

# DEPENDENCIES, PARALLELISMS, AND CONNECTIONS: CENTRAL AND EAST EUROPEAN MEDIA AS SYSTEMS IN FLUX

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**ABSTRACT:** One of the leading arguments of this paper is that contemporary Central and East European societies are a perfect example of hybrid social systems. Even more, CEE nations could be looked at as if they are ‘social laboratories’ where all controversies, trends and consequences of modern life are tested. The discussion here concentrates on CEE media transformations, and it mainly moves around the idea that media functions and journalistic routines are indirectly shaped by contextual features. Likewise, media culture is formed on the basis of contextual (political, economic) particularities and is furthermore shaped by the traditions, social relations, behaviors and norms, which characterize society in general, and not only a part of professional culture. Since journalism indirectly confirms a society’s culture, it could be said that studying media in any country could become a fascinating and inspiring exercise. For this purpose, this paper offers a conceptual model which could be further used in disclosing the cultural particularities of CEE journalism and media culture.

**KEYWORDS:** transitional societies, media culture, media professionalization, political parallelism, culture of subordination, Central and Eastern Europe

## FOREWORD

Although established as democratic institutions with all necessary and recognized attributes, such as codes of ethics and institutions of self-regulation and accountability, the mainstream media in CEE do not meet most of conventional prerequisites for professional performance. As shown in media democratic performance studies, most often, CEE media score low in information impartiality assessments as well as watchdog functions (Nord et al., 2011). If compared to professional journalism traditions and performance in most of the Western countries, the media in CEE are not autonomous but clientelist institutions (Roudakova, 2008; Örnebring, 2012); their professional identities and journalistic ideals are also very weak (Lauk, 2008). At the same time, even though CEE societies and their media seem to be 'chained' and 'locked' in old networks and conflicts of power struggles between political and business elites, new developments towards reflective engagement of citizens with media appear to offer new, alternative channels and interactive forms of communication, socialization, and meaning making. By reframing mainstream media frames and filling up available niches with new information, these developments and trends in the field of specialized, alternative, and interactive media seem to contribute greatly towards diversification and pluralization of contemporary societies. All things considered, it could be said, that all these developments and arising pressures on media, such as its continuing commercialization and decreasing public service orientation, growth of personified consumption and individualized choice over news content have universalistic character, thus they are witnessed in many countries around the world, and are not just an illustrative manifestations of media in the new European democracies.

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Not long ago, the view that CEE countries represent a (politically) homogeneous region was among those standard approaches applied in media performance assessments and theoretical conceptualizations. Likewise, in the early 1990s, most of the comparative studies of media tended to stress that all transitional societies and their journalism should be assessed from the point of view of democratization's institutional perspective. Following such an approach, Central and East European countries and their media, generally, should be no different from media representations in the West. Thus CEE journalism should be assessed according to the criteria of institutional autonomy, accountability, and public service orientation. Here it is noteworthy to mention that such a line of thinking was also strongly supported by dominating social and political

imaginaries cherished in CEE countries at that time. In the early 1990s, it was typical to look at political system changes in CEE as internalizing the 'natural return' of those countries to the 'imagined' West (Hoyer et al., 1993; Lauristin and Vihalemm, 1997; Splichal, 1994).

There is nothing wrong with using a normative approach in the study of society's democratization. Such an approach is valuable since it permits operationalization of complex concepts. It also allows one to see change and assess progress. It also gives a certain degree of flexibility to re-shape and redefine earlier established concepts and descriptions of phenomena (for e.g., 'professionalization', 'politization/ideologization', 'clientelism', etc.) and to integrate contextually bound cultural aspects of social functioning.

In CEE media research it took almost two decades to change the dominating point of view. Only the most recent studies have taken quite an opposite approach and proposed to identify core differences (and striking similarities) in political and social developments and changes in the media field across the region (Zielonka and Mancini, 2011; Hallin and Mancini, 2012; Jakubowicz and Sükösd, 2008). It could be envisaged that the rise of new approaches is motivated not only by the attempts of researchers to identify all the differences among European political (and media) cultures in general, but also to analyze how contemporary developments and trends registered in those countries influence perceptions and views between the Western and the East Central parts of today's Europe. The principal motives and logic for such comparisons should be quite simple – by accepting and understanding all diversities and sensitivities of political histories, social imaginaries and enduring traditions, unity can be built; otherwise – a misbalance, a misunderstanding will occur and thrive.

