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Witnessing Change in Contemporary Russia

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Contents

Russian Studies in Finland ARTO MUSTAJOKI	5
The Political System in Contemporary Russia MARKKU KIVINEN	11
Contours of External and Internal in EU-Russia Relations HISKI HAUKKALA, VADIM KONONENKO, KATRI PYNNÖNIEMI AND SINIKUKKA SAARI	21
Integration of the Russian Economy with the European Union KARI E.O. ALHO	56
Corporate Governance in Russia EVA LILJEBLOM AND BENJAMIN MAURY	89
Diabetes Associations and Political Culture in St. Petersburg and Helsinki RISTO ALAPURO	107
Media as a Mirror of Change KAARLE NORDENSTRENG AND JUKKA PIETILÄINEN	136
The Swamp of Texts: Literary Mythology of St. Petersburg Revisited TOMI HUTTUNEN AND PEKKA PESONEN	159

Peculiarities in Doing Public Health Research in Russia	184
ELINA HEMMINKI, MERI LARIVAARA, TATIANA DUBIKAYTIS, MIKA GISSLER, ANNA ROTKIRCH AND OLGA KUZNETSOVA	
‘The First Child is the Fruit of Love’ – On the Russian Tradition of Early First Births	201
ANNA ROTKIRCH AND KATJA KESSELI	
Russian Health in Transition	221
PAULIINA AARVA AND ILKKA PIETILÄ	
Geography and the Economic Evolution of the Russian North	250
MARKKU TYKKYLÄINEN	
Holding Companies and Business Integration in the Russian Forest Industry Sector	284
ANNA-MAIJA MATILAINEN	
Measuring Particulate Air Pollutants in a Moving Train across the Russian Territory	307
VELI-MATTI KERMINEN, EIJA ASMI, SANNA KUOKKA, MIIKKA DAL MASO, KIMMO TEINILÄ, RISTO HILLAMO AND MARKKU KULMALA	
Lessons from the ENSINOR Interdisciplinary Research Project	317
BRUCE C. FORBES, ELINA KAARLEJÄRVI, TIMO KUMPULA, NINA MESCHTYB, ANU PAJUNEN, FLORIAN STAMMLER AND TUULA TUISKU	
Contributors	343
Russia in Flux Research Programme – Academy of Finland	348

Kaarle Nordenstreng and Jukka Pietiläinen

Media as a Mirror of Change

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the interface between hard forces of economy and politics, on the one hand, and soft elements of culture and everyday life, on the other – generally known as “mass media” or just “media” (both in singular and plural). The concept typically includes printed media (newspapers, magazines, books), electronic media (radio, television, film, video, records) and recently also the so-called online media (Internet-based forums, blogs, websites). Its core is news journalism but it extends to entertainment and arts as well as to education and business.

Russia inherited from the Soviet Union a highly developed media system. Technically and in terms of reaching the population the Soviet media were from the 1950s among the top twenty in world statistics. In terms of its socio-political content, however, the Soviet “Communist” media system constituted a type of its own in the so-called press theories around the world (Christians et al. 2009). Post-Soviet Russia provides a historical laboratory for studying the nature of media-society relations; Sarah Oates (2009, 37) refers to “the incredible experience of the post-Soviet media system (...) particularly useful for evaluating the utility of media ‘models’”. The laboratory has not yet produced a final reading of the historical case, but the contemporary Russian media landscape still suggests some central aspects of the change

from the former Soviet system to today's more or less stabilized Russia. These characteristics are highlighted below with references to recent scholarship on Russian media, including our own research.¹

The nature of media

The first aspect of change deals with the idea of media itself. Mass media in Russian are traditionally called *sredstva massovoi informatsii* (SMI), which literally means “instruments of mass information”. Sometimes even the word “propaganda” was added to this term: *sredstva massovoi informatsii i propagandy*. This implies an idea that the media are technical instruments; they mediate the messages emanating from sources of power to the public at large, and this receiving public will then turn the message flow into “mass information” or “mass consciousness”. Such an instrumental notion of the mass media fits well with the Communist system – but it also fits with the capitalist consumer society where media typically operate as vehicles for controlling the social consciousness and for selling audiences to advertisers.

