

## Freedom of the press and the ambivalence of the privatised mass media in south-eastern Europe

The ruthless unity in the culture industry is evidence of what will happen in politics. Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines in different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organising and labelling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape; distinctions are emphasised and extended. The public is catered for with a hierarchical range of mass-produced products of varying quality, thus advancing the rule of complete quantification. Everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously determined and indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type. Consumers appear as statistics on research organisation charts and are divided by income groups into red, green and blue areas; the technique is that used for any type of propaganda. (Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1947) *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Amsterdam.)

This pessimistic view stands in contrast to more optimistic voices which argue that the globalisation (and europeanisation) of western values, institutions and instruments lead mankind to greater chances and wealth. In reference to the so-called culture industry and capitalist exchange society in the age of totalitarism, Horkheimer and Adorno, two Jewish emigrant intellectuals from Germany, wrote the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in exile in California. Their main thesis – the birth of a new totalitarism inspired by the logic of the capitalist culture industry – is not new but it is topical. In accordance with critical media analysts (Zizek, Chomsky, Flusser and others), the globalisation of media products and the appearance of ‘flexible capitalism’ (Richard Sennett) and its cultural revolution – one could say the products of the culture industry – influence the existence of the ‘lonely crowd’ in modern societies. The difference between the globalisation of the media and the globalisation of other products (commodities) can be seen in the special character of the media in democratic societies. Freedom of speech in an ‘informational society’ (Manuel Castells) requires a free media and well-educated journalists.

So, media globalisation is a challenge for democracy when the big firms among global media enterprises act without any serious opposition and when they dominate the market for opinion.<sup>1</sup> One could say that a well-developed civil society should be resistant to manipulation and commercialisation. Modern democracy and so-called civil society are mutually dependent. Both – democratic institutions and different actors in civil society – belong to the (constitutional) project of the European Union. The question is whether europeanisation becomes:

1 Christiane Leidinger (2003) *Medien, Herrschaft, Globalisierung. Folgenabschätzung zu Medieninhalten im Zuge transnationaler Konzentrationsprozesse (Media, Power, Globalisation. Transnational Concentration Processes and Consequences for Media Content)* Münster: p. 15.

A continuing process that will eventually lead to a full European government or whether centralisation will be unable to overcome persisting national identities and/or increasing interest in localism...<sup>2</sup>

Not media globalisation but media europeanisation was discussed at a conference organised by the conservative German Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation and the Moldova Institute Leipzig, a new academic institution which focuses on history, politics and social change in Moldova.<sup>3</sup> The topics were the europeanisation of media legislation, the media as an economic factor, the media market and the ethics of journalism, exemplified by developments and trends in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova.

The latter belongs – unfortunately – to the poorest and most marginalised countries in Europe. Ruled by a communist president, confronted with the separatism of Transnistria and without a realistic perspective on EU membership, the debates on media policy, media enterprises and independent media seemed to be comparable with the birth pangs of the former communist countries in central eastern Europe. Liliana Vitu (Chi<sup>u</sup>inu) described the European discourse and types of new institutional structures. Several opinion polls confirm that the media in Moldova enjoys a rather high degree of public trust. About 60% of citizens believe in the media to at least ‘a certain’ extent, ranking it ahead of all other institutions (apart from the church) in terms of trustworthiness.

However, since the Communist Party came to power in 2001,

Mrs. Vitu pointed out,

international media experts noted a decline in media freedoms in Moldova. Compared with the first post-independence decade – when newly emerging private media outlets played a noteworthy role in shaping public discourse – Moldova has in recent years seen relative media pluralism give way to a more restricted media landscape, featuring attacks on investigative journalists, the closure of inconvenient media outlets and outright bias on the part of government-controlled media outlets. Even though the Moldovan authorities agreed to strengthen media freedoms in the European Union-Moldova Action Plan signed in 2005, they are still far from tackling this issue with any degree of seriousness. Weakened by years of political and economic pressure, the media in Moldova are therefore not in a position to serve the public interest by pushing for democratic reforms or better government policies.

Europeanisation seems to be verbal pluralism by the official authorities; private structures in the media sector are difficult to create while the communist-controlled state media sector tries to dominate the scene. But, the reality is more complex. Marias Dumbrava’s contribution on the development of the media market examined the picture concerning politics in television news. She focused on state TV and two private television groups, NIT and ProTV. One is influenced by Russian investors and has a Russian view; the other private television group is part of a Romanian enter-

2 See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Europeanisation>, 13 December 2007.

3 The conference *Media Policy and the Europeanisation of Media Policy in South-East Europe* was held between 11-12 October in Bucure<sup>u</sup>ti.

prise. This is a paradox situation – in this way, political news are caught by political interests and politicised in a sense which is contradictory to critical journalism.

