

# THE DYNAMICS AND DETERMINANTS OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN DEMOCRATIZATION: HOW CULTURAL PARTICULARITIES ARE SHAPING MEDIA LIFE

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper makes several contributions to the arising debate about the quality and variations of democratization and media performance in Central and Eastern Europe. As its first objective it provides a critical interpretation of the trend entitled 'individuation of consumption,' recognizing serious risks and dangers that changing conditions and social developments, such as individualization of media choices and media use and thus of media fragmentation, impose on the functioning of democracy in Europe. It specifically looks at the CEE experience – at transitional societies that are often described as lacking a sound and solid social and ideological basis, with weak economies and a political culture characterized by elite polarization and clientelism – and makes a presumption that those countries seem to be highly susceptible to negative effects of social and cultural transformations. It combines two perspectives of analysis – institutional and cultural – and, by observing the particularities of contextual conditions in the selected countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), questions whether a perfect combination of contextual arrangements could be discovered to enlighten our knowledge about alternatives in democratization and media performance across the CEE.

**KEYWORDS:** individualization, consumerism, media fragmentation, political and social polarization, Central and Eastern Europe, Baltic States

## THE NEW MIND OF THE MEDIA – FROM NORMATIVE VISIONS TO MEDIACRACY

Modern-day media has indeed progressed into a societal organization of the utmost significance, power and domination. Contemporary media institutions propose much more than a mere setting of political agendas and scrutiny of the powerful. Instead of being geared to predominantly political structures where practical political decision-making is meant to take place (such as government offices, parliaments, or other political assemblies), political discourses tend to develop in highly fragmented, diversified and interactive feature-empowered media environments. Today's politics is hardly imaginable without its new features of spin, spectacle and amusement – all those features induced and maintained by the new populist logic provoked and expertly managed by the media. Additional to scholarly examinations, which move around these new qualities and delve into the subtleties of mediacracy and media rulings, another popular line of analysis encountered in political and media fields is the notion of 'crisis'.

Generally, the ideal for media performance in healthy democracies should be envisioned as being a source of objective information that is widely available to citizens and interest groups (Trappel and Meier, 2011; Trappel et al, 2011). Democratic media has a number of prescribed functions to follow. It should support free speech and it must act as a check (watchdog) on the activities of powerful institutions. Idealistic vision also foresees that democratically performing media should preserve a discursive space for the emergence of a rational debate. The media should indeed act as interests' mediators and social mobilizers. Even more, conferring to another classical vision, the media should act as a pillar together with other societal institutions such as education, healthcare or cultural structures and systems bringing consolidating and keeping nations together.

The daily life in the twenty-first century, however, is challenged with advances and effects that differ significantly from what was expected from these institutions – media included – only a few decades ago. As seen from various cases<sup>1</sup>, serious challenges, drawbacks and media's failures to adhere to ideals of classical professionalism and accountability requests are reported throughout Europe. Many media groups

<sup>1</sup> Scandals surrounding the global Murdoch empire, as well as other, more recent, cases reported in the UK about media's misbehaviours have heated discussions about crisis of classical visions of professionalism and normative standing points as absent in today's journalism, and media institution as removed from democratic ideals.

(especially newspapers) had to reconsider their business models. Likewise, they had to lay-off their experienced staff members, supplementing those with a cheaper and less qualified workforce.

While economic and technological reasons are often blamed for the most obvious drawbacks challenging media's democratic functions, changing contexts and media usage conditions signal much more

They challenge the basis of democracies in the region. As seen from Freedom House reports, media independence rankings and journalistic professionalism assessments have dropped in all countries across Europe. Especially severe changes took place in the media of various CEE and Southern European states greatly moved by the global economic crisis and where governments infused serious cuts in the public sector as well as implemented other restrictions in cultural policies, such as rising VAT on newspaper publishing and sales. In another group of CEE countries yet additional trends – metaphorically entitled as media 'de-globalization' – were registered (Stetka, 2012). Sensing serious financial difficulties, many international publishers terminated their operations in evolving CEE markets and were replaced by local business groups with unclear aspirations and interests, intensifying politization and oligarchization in the region.