A simple SMI notion of the media has in post-Soviet Russia been replaced by a more complex notion, whereby media are not just technical instruments but more or less autonomous actors, although the term SMI continues to be used. Current media are, at least in theory, more versatile and independent than they were during Communism. But again, the same is true of the media in the so-called Western world. There is a universal trend for the media in developed market economies to constitute a sphere of its own – *mediasphere* – which not only suggests that the media are more autonomous in directing public opinion but also that they perform a more fundamental role in society

¹ Kaarle Nordenstreng was the director of the Academy of Finland project *Media in a Changing Russia* (2006–2008), with Jukka Pietiläinen working in the project team along with Katja Koikkalainen and Svetlana Pasti. A parallel Academy project *Making a Good Life* at the University of Tampere was directed by Professor Arja Rosenholm. Both projects had a Russian partner team, the first based in Moscow State University with Elena Vartanova as team leader and the second based in Ural State University, Ekaterinburg, with Elena Trubina as team leader. A common anthology of these projects has been edited by Rosenholm, Nordenstreng and Trubina (2010). Part of this chapter is based on Pietiläinen's paper prepared for conference *Beyond East and West* at the Central European University in Budapest on 25–27 June 2009.

by mediating social and economic relations between people and institutions. Indeed, *mediation* and *mediatization* have become buzzwords in contemporary media studies everywhere (Couldry 2008; Hjarvard 2008).

In post-Soviet Russia, however, the notion of media has undergone an additional change: from instruments in the service of central power to platforms reflecting various social actors. These contrasting roles are seen in media theory along a dimension which runs between the extremes of an outside and neutral observer of events in society, or a mirror for looking at the world, on the one hand, and on the other, an active participant in running and changing society, or a weapon to fight in the world. In this view, the earlier SMI media were active and partisan weapons, while the later mediasphere is seen to operate as a more or less passive and neutral mirror (Nordenstreng 2006; 2007).

Accordingly, “mirror” in the title of this chapter is a considered choice. A related term is *glasnost*, which can be seen as another way of expressing the idea of a faithful mirror of society. As shown by Reino Paasilinna (1995, 12), Gorbachev was not the first to employ it in Russia; it has been used since the 18th century, among others by Pushkin and Gorki – as well as Lenin. Actually, *glasnost* should not only be seen as the other side of *perestroika* of the late 1980s but as a concept deeply embedded in Russian culture. It parallels the Western understanding that in essence media and journalism has the transparency of glass (Glasser 1996).

Waves of change

An overview of the historical change, which shook the Russian socio-political system during the last three decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the new millennium, was presented in five waves in Ivan Zassoursky’s chapter in *Russian Media Challenge* (Zassoursky 2002). The same periodization is included in Zassoursky’s *Media and Power in Post-Soviet Russia* (2004). Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova (2009, 14) characterize it among the surveys of developments around Russian media as “the defining work in this category”.

The table showing the transformation of the media system in the Soviet Union and Russia from 1970 to 2000 speaks for itself and is reproduced in Table 1.²

Looking ahead beyond these waves of change, Ivan Zassoursky writes in the early 2000s:

For the younger generation of Russians, Putin's administration is seen as struggling with petty old problems of national identity, law, order, and the like. The school of chaos they faced through the nineties let them adapt to any conditions and turn to private lives as spheres of self-realization while almost completely ignoring the virtual community of the nation state. And here lies the seed of the next social project that may look nicer than the "Great Russia" national identity that seems to emerge as a symbol of the Putin era. However, this does not mean the younger audience detests that strong state ideal. (Zassoursky 2002, 84.)

We shall return to these prospects for the future at the end of this chapter, after reviewing the Russian media landscape from the angles of economic structure, audience consumption, content culture and socio-political trends.

Media structure

In Russia, the media structure largely collapsed with the Soviet system. Earlier centralized structure was replaced by a regionalized and localized media model, with television remaining the only really national media. In Russian television the role of sponsorship and dependence on outside funding was crucial in the 1990s and led to oligarch media empires. Since 2000 the role of the state has been strengthened, but it has not resulted in West-European style public service television; instead a combination of market strategy and state control has emerged.

Before the collapse, the newspaper circulation was heavily concentrated on a small number of national newspapers. In 1990, 43 national newspapers

² This version is based on Zassoursky 2004, 22–3, but is abridged to include mainly media-related aspects of the five periods. It has been updated by the author himself.