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As observed, many of the media democratic performance failures earlier identified solely with transitional societies and young democracies of CEE today are also registered in the countries with long standing traditions of consensual democracy. Media in most of Western Europe, as well as in the United States, tampers with serious problems to sustain their business models, to meet the ideals of professionalism (Hallin 2009). Many of those commercial models have turned obsolete, thus stimulating discussions as to whether an adequate business model for quality journalism could be found at all. In particular, significant changes are found in the sectors of print media and public service broadcasting. In many countries around the world, the newspaper business is scaling down

due to economic crisis and market failures. Public service broadcasters are also losing their centrality in changing societies, and their financing models are under political attack due to their market disturbance by developments in the new media sector (Nieminen, 2010).

The main goal of this paper, therefore, is to argue that because of their unique accounts of transformations and changing social and cultural conditions, young democracies and transitional societies (and their media and journalisms) are more prone to emerging social pressures, developments, and trends. By aiming at this task, I will take a closer look at the driving forces of different social pressures (namely, technological diffusion and, to some extent, the commercialization of media) and will concentrate on emerging consequences (such as fragmentation, social polarization and ideologization, and individualism) registered in contemporary societies. In this paper, I apply a cultural approach which supports the view that in order to understand professional performance it is crucially important also to understand the broader social context – namely, the social logics and dynamics behind all relations maintained and meanings generated in a particular society. Thus I propose a discussion which gradually leads to the development of a ‘conceptual model’ which could further be used in the examination of different variations of CEE journalism and media cultures.

## **ON CENTRAL AND EAST EUROPEAN HETEROGENEITIES**

Two decades after the political system change, Central and East European nations are still struggling to transform their mentalities, to understand what values and assigned meanings underlie the behaviors of their citizens and elites. Even today, due to different forms of social and cultural lives, practicing religions, values and traditions, as well as historical developments and meanings, the existing political cultures in the region are a mixture of pre-communist, communist, and post-communist combinations (Gross, 2002). Thus one of the arising feelings distinctive to reflections on post-communist Central and Eastern Europe is its miscellaneity, heterogeneity, and hybridity. Such descriptions and impressions are based not only on the heterogeneity and cultural diversity manifested across the region (Bianchini, 2011) – it is also based on the mix of different social structures within those countries – effects that arise from their fragile ideological foundations, their young political and party systems, and, especially, their weak civil societies (Golubeva and Gould, 2010).

From the structural point of view, many things in CEE countries seem to be in place, and their political and economic institutions and systems are competitive

and functioning. Yet, at the same time, in most of the CEE countries, commitments and loyalties to democratic values are registered to exist with generally antidemocratic, clientelist, and private-gain-centered practices. In spite of registering many positive changes in people's lives, such manipulative and socially destructive practices and clientelist arrangements are still dominant in those societies – they were inherited and formed in times of different regime changes, occupations and ideological shaping, thus they have deep historical roots and long-lasting social effects in the region.

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It is a truism that institutional change and political and economic transformations are paralleled with the rise of severe social consequences. In the past century alone political regimes in Central and Eastern Europe changed repeatedly, thus social bonds and community ties in those nations were discontinued and broken countless times. As a result, feelings of social alienation, of loss, of exclusion persist in today's Europe's transitional societies. As public opinion data reveals, trust in public institutions is low in most of those countries and public associational involvement is marginal (EHDR, 2011). In most cases, these outcomes are a result of discrepancies between high public hopes associated with liberalization and cherished ideals in the early 1990s, and real life appearances, challenges and requests that followed with the wave of economic and social reforms.

In all CEE countries, new social pressures and requests emerged with economic liberalization and rapidly changing economic conditions. Very soon, social pressures and expectations reached high levels and were followed by pressures 'to achieve more in one's life'. Many of those requirements were (and still are) measured and assessed according to some external, non-internalized standards, such as new public morals sustained not only through popular moods but also popular narratives mainly transferred and maintained through media-designed 'success' stories and simulated achievements. Additionally, the rise and increasing focus of the media on negativism, crime news reporting and sensationalism also affect how people feel, what they concentrate on, and what they consider of as important to think about.

It could be envisioned that transferred to other contexts of social life, such moods and increasing attentiveness to negativism would also affect public views on political institutions and structures. Dominating news about corruption and dysfunctions at the public sector magnetizes public attention and opinions thus becoming prone to all types of sensationalism. The dominating negativism also

affects popular moods in the sense that individual disappointments become blamed on the misbehaviors of others. Thus a blame culture persists and is further captured and maintained by mass media.