Additionally, another challenge appears to be social changes initiated as a result of generational shifts and appearing novel news consumption fashions among various groups of the changing audience. For many young Europeans, for example, the Internet has become the principal and only news and information resource they repeatedly use. Obviously, changing media access routines have also distorted how these younger generations are socialized into public life and what their encounters with politics and public affairs are. These shifts also critically affect individual participatory characteristics, hence alienation and withdrawal from social life appear to be new trends witnessed through arising political disengagement and decline of support to conventional party ideologies and party membership (and politics in general).

A number of critical questions need to be asked here: How changing media production and usage conditions correlate with the functioning of democracy in Europe – in other words, do modern-day media contribute to public emancipation, empowerment and connectivity,

or do they merely support individualized and popular encounters through consumer-inspired needs leading to media and audience fragmentation? How (and with what means) can a political-ideological sense be mobilized in a contemporary, individual interests-focused world, and what role does professional journalism play in this respect?

### **INDIVIDUALIZATION – A BLESSING, OR A CURSE?**

Although many of the changes observed and identified in the previous section of this paper, particularly the ones associated with the rise of individuation and personified consumption, appear to be rather fresh and new, this is not exactly so. In older European democracies, the public sector was reshaped and market schemes were already initiated a few decades ago. As intensely debated, all attempts of imposing criteria of competitiveness, of market-based logic, of financialization, have accelerated new social tendencies among which individualization is the most prevailing trend. Predominantly geared towards marketization and commodification these developments have also placed individuals in uncertain market relationships in almost all spheres of their active life. Temporariness in employment, marketization in public education and health care, and other uncertainties caused by transformations of the public sector have added a greater sense of risk and confusion throughout Europe. The neo-liberal economic regime not only changed the world economy, but most importantly it changed fundamental policies within the nations by introducing privatization and marketization as well as other market-oriented forces into the daily lives of Europeans.

As seen from various academic inquiries, contemporary societies are critically scrutinized for such inclinations as obsessions with consumerism, political disconnect media's increasing commercialization, professionalism compromises and the like. Media and political institutions in different countries around the world are confronted with new questions arising as adequate responses to rapidly changing economic and social conditions, such as economic difficulties, financial drawbacks, technological diffusion, and all other types of contemporary crises followed by disappointments, devaluations, confusion and loss. Although not all European countries have been similarly affected by economic crisis, almost all of them had to react

to similar tendencies identified as critical for the media field, namely the decline of financial mechanisms and sources to support advertising and media business, shifting media independence conditions, changing audience consumption traditions, and increasing Internetization.

Likewise, the increasing individualization (reinforced by personified consumption and gradual loss of community ties) has turned out to be a critical factor that is both a driver as well as a social outcome of change. Among those core social consequences most closely associated with rising individualization in the political sphere is the demise of the classical concept of citizenship. Traditionally, good citizenship is envisioned as a genuine intention of acting for the good of others. The contemporary public sphere, primarily maintained through media channels, in contrast, is progressively filled with the concerns and preoccupations of people only as individual consumers, thus leaving little room for the concerns of them as citizens engaged with common issues. Speaking very generally, individualization destroys the core foundation of what the true public sphere is or what it could be. It challenges the principle of togetherness, of social co-existence. Hence finding consensus on important public issues becomes problematic, and the ideal of public communication is reduced to sharing intimacies and personal confessions, or building-up of personal social capital through newly available communicative means, such as Facebook or others. As seen, many of such harmful, even destructive, trends towards sensationalism, populism, political commodification and, equally, towards democratic fatigue, have found an echo in various European states.

In spite of an uncertain future, few judgments, nevertheless, seem to be essential here. Democracy, as a political form, assumes engagement, commitments and participation. Equally so, effective participation and enlightened understanding of public matters are necessary preconditions of a working democracy. Speaking generally, such a view implies a basic orientation to public affairs. While it is difficult to identify in precise numbers the exact level and nature of desired public involvement and participation, it nonetheless is acceptable to question when and how media consumption contributes to public connectivity and interest in public matters, and when and why media fails to meet and adhere to these expectations.

As a test case for such an investigation, I propose to look at the transitional societies. Although it may seem that Central and Eastern Europe lives in an endless cycle of intense fluctuations and instability, and its social atmosphere is charged with feelings of uncertainty and flux, what creates such an impression, essentially, is not the societal change as such, but the abundance of urgent calls and requests inspired by on-going social pressures. It is important to get hold of these pressures; but it is also important to capture all cultural aspects acting in those moments as well as their effects and outcomes.

