Media Transition in Eastern Europe after 1989—Albania and Poland in Comparison

Paolo Carelli

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy

In this article the author compares the transformation of media systems of two countries belonging to the former Soviet bloc of Eastern Europe: Albania and Poland. The aim is to highlight differences that occurred in this process, in order to show how, albeit a similar past and the belonging to the same political and economic model until 1989. The diversity of media transition explains the existence of different national ways in which post-communism developed during the last 25 years.

Keywords: post-communism, media systems, transition, television, democratization

Introduction

After 25 years from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of communist regimes in many Central and Eastern European countries, we can trace the key aspects that characterized the transition and consolidation of democracy in single nations; in this sense, the transformation of media systems that occurred in post-communist countries in the early 90s could function as a paradigmatic example of how different national specificities—albeit within a bloc marked by the same economic and political model of dictatorship—shaped various paths of approach to democracy. According to Przeworski and Teune (1970) and their comparative approach theory, we will adopt a comparison between two so-called "most-similar systems" in order to emphasize differences and peculiarities that "may be taken for granted and difficult to detect when the focus is on only one national case" (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995, p. 76).

As the author has already underlined in a more complete version of this article (Carelli, 2013), Albania and Poland are two countries belonging to the same political model until 1989, but they faced a transformation of institutional, economic, and media system that took an opposite route, which confirms how historical and socio-cultural contexts within which media operate are important, as many authors said (Fickers & Johnson, 2010; Örnebring, 2009).

Before starting a detailed comparison of the evolution of media systems in these two countries, we have to take into account the state of media in Eastern Europe during th regime, in order to identify the main differences among the single nations.

Communism Was Not a Monolyte

Timothy Garton Ash (1990) wrote that "democratization came true in 10 years in Poland, 10 months in

Paolo Carelli, Teaching Assistant, Intercultural Communication, Department of Communication and Performing Arts, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore.

Hungary, 10 weeks in Eastern Germany, 10 days in Czechoslovakia, and 10 hours in Romania"; this remark is able to explain how demonstrations and riots in Eastern Europe underwent a process of acceleration and propagation from one country to neighboring states, in a sort of "domino-effect", to use the words of Samuel Huntington (1993), where a key role was played by demonstrative effects of cross-border television (Voltmer, 2001). The deep differences of democratization process among the single national contexts shows that communist dictatorships were not a monolithic block, but rather that at least since the 80s, the "picture of a co-ordinated, univocal, and propagandistic media was no longer adequate for the vast majority of communist societies" (Sparks & Reading, 1998, p. 56).

The geographical disparity in the organization and functioning of media systems in communist countries began increasingly clear at the end of the 70s and at the beginning of the 80s: in Poland, for instance, import of foreign films reached about 43% in 1986 and in the same year 47% of the series aired on Polish state broadcasters came from Western countries (Jakubowicz, 1989). In Hungary, a strong process of liberalization in media sector—as in other sectors of social and economic life—occurred since the 70s; then, at the middle of the 80s, Hungarian state television acquired more than 800 programs from abroad, and from Western countries above all (Kövesdi, 1991), so that the percentage of those watching foreign TV programs increased from 19% to 31% in 1986 (Sparks & Reading, 1998). On the contrary, Czechoslovakia was subject to the "normalization" after the defeat of the Prague Spring in 1968; this prevented an openness and liberalization of the sector and the import of foreign media products was primarily intended to programs of other Eastern European countries. Besides, during the 70s and the 80s the third channel of state television "was dedicated entirely to rebroadcasting programmes from Russian TV" (Sparks & Reading, 1998, p. 57). In other countries, for example Albania or Romania, the interdiction exercitated by the regimes was even more drastic; in these nations, state channels arrived to broadcast only for a couple of hours a day (Gritti, 2001).

This brief overview of communist television during the dictatorship clearly reveals how different was the situation within the Soviet bloc; alongside the dichotomy between partial liberalization and strict compliance with the totalitarian principles, Eastern European countries experimented an ample range of media models that influenced the transition to democracy and the ways the regimes were overthrown.

Transition to Democracy and the Media

Karol Jakubowicz (2005) tried to explain the process of transition to democracy in Eastern European countries taking into account three conditions: Path to democracy has been accomplished at a systemic level (the end of state monopoly and the rise of the market economy), institutional (a new form of government) and international one (the entry of some post-communist countries in the European Union). These changes were reflected on media systems revealing very complex transformations; in this sense, "different processes can be identified, which included democratizationl, privatization, commercialization, and internationalization" (Gulyás, 2005, p. 63). Haraszti (1987) argued that the introduction of global capitalism values in Eastern Europe began at the end of the 80s and led to a "total re-organization of life, ending up in a privatized, globalized, de-monopolized economy" (1987, p. 34).