Undeniably, the young democracies and transitional societies of today's Central and Eastern Europe comprise complex social systems. Even more, these societies are fragmented and atomized – there is a lack of social capital and trust, and social ethic. And the lack of such norms, furthermore, produces moral deregulation and an absence of legitimate social aspirations. The existence of norms regulates human behavior, exchanges and communications, while reducing egocentric behavior, and the feeling of existentialism. They also connect, mobilize, and unite society. Besides, the rules help to regulate the behaviour of individuals only when they are understood and internalized, then they become conscious norms of human behaviour – after which these norms can actually become an imperative of moral behaviour.

In transitional societies all social moods are not only maintained and confirmed by media practices and discourses, but CEE media itself is functioning as if it is in a 'moral and normative vacuum' – and in most cases the lack of articulated professional ethos is identified as the biggest drawback against the professionalization of journalism (Lauk, 2008). In most of the CEE media, as well as other institutions, there are no 'common and internalized values' (although there exist institutional structures and instruments such as requests on media accountability or self-regulation) to regulate, motivate and organize their professional fields from within.

All in all, CEE societies confirm the existence of complex and different political cultures in each of those countries in the region. Likewise, these societies comprise different professional cultures which are maintained through different types and degrees of social arrangements and networks functioning with their own traditions, rules, ideas, and habits.

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The idea of 'parallelism' seems to be the best starting point to initiate further analysis of all specificities, particularities and characteristics of the socio-structural and functional arrangements and practices in CEE.

Social parallelism is a complex concept. It can mean many different things and take into the account different societal aspects. Theoretically speaking, the core foundation of the idea of parallelism lies in the relationships between any given

civilization, its dominating values and ideas, popular narratives, social and cultural imaginaries, and political and social systems that function in it. In comparative studies of media and politics, political parallelism, for example, is best described by media's support of and its dependence on ideological leanings and political 'faiths' of a particular society (see Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Likewise, this view can also reflect the diversity of perspectives found in the wider society and its reflections in other social structures, such as educational institutions, governments, public services, business cultures, social behaviors, and so forth.

Following the approach developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), CEE countries are described as societies revealing high degrees of politization and (political) parallelism. Among the three Baltic countries, for example, Estonia is the only country that shows lower degrees of political or business parallelism, whereas in Lithuania and Latvia, media are more closely intertwined with political and business relations (MDCEE, 2011). Baltic societies could be described as politicized societies where social and political powers are maintained through clientelist relations among their elites. If transferred to the media field, such relations have little to do with formal connections and organizational ties, or with transparency of editorial policies and ideological lines in media. They mainly deal with personal connections and favors among journalists, editors and their various news sources or 'media donors'. In a few words, post-communist countries can rightly be named as 'societies with clientelist attributes'. Here it seems logical to pose a question as to what degree such dependencies are emblematic to contextual cultures of CEE, or are these signaling developments also registered in the countries with longstanding traditions of democracy.

A historical perspective which observes different phases of post-communist development and questions the particularities of institutional change in times of political breakthrough in the early 1990s can be a useful starting point in the debate about political (and business) parallelism and the culture of clientelism as dominating features of political life in CEE. Briefly, such a perspective observes how political practices were shaped by different decision-making approaches and cultures in the exact time of change (political transition); it also looks at characteristics of party systems and other developments in the political field and changes that evolved in different periods of time.

Indeed, none of the revolutions in CEE followed identical paths. Transition was a project that today can rightly be called 'a return to diversity' process in CEE.

The most significant difference between varying approaches applied in those countries in times of an 'escape from communism' is locked in the dominating

meanings and treatments assigned to the soviet past. According to Norkus (2008), who quotes Timothy Garton Ash and uses an invented concept of “refolution” which symbolizes mixed combinations of ‘reform’ and ‘revolution’, a critical number of CEE countries targeted softer versions of systemic changes. For example, in Lithuania, Poland and Hungary, the foundations of democratic restructuring have raised from ex-communist and anti-communist elite pact. The core essence of this pact is that in the exchanges of loyalty to the new regime, the communist elite could privatize state-owned properties on a large scale, and lustration was performed only on an ‘imitative level’ (it was applied only for former secret service workers).