WITNESSING CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

	1970–1985	1986–1990	1991–1995	1996–2000	2000–?
Political system	USSR corporation management. One power centre.	Shifting and shaking. Democratic reforms coincide with “dry” law and tobacco shortage.	No system. Struggle. Complete decentralization. Strong opposition.	Mediated, strong regional leaders. Media holdings as political parties. Elected monarchy.	Centralized system based on law enforcement agencies and army. Weak opposition.
Ideology	Communist-imperialist, evidently false but pervasive. Stable.	Democratization, socialist reforms. Optimistic.	Market fundamentalism, democratic reforms, anti-Communism.	No coherent belief system. Symbolic space around dramatic conflicts.	Nationalism (strong state + monopolism) vs. enemies and global turbulence
Social dream	Welfare consumer society	Public sphere + the West	Welfare state	Law and order	Great Russia
Media system type	Propaganda machine	Glasnost-propaganda machine	“Fourth power”, independent media	Media-political system, society of the spectacle	Instrumental media, social responsibility
Media system structure	Newspaper-based, radio important, state-controlled TV (3 channels)	Newspaper-based, stronger TV, strong radio	Transforming: printed press in decline, broad-casting on the rise	Media-political system in the commercial media environment	State-controlled media in commercial environment vs. the Internet.
Journalist roles	Instrumental	Important, especially in printed press	Extremely important	Almost completely instrumental	Defined in professional terms
Media leaders	<i>Pravda</i> , <i>Izvestiia</i> , Radio 1 and Radio “Maiak”. Strong state controlled publishing and film industry.	<i>Moskovskie Novosti</i> , <i>Ogonëk</i> , literary and intellectual almanacs. Radio “Liberty”.	<i>Izvestiia</i> , <i>Moskovskii Komsomolets</i> , <i>Nezavisimaia Gazeta</i> . <i>Kommersant</i> , Russian TV 2, NTV	Public Russian Television ORT, NTV, FM radio, elite press (<i>Kommersant</i>), magazines (<i>Cosmopolitan</i>). Film industry.	State-controlled TV, entertainment TV, FM radio, tabloids. Online media, blogs, social networks, video, gaming, instant messaging.
Media opposition	Samizdat, oral speech, anecdotes. Russian-language radio stations and newspapers based abroad.	Radical samizdat + conservative Communists (<i>Sovetskaia Rossiia</i>).	Communist newspapers (<i>Pravda</i> , <i>Sovetskaia Rossiia</i>), nationalist (<i>Den</i>).	Communist, nationalist and alternative media (<i>Trava i volia</i> , <i>Radek</i>).	Representation (TV, radio, press) versus Communication (new and mobile media).

Table 1. The Media-Political History of Russia Since 1970, according to Ivan Zassoursky

shared 49% of the total newspaper circulation of the whole Soviet Union (Pietiläinen 2002, 108). The collapse was even more dramatic than in most of Central East European (CEE) countries, because the media system was more centralized and more vulnerable to suddenly rising costs. In Russia most of the national as well as many regional newspapers lost over 90% of their circulation. According to official statistics, the circulation of national dailies dropped from 80 million copies in 1990 to 5 million copies in 1998, and since then decreased to 2.4 million in 2001, but since then increased again to 4.1 million in 2008.³ Distribution of newspapers was formerly based on subscriptions, but the new newspapers found retail sales a more viable way of distribution in conditions of hyperinflation.

In the early 1990s, most of the newspapers were privatized to their staff, while new oligarchs gained influence in many television channels. The line between public and private disappeared, since the ORT (Public Russian Television), even if 51% of it was formally owned by the state, in practice got its financing from businessman Boris Berezovskii and was under his influence. Russian oligarchs used their influence over the media in order to gain assets in other businesses privatized by the state. The victory of the oligarchic media system was apparent in the 1996 presidential elections when political and economic power holders joined together in order to ensure the re-election of President Boris Yeltsin, whose popularity only half a year before the elections was extremely low.

The ownership of the Russian media industry is now divided between governmentally controlled state capital and privately controlled commercial capital, the latter comprising both domestic and foreign ownership. The trend in the 2000s has been a decrease of commercial capital and a relative increase of state capital as the base for media enterprises, notably through mixed forms of ownership. This trend is accompanied by a concentration of the media industry, with three main players in the arena: a state enterprise (VGTRK) operating in TV, radio and Internet; a mixed conglomerate (Gazprom-Media) running TV, radio, press, cinema and advertising agencies; and a purely

³ *Pechat RF...* in 1990, 1998, 2001 and 2008; figures include newspapers which come out at least 4 times a week.

commercial structure (Prof-Media) in TV, radio, press, cinema and Internet. The Russian media system is also characterized by a trend towards regional industries in coordination with the central players. Regionalization and convergence of different media, including the Internet, are key aspects of the dynamically developing system. (Vartanova & Smirnov, 2010)

In terms of economy, Elena Vartanova and Sergei Smirnov (*ibid.*) demonstrate, first of all, the impressive size and diversity of the current media industry. Its growth rate, especially for advertising during the first decade of the new millennium, has reached the level of Western industrial countries (typically 1% of gross domestic product). Yet Russian media companies are still rather weak and it has been estimated (ROMIR Monitoring 2004, 3) that only in 2010 will Russia have enough consumers with income on such a level that there will be sufficient demand for independent media. The global economic crisis and significant drop (about 30%) in advertising revenue may have moved this deadline later, even if it was initially supposed to be realistic.