In comparison to Moldova, the media situation in Bulgaria and Romania differs. Both countries have gained EU membership. Both countries are well-integrated, although corruption and nepotism are still challenging the political system and the political parties. Moldova is still in danger of losing its sovereignty – remember the Russian influence and the tendency to join with Romania – whereas Bulgaria and Romania are on the difficult path to becoming consolidated democracies. Moreover, both post communist states are unable or unwilling to guarantee a pluralist media landscape. In practice, Carmen Chirea-Ungureanu and Andra Seceleanu were able to show that some prominent Romanian politicians misuse the mass media in simulating transparency and critical faculties.

Simulating a transparent ethos for television necessarily reconfigures the boundaries between publicity and privacy. The more politicians attempt to use television as a means of establishing closeness to their constituents, the more they erase the boundaries between the public official and what they promote as his or her private persona. The exhibition of a private persona for public consumption invites the public to expect that elements of the private appropriately merge with a politician's public persona and hence are appropriate subjects for public discussion. Politicians have manipulated television imagery for so long that they have helped to create the very erasure of the public and private persona that now haunt them. They have been willing accomplices in the creation of a new political culture that sees the private aspects of a person's life as politically relevant, which collapses older boundaries between public and private. The current wave of media-propagated scandals in Romania is the price we are currently paying for the construction of a simulated transparency between governments and governed. President Traian Basescu, for example, won the presidential elections by consistently making voters feel that he personally cared about them. Indeed, one of the clichés most often used to describe President Basescu's personal style is his famous remark delivered in the 2004 campaign: "Live in a good way." Basescu has proven himself a master at pushing himself – his emotions, his desires, his empathy, his appetites, even his moments of personal pain – on the Romanian public.

This simulated transparency does not serve the underlying political values that motivate the metaphor of transparency. Instead, it obscures and obfuscates, frustrates accountability and hides important information in a mass of manufactured political realities. It is a form of transparency that is not transparent at all. All of the Romanian broadcast media, and most of the print media as well, are owned primarily by wealthy individuals. Direct ties to the biggest of big businesses are almost unbelievably extensive and – according to the authors – these can't help but seriously bias and compromise news coverage. Moreover, the media empires are, first and foremost, profit-making corporations that conduct themselves like other corporations when it comes to corrupting Romanian politics. That is, the parent corporations of many make so-called 'campaign contributions' and also act against the public interest in other ways. Big winners in the corruption game, they show no signs of serious interest in political reform.

Within this context, Ivo Indzhof (Sofia) described the ambivalent contribution of foreign media, their investments and the development of the post-communist media landscape in Bulgaria. Is the latter free and varied? The existence of media giants

such as News Corporation, Antenna Group and WAZ-Mediagroup in Bulgaria is controversial. On the one hand, there is a positive influence in terms of developing the Bulgarian media landscape; on the other, the concentration process in the media market is a major problem with several effects.

First of all, economic independence and the growth of the domestic media becomes suppressed. There is a tendency of a ‘manufacturing’ of media concentration. Furthermore, the audience is getting more information from fewer sources in comparison to the nineties, while popular entertainment, soaps and trash in the mass-media is justified by the argument that everybody wants to be entertained. According to Adorno and Horkheimer (see above), the power of the media- or culture industry, uniform information, ruthless competition to gain market domination and shareholder value thinking set against critical journalism are a reality. So, the culture-industrial media complex could be seen as a matter of classifying, organising and labelling consumers:

Something is provided for all so that none may escape; distinctions are emphasised and extended. The public is catered for with a hierarchical range of mass-produced products of varying quality, thus advancing the rule of complete quantification.

In line with Indzhov’s analysis, unrealistic public opinion forming is threatening the consolidation of democracy in Bulgaria and EU integration. The lack of serious domestic media alternatives is the result of investments by foreign media.<sup>4</sup> The decline in public TV and radio continues. Between state influence (financed by the state budget and controlled by state authorities) and market forces (advertising and shareholder value thinking), it seems to be impossible to establish independent public television standards. Furthermore, most newspapers are controlled by political parties or commercial enterprises who prefer soft entertainment and no investigative journalism.

To survive, smaller media groups imitate the soft entertainment concepts of large, mass-media enterprises. This leads to a decline in quality journalism. In these circumstances, media pluralism is absurd. There are more and more attempts to manipulate people’s opinion to ensure own media and business interests: to protect certain political and economic interests in a populist manner.