On the other hand, revolutionary beginnings, attempts to ‘clean house’ by removing all of the soviet administrative elite from decision-making positions, had effects on changes in East Germany, Latvia and especially in Estonia, which culminated with the rise of the “right version” of populism in those countries. Additionally, the ‘restitutional’ policies in civil rights given only to the ‘older’ populations who were residents of those countries (before the 1940s) eliminated quite a big number of ex-communist electorates (mostly Russian-speaking). At the same time, especially in Estonia, the question of political loyalties were made extremely important and the political race took place between radical and less radical parties on the right side. As observed in further developments in Estonia, all populist parties were gradually ‘domesticated’ – they were slowly integrated into political coalitions, thus political life in Estonia culminated into more consolidated political structures than those registered in Latvia or Lithuania (Norkus, 2011).

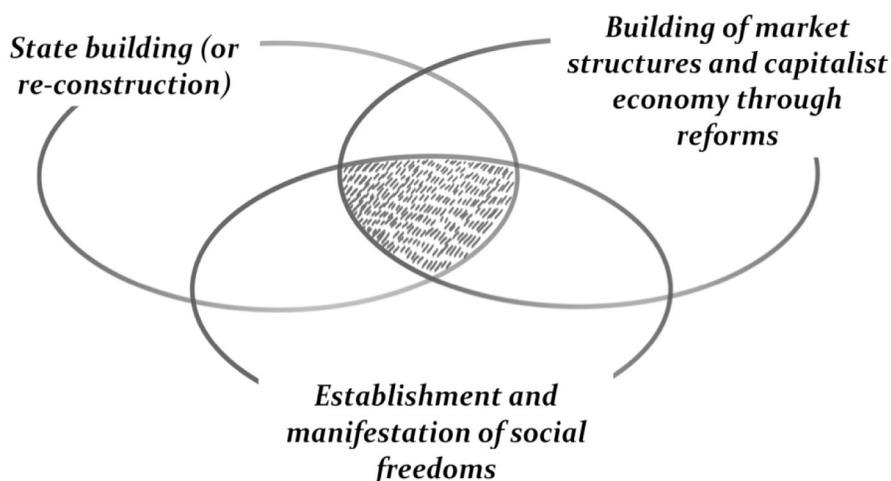
Although the above example gives only a very brief report of all particularities of political system changes in the Baltic countries, it is not difficult to notice that among the three countries, Estonia was the only country whose newly elected democratic government implemented very radical (‘shock therapy’) types of market reforms, while Latvia and especially Lithuania were more cautious and opted for much more gradual, so-called ‘calculated’ and ‘negotiated’ approaches.

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 performance and the organizational cultures that shape it. Among those exceptional features, emblematic to transitional societies, should be mentioned 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” (Örnebring, 2012).

From the theoretical point of view, clientelism (or the culture of dependency) refers to a variety of social practices and exchange services functioning within bureaucratic, political or other types of social institutions. As a keyword and an informal descriptor of those relationships, clientelism defines different patterns and degrees of dependence among the stronger (patron) and weaker (customers) actors in that relationship. It also refers to a reward system and other cultural attributes of such a partnership. Such type of 'culture' seeks compromise, fidelity, support, appreciation, and, to some extent, also devotion. Clientelism, as an attribute of existing social relations, is contagious and thus could be called as being defective to political life and the quality of democracy.

**Figure 1.**

Three dimensions of democracy building and liberalization in CEE.



The Singing Revolutions of the late 1980s and the early 1990s inspired important and significant social transformations across Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, these changes should be looked at as offering only 'partial transformations'. In most of CEE, social developments did not evolve to comparable degrees in all fields of public life. The independent states were restored, and with gradual economic reforms and privatization most of the urgent economic needs as well as requests were met. Still, these liberalizations have mainly followed well-known technicalities tested in other (Western) contexts and were not supported with social and cultural reforms and the re-establishment of 'public norms' built on the ideals of public service, respect to common good, agreed rules and established laws, and the building of social capital and trust.

## SOCIAL PRESSURES AND QUALITY OF LIFE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

As a result of clientelism, weak social capital and absence of internalized rules and agreed norms, political life remains confusing in most of CEE. Political party systems in most of those countries are quite volatile both in terms of the frequent formation of new parties as well as changes in the existing ones. For example, in Lithuania as well as in other young democracies, only a limited number of parties have consolidated programs, and political formations move around a myriad of smaller, one-leader orientated, and sensationalist issues.