As far as foreign ownership is concerned, it did not become an important feature in the post-Soviet media system, while in the CEE countries eight out of ten largest media companies are nowadays foreign. The only segments of significant foreign ownership can be found in magazines, economic newspapers and radio, but even here Russia differs from most CEE countries. Five out of ten largest magazine publishing houses are foreign or partly foreign (Finnish, French, American and two German companies) and these foreign companies publish five out of top the ten magazines in terms of advertising revenues (*Russian Periodical Press Market 2008*, 39, 51). The first foreign magazine *Burda* started its Russian version during the Soviet era in 1987. Especially after 1998 with the increase of economic growth foreign brands have increasingly launched Russian versions. The economic crisis of 2008–2009 has already caused the closure of some of them, which tells about uncertainties of Russian market, and also about unrealistic expectations.

In the newspaper market only two out of the top ten publishers are foreign. In the business press one of the leading daily newspapers, *Vedomosti*, is published by the Finnish owners Independent Media Sanoma Magazines, while the Swedish company Bonnier has since 1997 published a daily busi-

ness newspaper *Delovoi Peterburg* in St. Petersburg and has started a similar regional publication *Delovaia gazeta Iug* in Southern Russia as well. A similar marginal case is the publishing of English-language newspapers, of which two most important ones, *The Moscow Times* and *St. Petersburg Times* belong to the above-mentioned Finnish company.

In comparison with the CEE countries, the Russian media market remains mainly under national ownership and Russian media companies have even expanded to neighbouring countries like Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. The size of the country is certainly one explanation. The Russian media market is very fragmented: most newspaper publishing consists of regional and local media, which are usually owned locally and in only few cases (the newspaper *Zhizn'*, started as a network of regional newspapers, is one exception) has any cross-regional ownership or co-operation. In regional newspapers foreign ownership is rare, because most regional media companies are economically not viable or competitive enough in order to attract foreign investors. Also, the political risks may be too high.

In Russian television, foreign ownership also remains low in comparison with most CEE countries. There have been attempts to limit the ownership of television companies by foreign companies. The first of these attempts was a proposed law on television and radio broadcasting which was never approved (Richter 2002, 134). In 2001 the Russian Mass media legislation was amended with a ban of foreign ownership of more than a 50 percent stake in TV channels covering more than half the country. More recently, in 2008, a new law on foreign investments in sectors of strategic importance defined television and radio companies as “strategic”, which means that a foreign individual or firm will need approval before becoming a majority (over 50%) shareholder.

Summing up developments in the media landscape since the 1980s, the sociologist Mikhail Chernysh singles out *differentiation* as the keyword:

The first stage involved differentiation in line with political change, the emergence of pluralism and party politics. The second stage came when the rich or well-to-do strata needed urgently information of how to live, to build up a comfortable life. Hence came the *Domovoi* and other glossy magazines. The third stage related to a break-up of society into new market-embedded professionals and the rest of the population. It brought

about new journals and magazines dedicated to business and management. And lastly came the time when further differentiation of the market had to account for leisure and lifestyle practices. Now the market is guided not by politics but by consumer practices and the need for satisfaction of specific needs. What has been said is also true for electronic media: the decline of politics led to the emergence of new entertainment TV channels and radio stations with very specific music formats.

Equally crucial is the gradual rise of the cyberspace media. The Internet signified a new kind of democracy when reader had a chance to partake in the making of the final media product. Most traditional media had to react to the new Internet age, by opening up to public, engaging in lively discussion with its readers, by listening to what the readers had to say on this or that topic.⁴

The media scholar Elena Vartanova (2009), for her part, raises *market* as the most important factor of change. In her overview of the developments of competition and convergence, contemporary market-driven media, increasingly dependent on new information technologies, take into account the interests of advertisers and audiences more than ever. The structure of national and regional/local media markets is being increasingly shaped by the wants and needs of these players, and this process seems to minimize the traditional impact of politics on Russian media performance and activities. However, the change is complex and full of contradictions as indeed is Russian society as a whole. Accordingly, the contemporary media landscape also reveals “replacement of information with opinions, self-censorship and large role of the state in the public space” (ibid., 297).

