting events, to the multimillion-dollar benefit of the commercial stations. It has long been assumed that the private stations' powerful lobbying had had an excessive influence on parliamentary deputies, resulting in laws favouring commercial stations over public broadcasters. In the summer of 2008, the Czech Radio Board wound up Radio Wave, which had catered to a younger audience. The Deputies' arguments against the station indicated an overall lack of tolerance for alternative music and lifestyles. Earlier in 2000 and 2001, journalists and personnel of public service television organised protests against party "nepotism" that was perceived to be installing its members and supporters in major institutions of public administration, resulting in a *de facto* party control over the public service broadcaster. With journalists occupying the newsroom of the Czech TV and around 100,000 people demonstrating on the streets of Prague, the strike quickly moved to the international arena, with the International Federation of Journalists calling on the European Union to step in and solve the problem. After three weeks of strikes and protests, Jiří Hodač, the new Director General whose appointment triggered the turmoil at the station resigned citing ill health.[4]

The Hungarian media have been ranked just behind the Polish and Czech media industry with regards to the degree of their independence (Kovacs & Molnar, 2009). The generally free and diverse market still suffers from occasional political interference. Political interference is, however, practised in less obvious and more surreptitious ways than in the early 1990s. The public service broadcasters continue to grapple with a notorious lack of funding and are most exposed to political pressures. Since 1993, when the directors of public service radio and television resigned after a serious ideological dispute with Prime Minister Joseph Antal, and into 2000s, management practices still bore a greater resemblance to the state media model than to a public service one. While the Media Act (1996) introduced commercial broadcasting and broke up the state-controlled broadcasting monopoly, it has been criticised for not creating the proper legislative and financial framework for developing genuine public service broadcasters (Ociepka, 2003, p. 238). At the end of Chairman Zoltán Rudi's mandate in March 2008, the board of the public broadcaster failed to agree on a new appointee. Haggling among

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[3] In 2007, one of the leading news media personalities was fired from commercial television Polsat in the atmosphere of growing political pressure that the ruling Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc Party (PiS) and the Prime Minister himself exerted on businesspeople, including Zygmunt Solorz, the owner of Polsat TV. The journalist openly criticised government policies in his popular program and was widely believed to be the price that the owner of Polsat TV had to pay to maintain his broadcasting and other businesses without further "influence" from the government.

[4] Hodač was alleged to have close ties with the right-wing Civic Democratic Party and its leader, Václav Klaus, the former prime minister, was widely tipped at the time as a possible successor to Václav Havel for the presidency. Hodač has always denied the allegation.

the board's fourteen party delegates led to a year-long deadlock and once again drew attention to the dysfunctional management of public broadcasting in Hungary. Although more recently "some signs point to increasing stability and sensible reforms in programming presented on public TV and radio" (Kovacs & Molnar, 2009, p. 237), the squabble over the chairman of public service television points to the fact that politicisation of the publicly-owned media in Hungary is far from over.

Conclusion

After rejecting communism in 1989, most Central and Eastern Europe states enthusiastically embarked on democratic and neo-liberal reforms. It has been an enormous challenge and taken a huge collective effort to transform the system in its entirety: to re-design its economy, politics, legal and institutional order. The Copenhagen criteria that the European Union prepared for future candidate states in 1993 demanded the introduction of democracy as a condition of entry, and confirmed a list of principles that Central and Eastern European states had scheduled for themselves. Twenty years later, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary are considered to have gone farthest on the road to democratisation, with mature, consolidated democracies. Their media systems have been transformed into dual systems and constitutional guarantees of freedoms are in place.

However, the maturity of civil society and media professionals, both of which are important factors in this democratic transformation, has not yet been fully accomplished. In democracy, civil society, and particularly the media professionals, are expected to accept and adhere to the rules of the system. In Central and Eastern Europe this is not yet the case. Well into the second decade of transformations, there is a deficit of democratic values in the region, an underdeveloped civil society, notable deficiencies in the public sphere and, as a consequence, a low-level democracy. This, in turn, has consequences for relationships between political actors and the media. Despite the formal independence from political power and constitutional guarantees for the freedom of information and expression, it is still difficult to talk about media independence (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2006, p. 29). Media "autonomization" is, thus, still in the making and suffers from frequent attempts by political elites to control the media, their finance, regulation and content. Aidan White, General-Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, believes that there is an "utter crisis in the media" (European broadcasters face political "counter-reformation", 2009). He calls on the European Union to place a democratic media sector at the heart of the European agenda that would not be listed exclusively for future members of the European Union but guarded in the existing members. Central European states, once in the European Union and perhaps exhausted by the rapid reforms and less-than-optimal outcomes, seem to have abandoned their pledge to uphold the values of democracy. Could the European Union once again roll up its sleeves and assist with promoting democracy, the way it did in the region fifteen years ago? And what new incentive could be offered for the Eastern and Central European states themselves to help them to step back onto the path towards democracy?

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