So how exceptional is CEE experience in this respect? Do current social and cultural condition in Europe have anything to do with the period of changes and contemporary lifestyles in CEE? What are the most emblematic features of today's CEE media? How various aspects of CEE transition (roles and choices made by various political and social actors) have impacted on the media – its working conditions as well as its functions and missions?

## FRONTIERS AND LIMITS OF CEE DEMOCRATIZATION

Among the most striking conclusions evolving from a significant number of available research studies on CEE is the finding that, generally, all CEE elites (political and media including) are very polarized, very divided. On the other hand, social and political polarization commonly registered in changing political environments may be seen as enthused by the climate of urgent requests for change, specific institutional conditions and extreme instabilities, and also treated as a natural outcome of changing elite preferences and decisions as to which course of action to take in regards to political decision making. Nonetheless, despite enduring changes and institutional weaknesses, one of the paradoxes observed across CEE is that many dominating institutions of societal power such as political parties, although having low public legitimacy<sup>2</sup>, are able to gain public attention and assemble necessary resources to gain adequate status, for example, by mobilizing public opinion during elections.

CEE politics, in general, is strongly influenced and shaped by its presence in the media. Having only fresh histories, low membership support and fragile organizational structures, the political parties are particularly dependent on and determined by the media, hence they employ enormous efforts to systematically control and manage pub-

<sup>2</sup> Public support for political and social institutions in CEE is amongst the lowest across all European states. Its low (political and social) legitimacy is manifested through low institutional trust, low public engagement, low party memberships, low funding, and so forth.

lic opinion. Furthermore, politicians are genuinely convinced that the media have a major influence on voting habits and behaviours. Likewise, the media itself is not without sin – it is prone to heavy manipulation, populism, sensationalism, lifestyle issues and political consumerism. All this leads to a general feeling that politics and media in most of CEE uphold their lifestyles through reciprocal cohabitation and functioning symbiosis shaped through joint, clientelist interests.

In such a context, another evident inconsistency and paradox of social life in today's CEE is that supplementary political and societal components and structures that should instigate public control, awareness and associational participation, such as trade unions, civil society, professional independent media and others, are unusually weak or marginal. The existing dichotomy, ultimately, leads to a critical condition.

Indeed, being generalized, this account of political and media workings, nonetheless, directs our attention to contextual features regulating varied societal reactions and democratization in CEE. As could be seen from a brief examination of contextual qualities of the three Baltic countries (see *Table 1*), even nations with similarities in their most recent histories can generate varied outcomes in their transition and expose different restrictions to media democratization. Thus one issue that should be addressed here is the question of what kind of democracy (i.e. political and economic conditions as well as attitudes and ways of life) is needed for the media to perform their agreed-upon normative functions.

One possible way to grasp those variations would be through institutional and cultural examination. Institutionally speaking, many things (media laws and regulations, codes of ethics, institutions of media self-regulation) in the fields of Baltic media seem to be in place<sup>3</sup>. The picture, however, changes when socio-political conditions are examined and the media's actual performance is assessed. In many respects, and specifically in media performance, Estonia appears to be performing better than Latvia and Lithuania.

Why is the observed end-result as it is? How can these variations be explained? What are the contextual conditions determining media performance characteristics and qualitative outcomes?

<sup>3</sup> Liberalization of markets and privatization accompanied by other rapid developments such as technological diffusion and cultural globalization have indeed sped diversification of media structures and pluralized content in CEE. Yet, although established as democratic institutions with all necessary and recognized democratic attributes, the mainstream media in CEE do not meet most of the conventional prerequisites for professional performance.

Indeed, the assortment of democratizations in CEE (and the Baltic countries) shouldn't come as a big surprise. As seen from history lessons, both the pre-communist as well as communist decades in those countries were as diverse as those of the new democracies turned out to be. Similarities could be found in democratization patterns across various countries of the same region, but only through historical and cultural analysis is one able to reveal where designs of today's politics, economic development, media performance or other qualities of social life are correlating with, or are shaped by, patterns of political