With only a few exceptions, in most CEE countries, political party systems are quite unstable and labile in the sense that they are highly responsive to political trends and fashions, and emerging moods. Likewise, partisan interests are intertwined with business interests and political thinking is shaped by ad hoc needs and private gain inspired logic rather than through long-term policy making decisions (Zielonka and Mancini, 2011). It has almost become a tradition that in many CEE countries, before almost all parliamentary elections, a major political party either splits into several smaller parties, which then merge into a completely new unit, or several new political parties take part in these elections, though not all manage to meet the electoral threshold (Kažoka, 2010).

At the same time, although the political life in general (political competition and political preferences among parties, consistency to political party lines in actual actions of politicians and their voting behavior during sessions in parliament, and other issues) looks quite volatile and mixed, it is actually quite far from being confusing, indescribable, and chaotic. For example, in Lithuania, a number of ideological distinctions and lines around which political life moves in the country, and also around which all political cleavages are structured, can be distinguished fairly easily. In most cases, as in all three Baltic countries, these cleavages center on economic questions, moral views and the Russian factor<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, confusion arises when electors expose their political preferences by choosing certain 'ideological packages' from various political programs (Ramonaitė et al., 2010). All in all an important observation about political life in Lithuania is that people do not differentiate their views according to party lines. They also do not express nor follow ideologically consistent views in their political behavior. In other words, people do not have consistent economic and moral views according to which it would be possible to assign their values to ideological groups on the left or right side of the political scale.

<sup>1</sup> Among those lines are (a) the economic preferences on the 'left – right' line and leanings that have similarities to what is observed in the old democracies in the West; (b) a kind of a 'traditionalist line' that is focused on moral-choice requiring issues, and its decision-making ranges from more liberal to conservative values and attitudes – this line mainly expresses tensions between tradition and innovation, between continuity and change, between tradition and modernization, and so forth; (c) a cleavage that is somewhat specific only to this geo-political region of post-communist countries, and covers attitudes observed in former soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and their leanings towards Russia and the soviet past (expressed through soviet – anti-soviet opinions).

From the media business-related perspective, the biggest drawback of such political life is that journalists, working for media which are politically instrumentalized, end-up being pulled into all those clientelist networks and orbits, those webs of relations requiring advocacy skills taking center stage, rather than neutral reporting (as a good reference here see, for example, Roudakova, 2008). Moreover, journalists are also pulled into those social relationships and cultures that are built on and support manipulative strategies; and personal competition and individualism become their core professional attributes. Journalists are chained to specialized sub-cultures where pressures from sources are very high while professional and moral values are generally missing.

<sup>2</sup> Hallin and Mancini (2004) refer to 'secularization' as the separation of citizens from attachments to religious and ideological beliefs. It refers to the rise of a more fragmented and individualized society.

As documented in several studies, in such contexts professional relations and partnerships are built and maintained through informal relationships, agreements, negotiations, information leaking, and manipulation (AIM Research Consortium, 2007; Juodytė, 2011). Certainly, such professional cultures could be seen as the product of cultural continuities of, on the one hand, media partnering with elites combined with, on the other hand, responses to the requirements of contemporary (secular, consumer needs-focused) life. It is no surprise then, that typical keywords describing contemporary CEE communications are 'conflict' and 'aggressive competition', as well as 'secularization'<sup>2</sup>, and 'consumerism'.

All in all, a lack of media autonomy, accountability and absence of transparency are among those most serious drawbacks identified in CEE media performance. At the same time, media independence issues are widely debated in those countries – most often in informal networks of journalists, specialized academic publications, and the blogosphere. In addition to these observations, it must also be noticed that across CEE countries, changes and developments are seen to accommodate well-defined political rhetoric and keywords, which constitute definitions and structural elements well-recognized in the West, but having conceptually different meanings and context in young democracies (Kulakauskas, 2003; Aleksandravičius, 2012).

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In societies with clientelist attributes, group interests intervene in all spheres of public life: in politics, in business, and in media structures. In this respect, fundamental questions arise as to what degree and how these 'cultures' influence social relations and qualities of life in those countries, and, perhaps, how they also affect the performance and professionalization of journalism.

Indeed, development of culture is a slow and gradual process. From the discussion above a feeling arises that, generally, liberal political culture is missing in most countries of CEE. It is difficult to oppose the argument that the expected culture can emerge, be adopted, and homogenized among different members of society only in the course of generations. Looking at contemporary developments in Central and Eastern Europe, there are grounded doubts whether a qualitatively new, consolidated political culture will emerge in the next decade.