Media consumption

The most important change in Russian media use during the last twenty years has been the change from a nation of readers to a nation of TV viewers (Dubin 2001, 298–300). The second most important change is the different development of newspapers and magazines. Newspapers, even if they are still read by two-thirds of Russians, are losing their popularity, while magazines

⁴ Personal communication with Professor Mikhail Chernysh of the Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow (April 2009).

are increasing their readership. The third most important change has been the differentiation of newspapers and this has also caused some differences in the readership structure of different newspapers. According to a national survey conducted in 2007, over 98% of Russians watch television, while only 66% read newspapers, 53% listen to radio and only 38% read magazines (Pietiläinen 2008, 367; see also Vartanova 2002; Belin 2002).

Newspaper circulation boomed during *perestroika* but started to fall as early as 1991. Economic collapse and hyperinflation caused further reductions in 1992 and 1993, although the number of newspaper titles increased significantly. The fall in circulation has not been uniform and new weekly newspapers, in particular, have been able to gain new readers. A degree of differentiation is in progress among the print media: some newspapers serve “the information needs of an educated elite, while other newspapers are catering for the mass taste” (Voltmer 2000, 494).

The proportion of the population which reads newspapers is thus decreasing. In 1998 some 75% read some newspaper regularly, while in 2007 only 66% had read a newspaper in the previous week. Some signs of a declined interest in newspapers were visible a few years ago when the number of people who felt that newspapers had become more interesting dropped rapidly from 58% in 1998 to 34% in 2001 (Zorkaia 2005, 61). The winners in this competition among newspapers for readers have usually been various television guides, of which *Antenna-Telesem* is the most prominent. Newspapers devoted to sports have also gained in popularity. Newspapers have lost their popularity especially in larger cities, while in small towns and rural areas the most important local newspapers in many cases reach over 50% of the population. Newspapers of smaller towns have also in many cases shown a high degree of professionalism and independence (Eismont 2007). Larger cities are a battle ground for regional editions of national newspapers which have been emerging since the end of 1990s and been part of the restoration of the national press.

The magazines have developed quite differently from the newspapers. While most of today’s popular newspapers existed in the Soviet era, most contemporary popular magazines were almost all founded after the collapse

of the Soviet Union. Russian magazines have faced tough competition from foreign formats. It is likely that a more flexible operation of journals in the media market (more oriented towards retail sales than subscriptions; an income structure based on selling price more than advertisements) and usually less politicized content made it possible for foreign owners to enter the Russian magazine market, while the newspaper market has remained largely closed to foreign owners.

Radio, especially music radio, has also been one of the success stories, mainly because of lower production costs, attractiveness to advertisers due to high targetability, decreasing politicization and improved professionalism (Vartanova 2002, 57). The radio channels people choose to listen to varies considerably depending on age and partly on gender.

Magazines, radio and (entertainment) television are the most Westernized sectors of the media and the most adapted to the new economic and political conditions. Newspapers, on the other hand, are lagging behind. Some newspapers have successfully adopted a popular style and have been successful in gaining readers and achieving a certain financial independence. On the other hand, serious quality newspapers are seldom independent, often being linked with political power struggles. Those sectors of the media which have Westernized most rapidly are more popular in cities and among young people than in more traditional regions and population groups. The same is true of the Internet. Most Westernized television channels, the entertainment channels *STS* and *TNT* in particular, have also increased their popularity, especially among young people and in large cities. The more traditional channels, *First Channel* and *Rossiia* are more popular among old population and in rural areas.

In general, it is important to remember that media consumption reflects the widening social inequalities in contemporary Russian society which are accompanied by new forms of classification and division throughout the media and cultural field.

Media culture

All post-Communist countries, Russia included, have imported a large amount of Western formats and practices to their media. In Russia, the arrival of foreign formats has been the most visible in entertainment television (Rulyova 2007). Foreign influence is also obvious in Russia's new business papers, which "increasingly resemble other media systems in market economies, although significant differences nevertheless exist" (Koikkalainen 2007, 1326). Magazines, not least those representing the fashionable "glamour" life style, constitute another bulwark of Western mentality in the media culture (Litovskaia & Shaburova 2010, 198).

Terhi Rantanen (2002, 133) has pointed out that Russia has already entered the third stage of globalization, that of declining globalization because "a saturation point was reached and there was growing criticism against globalization and a partial return to national values". If "by September 2000, almost all soap operas were of foreign origin" (*ibid.*, 99), the production of similar Russian programmes have replaced most of foreign imports since then. Already at the end of the 1990s, Russian-made programmes started to compete successfully with foreign ones; of the top ten serials four were Russian, three from Latin America and one from the United States (*ibid.*, 101–2).