COMPARATIVE INDICATORS	ESTONIA	LATVIA	LITHUANIA
<b>BASIC STATISTICS</b>			
Population (Census 2011)	1,28 million	2,07 million	2,98 million
Dominant religions (2011)	16,2% Orthodox 9,9% Lutheran	34% Lutheran 24% Roman Catholic 17,8% Orthodox	77,2% Roman Catholic 4,1% Orthodox
Major linguistic groups (EuroStat, 2011)	68,6% Estonians, 25,7% Russians, 3,3% Ukrainians and Byelorussians	59% Latvians, 28% Russians, 4% Byelorussians, 2% Poles, 1% Lithuanians, 5% other	83,7% Lithuanians, 6,6% Poles, 5,3% Russians, 1,3% Byelorussians, 3,1% other language groups
International membership (NATO, EU, Eurozone)	NATO, EU (2004) Eurozone (2011)	NATO, EU (2004) Eurozone (2014)	NATO, EU (2004) Eurozone (2015)
GDP per capita (Eurostat, 2011)	11,900 EUR	9,800 EUR	10,200 EUR
<b>SPECIFICS OF POLITICAL LIFE</b>			
Trust in institutions (Eurobarometer 2012)	16% (political parties) 35% (government) 29% (parliament)	6% (political parties) 17% (government) 13% (parliament)	13% (political parties) 21% (government) 13% (parliament)
Political and electoral participation <sup>4</sup> (voter turnout in last national parliament elections, European Parliament elections)	63,5% (2011) 43,9% (2009 EP)	59,4% (2011) 53,7% (2009 EP)	35,7% (2012) 20,9% (2009 EP)
Perceived levels of corruption <sup>5</sup> , 2013 (country rank)	28	49	43
Populist cleavages and Euroscepticism <sup>6</sup>	Low	High	High
Degree of political parallelism and socio-political polarization <sup>7</sup>	Low	High	Medium
Civic engagement and participation (organizational membership – % of people that belong to at least one organization, EVS 2008)	40%	28%	26%

**Table 1.**  
Comparative overview of selected country indicators.

<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://www.idea.int/index.cfm>.

<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2013/results/>.

<sup>6</sup> Source: (Norkus, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Source: (Ornebring, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Source: (Stetka, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Source: [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics\\_explained/index.php/Statistics\\_in\\_focus](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Statistics_in_focus).

SPECIFICS OF MEDIA LIFE			
First newspapers published in the country	'Luhhike Oppetus' (1766)	'Latviesu Arste' (1768)	'Nusidavimai Dievo karalystėje' (printed in Lithuania Minor, 1823)
Media use on daily basis (Eurobarometer 2012)	82% (TV) 64% (radio) 42% (written press) 64% (internet) 40% (social media and networks)	81% (TV) 55% (radio) 19% (written press) 63% (internet) 44% (social media and networks)	86% (TV) 55% (radio) 32% (written press) 51% (internet) 28% (social media and networks)
Share of advertising in media – TV, newspapers and Internet (TNS Gallup 2012)	TV (30,8% Newspapers (26,8%) Internet (16,6%)	TV (45,1% Newspapers (9,0%) Internet (15,4%)	TV (47,8% Newspapers (16,3%) Internet (10,0%)
The power and impact of PSB (TV and radio, TNS Gallup 2011)	Audience market share: 15% ETV, 19,7% Vikerraadio Daily reach: 36% ETV, 23% Vikerraadio	Audience market share: 8,8% LTV1, 9,5% Latvian Radio 1, 18,2% Latvian Radio 2 Daily reach: 28% LTV1, 8% Latvian Radio 1, 15% Latvian Radio 2	Audience market share: 10,7% LRT TV, 20,8% LRT Radijas Daily reach: 34% LRT TV, 19% LRT Radijas
Levels of internetization (internet used in the past 3 months, Eurostat 2013)	80% (63% use internet daily or almost everyday)	75% (60% use internet daily or almost everyday)	68% (53% use internet daily or almost everyday)
Media advertising expenditure (TNS Gallup 2012)	72,5 (million, EUR)	70,9 (million, EUR)	99,4 (million, EUR)
De-globalization of media ownership (foreign media owners that left the Baltic countries as a result of the global economic crisis 2008-2011)	Dailies 'Postimes' and 'Eesti Paevalehti' (Schibsted)	Daily 'Diena' (Bonnier Media)	Free daily '15 min' (Schibsted)
Oligarchization assessments <sup>8</sup> (local media moguls/media owners and their political leanings)	Low	High	Medium
Media performance calculations (Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders)	16 (FH 2013, free) 11 (World Press Freedom Index, 2013)	28 (FH 2013, free) 39 (World Press Freedom Index, 2013)	24 (FH 2013, free) 33 (World Press Freedom Index, 2013)
THE ROLE, POLICIES (AND INTERVENTIONS) OF THE STATE			
Social policies <sup>9</sup> (total general government expenditure as a percentage of total spending, 2011)	8,3% (general public services) 12,0% (economic affairs) -0,9% (environmental protection) 13,3% (health) 16,9% (education) 34,2% (social protection)	11,7% (general public services) 14,5% (economic affairs) 1,9% (environmental protection) 10,7% (health) 14,9% (education) 31,5% (social protection)	12,1% (general public services) 10,6% (economic affairs) 2,5% (environmental protection) 14,0% (health) 15,6% (education) 33,8% (social protection)
VAT for media, and Availability of public media support foundations	9% (standard is 20%)	12% (standard is 21%)	9% (standard is 21%) Yes ('Press, Radio and TV Support Foundation')