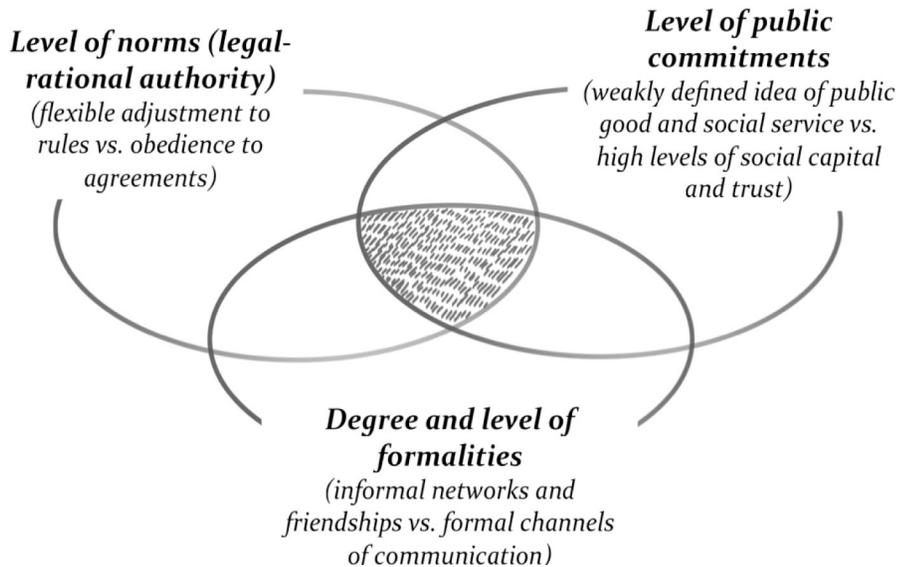
In this context it is most crucially important to remember and acknowledge that any social and cultural change is a gradual process. Change is a social phenomenon; thus there is hope that all those countries will gradually free themselves from the 'consequences' of communism.

The process of CEE transformations actually deals with multiple 'cultural transformations' – with transformations of views and mentalities. As mentioned, as a result of complex and multiple social transformations, the political cultures of those nations are made up of diverse political sub-cultures. Furthermore, those political sub-cultures have their own ties to different combinations of values and attitudes found in various social groups: religious, regional, ideological, ethnic, or those belonging to different institutions of society (academic, professional, or community-based). Hence, disclosing these sub-cultures and arising social and cultural eclecticism and heterogeneities appears to be a sub-task of this paper which also aims to discuss and reinterpret these hybridities in the context of contemporary and rapidly changing media conditions and professionalism requirements.

All things considered, this discussion leads us to the finding that political and media lives in CEE countries are shaped through the culture of dependency on different informally maintained partnerships and networks with its core features, such as informal and clientelist relations, but also suspicion and distrust. Such model of social arrangements and logic could be further conceptualized and graphically illustrated in *Figure 2*, where three constitutive elements (pillars) such as (a) the level of existing rules and agreements, (b) the level of public orientations and commitments, and (c) the character and type of means and channels for making meaning, become prevailing contextual dimensions defining different degrees and levels and publicity of agreements and negotiations, and give rise to the emergence of different variations of a 'culture of subordination' in CEE.

**Figure 2.**

Three features distinctive to development of a certain type of social culture (as argued in this paper, registered high levels of clientelism and political and economic instrumentalization lead to the rise of culture of calculated agreements and dependency in most of CEE countries).



The three components of the conceptual model could be further devolved to accommodate indicators which refer to both structural and media performance assessments, such as legal requirements and dominating policies for media and its adherence to these, organizational structures within the profession of journalism, public trust in media, and the like.

### **FEW REMARKS ON THE RISE OF ALTERNATIVES AND COUNTER-POWERS IN CEE**

Despite grounded criticism of CEE media's performance towards instrumentalized production and dependency, parallel informational alternatives (niche and specialized magazines, internet, social media, and blogs) are registered as gradually emerging replica spaces favourable to the development of dialogical communication between different audience groups, and also of professional journalism with a controlling function. These parallel informational worlds – so-called 'parallel universes' – are the fastest-growing spaces that offer a rich field of ideas and generic diversity. Furthermore, access and active consumption of news in such media leads to the rise and establishment of completely new networks, to the rise of social movements and formations with their own sets of ideals, values, and ideologies, and, most importantly, authorities, experts, and leading public figures (Balčytienė, 2012).