Natalia Mikhailova (2010, 189) has noted in her analysis of the Russian versions of *Survivor* reality show that, "the paradigm of the gender stereotypes presented in the show has changed, advancing towards the Western model of a successful woman" and that "the new Western behaviour practices were often presented in combination with the traditional Russian (or Soviet) concept of *good* behaviour". In Russia, new formats of entertainment television have not been approved without criticism. Accordingly, that "all of the major private TV channels exhibited a high degree of social irresponsibility" with reference to "the scandalous programs 'Behind the Glass' (*Za steklom*, TV 6), 'Windows' (*Okna*, TNT), and others" (Sharikov 2007, 90). The reality TV show 'Behind the Glass' was made according to the format of Big Brother, and first aired in 2001 by television station TV-6. Programmes which could

hardly been called “scandalous” like *Pole Chudes*, the Russian version of *Wheel of Fortune* format, have also been “seen as popular and of ‘bad taste’ (...) by the metropolitan intelligentsia” (Rulyova 2007, 1384).

This kind of critical attitude towards foreign formats has caused Russia to adopt Western practices more selectively than many smaller CEE countries. Also, foreign formats have been domesticated by merging them with traditions of Russian culture. Cultural and economic possibilities for these kinds of adaptations have been better in Russia.

In the field of news journalism the diffusion of Western news paradigm has been one of the key changes in the media in CEE countries. For example, in Estonia the professional news form of inverted pyramid became universal in one decade after the collapse of the Soviet system, while in Russia its adoption has been slower (Pietiläinen 2005). In Russia, the local conditions have been less amenable to adaptation to journalistic culture which would be detached from journalists’ own moral, political and religious principles and based on the audiences’ tastes and the performance of competing newspapers.

Sticking to old traditions, and the importance of national traditions in other areas than journalism, also seems to be one of the characteristic features of Russian society. In accordance with the old traditions of publicist ideas, Russian journalists emphasize the need to assist their public and their role in developing intellectual and cultural interests of the public (Pasti & Pietiläinen 2007). On the other hand, as shown by Svetlana Pasti (2007), journalists reflect the different generations in changing Russia – one rooted in the Soviet era, another made up of the transitional elements of the 1990s and the youngest carrying a post-2000 world view. According to Olessia Koltsova (2006), Russian journalists are more controlled than their Western colleagues but less dominated.

Media politics

After the collapse of Communist rule the political system was pluralized, competitive elections were held and the result of elections was in many cases the victory of the opposition in most CEE countries. This split among the political elite also had consequences for the media. “Political pressure on print journalism was moderated and pluralized in some countries, and terminated in others”, while “broadcast media remained at the forefront of attention among the new political elite” (Bajomi-Lázár & Sükösd 2003, 31).

After two decades of transformation, in most of the CEE countries the links between media and the political system are close. In that respect the media-politics relations in these countries resemble the situation in Southern European countries in which political clientelism, with close relations between press and politicians, has long traditions (Splichal 1994; Hallin & Mancini 2004). In Russia the situation is much the same. However, Natalia Roudakova (2008, 55) has pointed out that in Russia, unlike for example in Italy, the alliances between politicians and journalists are unstable and not rooted on clientelist ties and loyalties.

Russian relations between politics and media are in some respects less obvious than in other CEE countries. Formally many media are private and independent but the control mechanisms exist, while journalists are also aware of them and possibly capable of resisting them, or at least understanding their problems.

Public service television remains a rather weak idea in contemporary Russia and it seems unlikely that the State television channels would move completely to licence fees or budget funding. In general, the idea of public service broadcasting has not attracted much attention in Russia, obviously because both the political will and the public need have been lacking, as pointed out by Elena Vartanova and Yassen Zassoursky (2003). They regret this and take it as an indication of the underdevelopment of civil society. Yet “public service broadcasting is both a part of and a condition for civil society in Russia” (ibid., 106).

On the other hand, in Russia as elsewhere, the system of clientelism is under pressure from globalization and marketization processes and these market mechanisms affect the media in Russia in much the same way as elsewhere. The new system which has formed in Russia is not stable and could be changed quite rapidly.

What is different between Russia and practically all CEE countries, is that in the latter political power has been moved from one party or bloc to another, in some case even in every parliamentary elections. In Russia, the “party in power” has remained in power even if its political support has fluctuated and not always been very strong (in 1995 10% of votes). Russian political power structure is much more closed than that of many CEE countries, which leaves little room for political dissent and competition, even if some forms of these persist in Russia.