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SPECIFICS OF SOCIAL LIFE AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING			
Public satisfactions with how democracy is working in the country <sup>10</sup>	50% (rather happy) 21% (rather unhappy) 29% (difficult to say)	23% (rather happy) 63% (rather unhappy) 13% (difficult to say)	15% (rather happy) 40% (rather unhappy) 35% (difficult to say)
Labor market conditions (unemployment and youth unemployment, Eurostat 2012)	12,5% 19,3% (youth unemployment)	16,2% 24% (youth unemployment)	15,4% 24% (youth unemployment)
Socio-economic signs such as emigration	In the period 1990-2010 about 10% (or about 150,000 people) of Estonia's population of 1990 are registered n.a.	n.a.	In the period 1990-2011, 728,700 people emigrated from Lithuania (about 20% of the country's population of 1990s) 2010 is registered as peak year with 83,500 people departing
% Of the population considered to be at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion in 2011	23,1%	40,4%	33,4%
Tertiary education, and Lifelong learning, OECD 2010	27,9% 12,0% (lifelong learning)	28,9% 5,0% (lifelong learning)	29,2% 5,9% (lifelong learning)

<sup>10</sup> Source: (Lauristin and Vihalemm, 2011).

decision making, social and economic policies designed by elites and other choices made in those countries in the critical moments during the twenty-five years of post-communist change.

A number of lines of examination according to which the present-ed data (see *Table 1*) could be studied seem to be noteworthy here. What strikes me most from such a comparison are the significant variations of political engagement data, institutional trust and the general feeling of happiness as seen from the section on satisfactions with how democracy is working in the country, and might also be detected from selected socio-economic indicators, such as data on emigration, investments and popularity of education initiatives as well as others. As commonly assumed, absence of associational and consensus oriented political culture seriously distorts contemporary politics and social well-being and affects other societal outcomes (such as individualism, confrontations, social and political polarization). Following such lines of thinking, it could be argued that uneven, weak associational structures, which traditionally should be sustained through varied public communications channels and net-

works, do not contribute to critical discourse development and do not infuse other public actions, such as public criticism and control over other powers (political, economic) in society.

Although the above example of data analysis gives only a brief report of all particularities of political system changes in the three countries, it is not difficult to notice they stem from choices and decisions made by the elites in critical times of politico-economic transformations in the Baltics. Estonia was the only country whose newly elected democratic government implemented very radical ('shock therapy') types of market reforms, while Latvia and especially Lithuania were more cautious and opted for much more gradual, so-called 'calculated' and 'negotiated' approaches (Norkus, 2011). It could be argued that the continuity of particular cultural appearances (as manifested through different agreements and negotiations between elites) has distinctive characteristics observed in today's institutional performances and organizational cultures that shape it. Among those exceptional features, emblematic to transitional societies, should be mentioned a certain tradition of enduring interdependences and 'calculated agreements' leading to clientelist social forms and relations that further contribute to the emergence of a 'culture of dependency', more emblematic to Latvia and Lithuania than to Estonia (Ornebring, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Here the results of Freedom House (FH) assessments are taken into the account which rank Estonia the highest among the CEE countries (see *Table 1* and FH rank for Estonia 16).