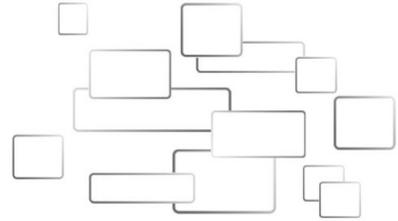
It is not difficult to notice that many of these developments are in line with what was identified by different proponents as the rise of online media as alternatives and contra-flows against mainstream media views and messages (Boyd-Barrett, 2007), as well as ideas of interactive communications and social networking as potential sources and counter-power centres in contemporary societies (Dutton, 2009; Castells, 2007).

All scholars cited here put forward the notion that the development of interactive, horizontal networks of communication has induced the rise of a new form of communication – a so-called ‘mass self-communication’ as defined by Manuel Castells. As argued, all these emerging new communicative forms and conditions provide the support for the ‘social production of meaning.’ They also act as catalysts of ‘socialized communication’ and counter-power, understood as the capacity of a social actor to resist and challenge dominant and institutionalized power relations. As seen from audience studies, although certain media (e.g., television) still retain their share of public attention in most of CEE, the internet and social media sites are also extensively used by citizens as a new medium for networking, negotiation, and meaning making (Balčytienė et al., 2012). As seen, the emerging new type of communication (and also participation) is characterized by self-generated interests, self-directed actions and choices, and self-selected reception. In this sense, it appears something completely new in CEE.

Generally, today’s communications field in CEE is booming with newcomers – it is saturated with new channels, news sources, access opportunities hardly imagined only a decade ago. For CEE audiences, there is not just one news media or source of inspiration available. There are no longer just one or a few attitudes, or a few dominating opinions. There is a multitude of them. Likewise, interactive technological developments, supported with economic models of small-scale online funding and development of internet media and blogosphere, lead to the formation of completely new audience groups, new social movements, and new social (and political) formations in CEE. These groups and formations are not massive – they are niche-issue oriented; they function as de-territorialized, yet ideologically shaped groups of followers and supporters. Information sources and niche media used by those groups of followers are accordingly converted into a ‘semi-alternative field’ which functions and is maintained in parallel with mainstream media (see *Figure 3*).

**Figure 3.**  
Competing mainstream and alternative media and professional and user networks (Balčytienė, 2011).

### *Parallel communicative spaces and information flows*



#### **Mass media spaces characterized by:**

- Registered and growing media concentration on national/ local levels
- Increasing external pressures on media (from PR and strategic communications)
- Increasing internal pressures on media (economic pressures, job cuts, loss of public service mission and ideals)
- Weakening of professionalism (de-professionalization of journalism)
- Weaker control/watchdog mission of media (lack of resources, missions)
- Political or business parallelism
- ...

(Results of comparative media studies)

#### **Semi-alternative media spaces characterized by:**

- Non-mainstream, alternative, community, niche, and specialized-media
- Aims at re-framing of mainstream media frames
- Offers new genres and follows new functions
- Offers new news sources, experts, and authorities
- Rests on different ownership structures and business models (and funding schemes such as sponsorships)
- Constitutes the rise of ideologically-focussed networks of communicators
- ...

As shown in Figure 3, the parallel field contains within itself also the works of conventional media, such as cultural weeklies or monthly political and economic news and analysis magazines, or certain niche and specialized television and radio channels and programs. Its exceptional feature is described by the keyword of 'alternativeness' – discourses moving around non-mainstream views and opinions presented by actors from outside the dominant (elite) networks.

## **DISCUSSION**

Going back to the main argument discussed in the introductory part of this paper – that transitional and young democracies are more closely affected by emerging changes towards increasing fragmentation and social polarization and individualism – it seems that these societies indeed could be recognized as 'laboratories of contemporary life' where all emerging controversies are observed and tested.

CEE societies have distinctive social attributes and characteristics. Many of those characteristics could be grouped under the umbrella of a general 'culture of subordination' (or dependency) with descriptive attributes such as clientelism

and informal relations, low understanding of the common good and public service missions. It can be argued that such culture is more prone to development towards individualized consumption, consumerism, and personified access.

Indeed, all such developments towards fragmentation and social polarization are observed in many countries around the world, not only in CEE. It could be discussed that fragmentation is a result of increasing commercialization. Another factor leading to fragmentation and social polarization is the increasing use of new media and social networking among younger audiences.

In the fields of media and politics, for example, all registered controversies and severe social consequences center along two opposing developments that could be seen as the tendencies towards 'de-politization and politization' or 'de-professionalization and professionalization', among others.

Let me take a brief look at these developments.