The Russian authorities have been eager to keep the most influential media, mainly national television, in their control. In principle, there is not much difference from some Western presidential regimes. For example, similar features could be found in France during the Fifth Republic under de Gaulle in the 1960s and in Ukraine in the early 1990s (Chalaby 1998, 433). These features include, first, the fact that the state is a key player in the media field and continues to exert firm control over public communications. Second, television is a national institution and therefore enjoys a certain prestige, but has duties to present a positive image of the nation and foster national cohesion. Third, presidential regimes do not usually resort to overt or violent means of coercion against journalists and, fourth, they tolerate opposition papers, but presidents do exert personal control over television (*ibid.*, 437). What concerns Gaullist France and Ukraine is also valid in post-Soviet Russia.

Sarah Oates (2006, 29) has pointed out that “Russia technically has a diverse system of media ownership for its major media outlets, but realistically there is no central media outlet that can challenge the Kremlin’s monopoly on power and information”. Suggesting a “neo-Soviet model of the media” Oates (2009, 55) claims that “the Russian media is again a tool for the elites rather than a watchdog of the masses”.

It is obvious that the Russian state has aimed to marginalize the dissenting

views and has been rather successful in doing so. The result of this process is not very far from the practice of developed Western societies, in which the general rule is that the more dissenting a view is, the more marginalized it will be. In Russia, this process is certainly more visible than elsewhere and the “invisible hand” of economic forces which marginalize dissenting views is more apparent and looks more the hand of the state than that of the market.

According to Alexei Pankin (1998, 32), the Russian media model is characterized by the following features: authorities’ unwillingness or inability to conduct radical reform, their unwillingness to either let media go completely their own way, or to fully subsidize them; early accumulation of national capital and an above average level of corruption. In this system, media do not live by the market, but a great amount of diversity can be found.

Boris Dubin (2004) concludes his analysis of the collective identity of Russian society with a keyword “stabilization”: media promoting average world view with little choice. This again feeds depolitization of society particularly through television infotainment “massage” which substitutes political life and civic participation. Dubin’s (2005) assessment of the period 1995–2005 subscribes to a *déjà vu* among many socio-political observers – back to the Brezhnev and earlier times.

Future prospects

There is no shortage of critical voices assessing the contemporary Russian media landscape, coming mostly from the West but also easy to find inside Russia (see Vartanova, Nieminen & Salminen 2009). The standard question asked is whether Putin’s media policies mean a return to the Soviet system. However, such a simplistic question is not analytically helpful and moreover contrary to Russian reality.

A more balanced approach is provided by Birgit Beumers, Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova (2009) in an impressive anthology of mainly Western academics with different angles of more or less critical approach to where the Russian media landscape has been going in the 2000s. They make a point

of the “conflicting signals” coming from the landscape, and their editors’ introduction avoids a definite verdict: “If this leaves the reader unable to draw a single, coherent message from the volume, then we will consider our task successfully completed, for such a situation mirrors the state of affairs prevailing upon the ever-shifting sands of the post-Soviet media landscape.” (*ibid.*, 25)

The same view is shared by Mikhail Fedotov, Minister of Press and Information 1992–3 and one of the main architects of the post-Soviet media law⁵, who perceives that Russia is moving in opposite directions simultaneously, “including movement from autocracy to democracy and from democracy to autocracy, since the elements of both regimes are visible in our ideology, propaganda, and law”.⁶ His assessment serves as a baseline for the future:

However, as the market in this country is inadequate, flawed, perverse, far from being up to world standards, and so is democracy, the reforms introduced here often yield the results opposite to those declared. Thus, the legal ban on censorship in the media has resulted in a mixed model of Soviet and Western styles of interaction between the authorities and the media, which embodies the worst features that have ever existed in the countries of the Warsaw Treaty and NATO...

In turn, the conception of independent mass media has altogether lost its clarity. In the early 90s, this conception more or less adequately reflected the editorial policies of non-government media. Starting from the mid-90s, the most influential non-government media gradually came to be instruments of political influence in the hands of financial and industrial groups, to varying degrees associated with the Kremlin. However, now and then business interests of those groups were contradictory, this is why the information flows generated by them formed an incomplete but stereoscopic and colourful picture of reality. In those days, a large number of Russians aspired for expanding information pluralism due to emergence of new media holdings which would less and less depend on the state. The opposite was really the case, however, and as soon as the degree to which the financial and industrial groups were affiliated with the Kremlin exceeded reasonable limits, the information picture of the world became flat, black-and-white and clearly divided into ‘us’ and ‘them’.

It would be wrong to say that such a monochrome landscape is characteristic of the Russian media as a whole: in fact, beyond the national TV channels and state-run media, the landscape remains fairly multicoloured. Here the ‘yellow’ press goes together with glossy magazines, religious press – with popular science editions, business publications – with editions for the youth. Such variability is especially typical of the print

⁵ See Nordenstreng et al. 2002, 218–51.