Indzhov’s Sofia colleague Orlin Spassov analysed the meaning of ‘Europeanisation’ and ‘Americanisation’ in terms of what this could mean for Bulgarian media providers. Indeed, especially for television, Europeanisation is not the only alternative:

One may say that, in applying the principle of cultural franchising, Americanisation is the stronger tendency. Global-scale American corporations are adapting very well to national media markets and are actively investing in human resources. No one at News Corporation’s branch in Bulgaria has ever said, or will ever say, that bTV is an American TV station. On the

4 See Silvia Huber (2006) *Media Markets in Central and Eastern Europe An Analysis of Media Ownership in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia* Bd. 1.

contrary, it is invariably pointed out that bTV is Bulgarian. And people have gradually come to see it precisely as such. In contrast, many European media pursue a local policy which encourages their lasting perception as foreign ones. The promotion of American news values often involves giving priority to personalisation, sensationalism and sentimentalism. European values, which have their origins in the Enlightenment and are traditionally associated with rationality and civic principles, are today in crisis. This can be seen both in the sphere of television and of the press: throughout our region, the main deficit is that of quality content.

In Spassov's opinion, the future of the European public sphere remains very problematic:

We still don't have a sufficiently powerful and unified European media policy that can offer an alternative to the tendencies I've described here. My personal forecast is that, until the emergence of significant trans-European broadcast and print media offering one and the same content in numerous European languages simultaneously, the European public sphere will remain a utopian project.

Tendencies of Americanisation still exist; and a real and serious European public sphere with common interests and themes could not yet be realised. Even the discussion about a European constitution in the 'old' member states were national discussions which, in a way, point out the advantages or disadvantages of Europeanisation, the European institutions and the consequences of national identities.

A European dimension for the mass-media in the Republic of Moldova and the roles and responsibilities in the process of Europeanising the public space were the themes of Nicolae Toderas (from Bucharest), who pointed out:

Since it doesn't benefit from a legislative framework proper to the Europeanisation process, the Moldavian mass-media might be considered as an appendix to the declarative desiderata of government institutions. Even though the mass-media tries, somehow really hard, to make the relationship between the political power and the mass-media more dynamic, the government area remains reticent, closed, non-transparent and hostile to all activities towards opening the public space. In this, we include also the case of the institutions from the market sphere that just have to support the democratisation of the fourth sector, the mass-media. Practically speaking, in the past few years, they have made use of the same elimination method of media competitors that are not wanted by the current political power. After the reformation, the legislative cadre remains preferential: some media institutions are advantaged, others are not; and others are even ostracised. At the same time, I observed a paradox as regards the Europeanisation of the mass-media legislation: not to the current political power, nor to some political groups from the opposition, is it convenient that mass-media institutions from Moldova become truly free and respectful of the standards of a truly European press. It is certain that a free press would erode essentially the electoral capital of some political parties.

In the view of Toderas, media institutions from Moldova cannot sufficiently occupy the process of the Europeanisation of the public space in Moldova. They have primarily the responsibility of interposing themselves in the processes of negotiations with government institutions. And they have to create their own lines corresponding to the European dimension of mass-media, helping them become active in the sense of the Europeanisation of the public space. Metaphorically speaking, media institu-

tions must also accept the role of promoters of European values and Europeanisation processes. Ultimately, he considers that:

The European dimension of the Moldavian mass-media legislation may be realised only if a critical border of actors belonging to this domain intensifies mobility and partnership activities with the Moldavian external space. This would mean the realisation of an important lobby campaign at a community and extra-community level. The solution to people's circulation would contribute to the breaking of the ideological, manipulative and obedience barriers and to the setting up of some irreversible Europeanisation processes through the approach of inter-human contact.

All in all, media europeanisation is a phrase. The long road to pluralism, a free press and 'good' information is threatened by the commercial interests of the culture media industry and by interventions from state actors seeking to preserve power. Bulgaria and Romania are still trying to consolidate their democratic institutions; Moldova is a semi-democracy with semi-free media structures and a low perspective on the EU. So-called civil society tends to be unconscious regarding the powerful and professional acting of media enterprises.

Meanwhile, no conference paper emphasises the critical reader. The latter is an orchid. We live in mass democracies with a critical potential, but it is very difficult to mobilise for freedom of speech and independent newspapers. Only in semi-communist states like Moldova have some civil society actors established a basis. In Bulgaria and Romania, civil society and the qualities of critical journalism seem to be a minority game in the *media monopoly* (Ben H. Bagdikian). In a few years, we will be able to see if the prophecy of a commercial totalitarism made by Horkheimer and Adorno has become a reality or not. That such trends still exist was one outcome of the conference.