As popularly discussed, de-politization is among those dominating trends registered in contemporary societies. Hard politics is shrinking in media sections and fewer and fewer people identify politics as an issue they would be interested in. Generally, interest in politics has declined in all countries, and among all audience age groups. Even in the countries with high newspaper reading cultures people read less news and they show little interest in politics (Nieminen, 2010). Studies also confirm that young people are not interested in politics and this finding may be linked to the fact they do not read print media and newspapers (Vihalemm, 2012). At the same time, another trend is identified – namely, the trend towards greater politization (Hallin, 2009). Increasing politization, the rise of new 'ideological attachments' and dependencies, appears to be among those unexpected consequences that go hand in hand with fragmentation. This finding is especially closely linked to general changes in the field of communications, particularly to demassification of media and increasing Internetization, but also to changes in audience preferences in information consumption.

Changes in journalistic professionalism and professionalization are also identified as serious drawbacks witnessed in contemporary societies. As stressed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), professionalism can be assessed according to three dimensions: media autonomy (the degree to which the profession is autonomous from state), political and market constraints as well as media functions and professional norms (both formal and informal) that guide journalistic practice; and media's public service orientation, or the degree to which journalists view themselves as serving society's needs. In their subsequent studies, the authors address the rising

need to deconstruct the concept of 'professionalism' by emphasizing cultural aspects of the profession in different contexts (Hallin and Mancini, 2012). In this respect Nygren (2012) proposes to speak about the factors that define the 'ethos of profession'. Following the author, journalistic professionalization could be assessed as a process that arises from 'within the profession' (or organization) and refers to the maintenance of the professional creed of autonomous journalists. Whereas professionalization can also be assessed as a process that is stimulated by 'external' factors and demands (technological or economic or other emerging developments from other fields than media, such as political or economic interests).

At the same time, although attached to certain cultural and contextual constraints, these developments are not bound and restricted by these. In the Nordic countries, for example, media groups are still trying to maintain their hold on news production and their position in the media market irrespective of dramatically negative market trends and future market prospects. Journalists in those countries appear to show rather different adaptation strategies from what, for example, journalists in younger democracies seem to strive towards. In the Nordic countries, the aspect of professionalization as 'professionalization from within' still remains very strong (Karpinen et al., 2011; Von Krogh and Nord, 2011; Nygren, 2012; Nord, in this issue; Krivovyaz et al., in this issue). Additionally, civil societies in the Nordic countries keep high moral ideals. And media professionals themselves maintain requests for high quality control. In contrast, in most CEE countries these adaptations are less shaped by the existing internal rules, and are more shaped and focused on changes stimulated by 'outside' factors.

All in all, it seems to be true that in transitional societies all registered changes and transformations, as well as severe consequences, are evolving more freely. This may be caused by several factors: CEE countries manifest weaker associational and civic cultures; Journalistic professionalism in CEE countries is also low: in most of CEE the mainstream media is attached and closely integrated into the webs of complex social relations and partnerships with dominating elites. Alternative and non-mainstream media forms, though, are extensively used as new hotbeds for meaning making and socialization. Although contributing significantly to pluralisation, these new forms score low in terms of impartiality and objectivity; a sign the battles over rules and ideas in young democracies are not yet over.

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Lastly, a few more notes should be made on the significance of contextual and cultural particularities in the assessments of media performance. As shown here, all new developments and transformations reproduce the existing cultures, power relationships, and, consequently, the existing inequalities. These developments show that many characteristics of a more general – a society's – culture are also transferred to the media field and take shape through, for example, an enduring culture of clientelist arrangements and dependencies and agreements among elites. Likewise, all other contemporary changes and developments furthermore signal the rise of a consumer oriented, individualized, and socially polarized (and ideologically shaped) society – a society where personified access to news and information is prioritized and prized; a social arrangement that gives an impression of a society living in several parallel fields (or even universes). In such a context a warning question therefore arises: Can such a society give rise to a quality public sphere (and quality media), and to the development of participatory political culture?

In spite of all doubts and uncertainties, all these social developments also show that an unparalleled degree of 'human agency' and 'user control' is registered in CEE (as observed, for example, in the rise of new media and diversification and pluralization of the blogosphere, and changes in conventional media use among different age groups of audiences). How this new type of agency will evolve and how its public power will be used remains to be seen. In the same line of thinking, it also must be disputed whether a new type of journalism will develop in CEE to accommodate the needs and requests of a changing (democratic) society.

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