⁶ Personal Communication with Professor Mikhail Fedotov, Moscow (April 2009).

media, which involve an increasing number of ‘niche’ editions. In radio and television broadcasting segmentation is also present, though to a lesser extent, since the natural resource of radio frequencies is limited. But whatever the sector of the media, the dominant components are entertainment and propaganda.

Another analytical voice from inside Russia comes from Ivan Zassoursky (2009), who follows up his comments written five years earlier and quoted above:

The question of whether the media will be controlled tightly in the future is one of theoretical debate right now, where pros and cons can be weighted but no one can say for sure. What is important, though, is to see how the media function in a historical perspective, and here it is easy to map what can be called a spiral of control, or a spiral of freedom. (*ibid.*, 40)

The spiral suggested by Zassoursky runs through the thaw of the 1960s and the Brezhnev years of the 1970s, followed by *glasnost* and *perestroika*, leading to Yeltsin’s “Second Republic”, which by now has evolved to Putin’s “Third Empire”:

...the new Russian Empire seems to me like an iceberg melting in the Internet. A global information environment slowly but surely becomes the medium of choice for the new generation, bringing with it new possibilities, new habits and even new values [...] There is no way to predict how fast and effective the Internet onslaught will be: it will not be direct, that is for sure. The Soviet Union could never be conquered by the military assault it expected, nor can the [...] Russian political system be swept away by mass unrest. But it can be bypassed, or made more effective in dealing with everyday problems through an open flow of information and communication about issues of public interest. It can be more accountable and more transparent, and evolve when the generation of net users becomes the dominant generation and their values become the norm. The ruler in the Kremlin is not the problem: the power has to be there, and someone has to be the president. It is the system of administration in Russia that has to change, when the time is ripe. (*ibid.*, 40–1)

Arja Rosenholm, Kaarle Nordenstreng and Elena Trubina (2010, 2) also call for moderation in assessments of the state of Russian media. The current historical situation is ambiguous, while the post-socialist transforma-

tions and the global media market offer the readers and viewers a new kind of pluralism combined with a fragmentation of knowledge, norms and values. This requires of an individual reader new skills and media literacy in order to navigate in the plethora of fragmented messages, new genres and media formats. In the individualized situation which characterizes Russian social and cultural life today the receiver is offered innumerable options and alternatives. However, the reader's and viewer's freedom is accompanied by a conflict originating in the new technologies of control and normalization based on both market and political pressures. The conclusion is that the Russian media is far from being homogenous and that the mass media – not unlike the Western media – is a powerful but not primary agent in society.

Concerning media policy, Anna Arutunyan (2009, 80–1) has criticized the state-led efforts to liberate the press, which are, by definition, counterproductive: “a free press is one that is established from the bottom up, not from the top down”. Therefore the conditions for independent media should happen on all levels simultaneously, starting from the journalist himself. Erik Albrecht (2008, 110–1) emphasized that not just state policy, but also journalistic culture is a key factor in developing press freedom and that much of the Soviet journalistic cultures still prevails in Russia. Pasti (2010) for her part points out that the new post-Soviet generation of journalists who have grown up surrounded by consumerism and market values, is pursuing “pragmatic individualism” and working in the state media as “mercenaries” but in the private media as “artists”. Therefore a more profound cultural change will be needed, not only among political leadership but also among journalists and the population at large.

While media scholars have usually concentrated on political news media, more invisible developments have been going on in the field of popular culture, which also acts as an agent for social change. Since the early 1990s, glossy and glamour magazines have changed the Russian media sphere in a remarkable way. Many of these magazines (*Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *Elle*, *Vogue*) based on Western formats enjoy huge readerships and have already promoted a value change in post-Soviet Russia. The aim of these magazines has been to create a new man (Bartlett 2006, 196; Rudova 2008, 2), an objec-

tive which is not far from the Soviet idea of a new man, although the qualities associated are completely different. As a result, it might well be the case that the social change promoted by the media will not happen with the political power struggle but with a slower cultural change which is taking place in Russia.

The change from the Soviet media system to the current system has been rapid, but not without setbacks. The result, in many ways a strikingly Westernized media system and media content, is something that only few would have expected 25 years ago. In 2010 Russians live in a media sphere in which they can access a huge variety of views and entertainment, and also, if Internet is included, to express their opinions. True, the television news and current affairs programmes differ quite a lot from their Western counterparts by not exercising criticism of the powers that be. Also true, the problems caused to the working journalists by state and other institutions are numerous, in the most extreme form with a high rate of killing of journalists. These facts, however, should not blind researchers to the important changes and developments which are going on in Russia.

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