<sup>12</sup> Here it is important to stress that it is not individualism as ruthless self-interest that could have been seen in inter-war Estonia, but rather individualism combined with respect to the actions of others, also to communal practices, which endured throughout the twentieth into the twenty first century.

It looks like the countless successes of Estonia were born from a complex combination of historical, cultural and geographic factors, among which Lutheran modesty, social persistence, geographical determinism and ruthless pragmatism have the most obvious effects. All these affect the workings of democracy. Among those plausible explanations of the country's contemporary advancements in terms of its media's democratic institutionalization and its professionalization<sup>11</sup> appears to be its historical continuities from both pre-communist and communist cultures and capacities to cultivate, within reasonable limits, a potential for moral choice and democratically useful experiences leading to formations of counter-elite cultures (Bennich-Bjorkman, 2007; Norkus, 2011). The liberal idea of equal opportunities and a profound respect for individuality (rather than the notion of equal outcome), already formed decades ago, aptly characterizes the predominant mentality of this small nation in the present times as well<sup>12</sup>. The specific features of such mentality are uncovered in a number of outcomes of post-communist transforma-

tions, predominantly in low politization and oligarchization, higher satisfaction with democratic structures and their functioning, lower levels of socio-economic divergence (such as unemployment, poverty, emigration) also distressing political and media climate.

It indeed appears to be thinkable that conflictual political culture, which is fashioned by deeply polarized, very divided elites (especially in Latvia and Lithuania), is the main cultural apparatus that instigates and sustains on-going battles. Media, too, is entrapped into those confrontations. Many of those are found in mainstream television; many of those are transferred into the Internet. Although contributing to pluralization, these furthermore support increasing fragmentation, social polarization (and also politicization) of different groups, maintained through various opinion clusters functioning as 'hotbeds of political opinions.' This furthermore affects segmentation and structuration of the public sphere into diverse parallel informational fields accessed by respective users (Balčytienė, 2012).

Briefly, in the longer perspective, such developments might become critical for democracy. If the country's public sphere is saturated with controversial, polarized, conflictual, divergent issues, its citizens, correspondingly, find themselves as permanently, deliberately uninformed, manipulated and misrepresented voters. Their disappointment and gradual withdrawal from public life is also programmed by political and media performances – hence it is no surprise that conflict, disagreement, volatility and flux (and therefore the lack and absence of long-term political thinking and public policy visions) appears to be amongst the most illustrative features of today's political and social life in the Baltics.

### **WHERE DANGERS LIVE**

Indeed, ours is a self-absorbed age. It is an age of declining participation in the electoral process, of declining institutional legitimacy. Contrary to these developments and observations, this is also the age of intensity, of increasing choice, of pluralization. It is an age of individualized encounters, of selective public exposures. Democratization processes are not excluded from these information usage effects. Changes in media production and usage routines directly touch upon the citizens' knowledge of politics. As already warned, many contemporary lifestyles and information exposures happen

to be threatening to democracy: constant and nearly exclusive encounters with like-minded viewpoints will gradually lead to group polarization. It certainly may limit the diversity of arguments that viewers possess. It might also influence a citizens' political attitudes and beliefs. But the most uncertain issue here is the question of what the democratic consequences of selective political exposure is or could be. Clearly, such developments also raise anxieties about the function and normative missions of (impartial, objective, balanced) professional journalism.

Instead, our societies are represented mainly through the media worlds that maintain almost a perfect selection of sources that conform neatly and reliably to one's prior beliefs and expectations. It appears even more obvious that the manipulative and commercial logic and marketing strategies of advertisers, not the technology per se, must be accused for causing the fragmentation of society. Media offer specialized content and formats that allow advertisers to target desired populations more effectively. This leads to a 'customization' of media products and, furthermore, to encounters of individuals with other like-minded individuals living in their own personally constructed worlds – 'diasporic communities' as named by Zygmunt Bauman – focused on self-exposers, intimacies and confessions.

With increasing fragmentation and social polarization, and with control partially transferred to individual information consumers, professional journalism is in danger of gradually losing its previously held dominant 'expert' status. This partial 'de-professionalization' of journalism, alongside the increasing popularity and use of the Internet and social media and other sources, seems to indicate fundamental industrial change.

It appears that some markets seem to be more vulnerable to such developments than others. As noted, certain attributes – particularly, weak civic culture and the potentially strong role of television – may create potentially favourable conditions for the emergence of definite trends. This, when coupled with the rise of consumer oriented news production, results in fewer quality opportunities for the interested public to give an account of changes in their closest realities and their social surroundings. These developments lead to another dramatic observation in the mainstream media, which is its obvious

loss of public trust. Although in many Western countries the media still maintain high trust, in the transitional democracies of CEE, the public trust in mass media has dropped to its lowest position in the last decade. These developments, however, are an outcome of both – the neoliberal capitalist shifts in the media industry towards aggressive commercialism, and also the on-going diversification of all media products towards more individual-interests focused, specialized, niche, and alternative productions.

All in all, increasing social polarization and audience fragmentation, growing societal diversity, declining impartiality and objectivity in journalism, and the steady loss of credibility and trust in the mass media are becoming fixed features of our contemporary world. Individualized, selective or accidental exposure affects how people reason about, react to, and act in the political world. As warned by Gross (2009), Mancini (2013) and many others, fragmented media don't play that vital function of social integration that could foster necessary negotiations and agreements among the involved publics. It doesn't foster the kind of common knowledge and opinions that could make possible a more integrated, more inclusive and more dynamic society, which would be open to change and interdependence.

## RESUME

It still appears that economy is a strong determinant of media working conditions, particularly its independence, though this is not always a sufficient reason. A close correlation between higher GDP scores and higher media freedom and accountability assessments is seen in various international media evaluations (see *Table 1*). Still, economic policies and market conditions need to be supported with certain cultural norms of life, visions and ideals of how democracy should function in the country and how political life should contribute to it. As argued here, political thinking and decisions instigated and made by Baltic elites, already in critical times of post-communist transition (in the early 1990s), appear to also be crucially essential in shaping cultural and media policies of today<sup>13</sup>. Democratization research also puts a very strong emphasis on the country's socio-economic dynamics and its emancipation; it argues that the existence of wealthy, educated, middle-class earners is crucially important in boosting informed public participation in common affairs. None-

<sup>13</sup> These could be observed predominantly in design of economic policies (such as media subsidies, VAT exemption, openness to international investors, and others) that also define and determine conditions of media democratic functioning (Stetka, 2013).

theless, this issue also appears questionable. As seen from audience analyses, today's media users are enthused by matters of choice and differentiation, rather than by issues of agreement and common concern.

One of the principal tasks of this paper was to disclose varying media working conditions across Europe (by using an example of the three Baltic countries), but by doing this it also aimed to show that similarities in new social trends (such as arising individualized consumption and media fragmentation) are also found in larger and smaller markets, in stronger and weaker economies. Consequences and outcomes of those trends, however, tend to be contextually (and thus culturally) bound, thus their outcomes and consequences are culturally differentiated.

Related to this latter statement, a number of warnings ask to be listed here. As seen from this discussion, the critical effects and social consequences of various developments are more straightforwardly noticed to take place in transitional societies of Central and Eastern Europe – in the countries where the idea of common good is weaker, where the rules of the game are weaker and more flexible, and no agreements and fixed directions are yet standardized.

Another notice is that older European democracies are not immune to the arising changes. And they are not excluded from those potentially to be affected by trends of individualization and polarization as well. As discussed here, the challenges of declining revenues from traditional advertising, shifting audience preferences and decreasing political engagement should also not be overlooked in the countries that so far have effectively escaped most on-going social fluctuations. In the countries where traditions of media financial support from various resources are stronger (for example, through state funding and financial subsidies, or public donations and local initiatives), effects of these developments (media financialization, political populism, sensationalism) on the general media climate may not be as harsh as in the markets (Central and Eastern Europe, Southern Europe), where such public support models are not that well-developed.

To say it very generally, in most of Western Europe, also in selected CEE markets, conditions for journalism are quite favourable and promising. Markets are quite stable, state policies for media support

are functioning, and media culture is heavily influenced by ideas of public empowerment and inclusion. Whereas in the Central and Eastern European states which, for the past two decades, have been struggling with various instabilities and were severely hit by the global economic crisis (for e.g., Latvia), outcomes of changing media climate (both of economic and social conditions) are less reassuring. All in all, all issues discussed here (such as individualization, social and political polarization) should be assessed as matters of rising significance and universal concern. Their actual outcomes as well as their cultural variations, though, will only be seen later.

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