However, as stated, this path has been developed differently in each country. More precisely, it can identified two separate groups: on the one hand, the three large countries of Central Europe (Poland, Czech Republic, and Hungary), Slovenia and Baltic countries, and on the other hand the republics of the former USSR and the whole area of the Balkans. These countries of the first group have experienced in a short time

democratic institutions and market economies, while in those of the second group the transition process has often been slowed down and hindered by conflicts or relapses in authoritarianism marked by nationalism and personalism (Gritti, 2001, p. 68). The geographical unevenness of the democratization process represents "the historical paradox of post-communism" (p. 73) which is also evident in the media sector: in fact, as socialism was realized differently from country to country, so "the media in Eastern Europe are a clear example of how past institutional configurations influenced the process of media transition" (O'Neil, 1997, p. 5). Nevertheless, most countries saw a proliferation of media also favored by a renewed climate of freedom which, however, had not a few negative consequences on the overall quality of information and media productions: as Gritti pointed out, in fact,

> since the early 90s the media, and particularly television, play a crucial role in political struggle and communication, given the fragility of the new political parties and the opacity of economic interests. Thus is fulfilled that particular convergence of media, political class, and new capitalist. Media logic pervades in full the various political systems becoming the centerpiece (Gritti, 2001, p. 74).

This consideration shows that new democratic regimes and their media systems have struggled to overcome the legacy of communism and, in some cases, "mixed forms of old and new authoritarian structures as well as new commercial spheres evolved and are likely to co-exist for some time to come" (Fabris, 1995, p. 229). Several authors (Splichal, 1994; Fabris, 1995; Sparks & Reading, 1998) tried to define common trends of media transition processes in Eastern Europe countries, coming to coin terms such as "italianization", "germanization", "gaullization" to emphasize the closeness with certain models of relationship between media and politics typical of Western democracies, particularly European.

A recent attempt to classify the structure of media system of Eastern Europe after 1989 has been put forward by Jakubowicz (2008, p. 112) who identifies three main "orientations":

(1) Idealistic: this model has been yet experienced during 70s and 80s in countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, where social and cultural opposition movements grew up with the aim of building a "public sphere" for the access and participation to information and communication and preventing abuses by the political and economic power;

(2) Mimetic: the model is based on the implementation of Western media models through the liberalization of the press and the consolidation of a "dual" television system, which leads to define Eastern Europe as an area subject to a "quasi-colonial dependency" (Jakubowicz, 2005, p. 11) of Western countries;

(3) Atavistic: this model reflects the tendency of some new democratic governments to slow down the process of democratization of the media and their transformation to a real public service able to guarantee the pluralism of voices and orientations. Some cases of media systems controlled by just one political party occurred in Hungary in 1990-91 during the so-called "first war of media" and in Bulgaria in 1996.

According to the author, the dominant model currently in Eastern Europe "is a combination of the mimetic and 'atavistic' media policy orientations" (Jakubowicz, 2008, p. 113) with a prevalence of the first in those countries that have experienced an approach to liberal democracy and setbacks to the second model in countries where new and dangerous authoritarianism occurred.

Albania: The Explosion of Commercial Broadcasters

In this small Balkan country, the transition from dictatorship to democracy developed slowly and with difficulty, partly because of the isolation policy pursued by the regime during the previous decades; the break

with the forces of Warsaw Pact in 1968 and the approaching to the Chinese totalitarian model turned Albania into the most reactionary and backward country in Eastern Europe (Gökay, 2001; Henderson & Robertson, 1997). This situation of backwardness was reflected on the start of the democratization process following the collapse of communist regime: The legalization of political opposition, for example, did not turn immediately into a political and cultural pluralism, as in the first elections of 1991 the Socialist Party, direct expression of the former leaders of the regime, gained 66% of the votes against 27% of the Democratic Party (Biagini, 2005, p. 148). Only in the elections of the following year, Albanian population elected the first non-communist president since World War II and political forces related to ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities entered the Parliament.

Similarly, also the media system took the same path. With regard to the role of the press, it was marginal in addressing the transition process: *Zeri i popullit* ("Voice of the people"), the official newspaper of the propaganda during Hoxha regime, continued to be dependent on the single-party until its dissolution and, then, became the organ of the new Socialist Party (Gritti, 2001). In those years several newspapers were born, such as *Albania* or *Rilindjia Demokratike*, both close to the Democratic Party, and only in 1993—four years after the fall of the communism—a law on the press was passed. However, subsequent laws did not improve the situation: Albania lived for a long period of democratization the paradox of a press freedom and pluralism of information formally defended and promoted by the laws, but not structured yet, due to a lack of social and cultural conditions. Substantially,

> Albanian media has found itself in a situation when there is freedom of the press, but no free press. The activity of media business can hardly be called transparent, and there is little or no state control, combined with problems of implementation of existing media legislation (Londo, 2004).

More clearly, the broadcasting sector followed and reflected the slow process of reform of state institutions: until the mid-90s, in fact, both *Radio Tirana* (RT) and *Television Shqiptare* (TVSH)—the historical state radio and television transmitting during the regime—remained under the control of a single party and represented the only source of information of the population. Since 1995, the immobility of the system was undermined by an explosion of private television channels, often made by small publishers, broadcasting on a local basis. The majority of private radio stations and television channels transmitted in confined areas, sometimes small neighborhoods, in a progressive process of regionalization of media. Tendency towards decentralization of the media produced a radio and television system which is based, precisely, on the circulation and the entrenchment of local TV stations with limited coverage at the expense of national broadcasters.

Actually, in the Albanian television landscape only two private stations have a national vocation: *TV Klan*, which reaches 43% of the national territory, and *TV Arberia*, which covers 30%; on the contrary, there are 76 local analog televisions (Londo, 2012). The latters proliferated across the country and, despite having a license to transmit only at the local level, are able to reach larger areas; in fact, "some television stations with a regional license are catching up with the signal coverage of the private national stations, or even outdoing them" (Soros Foundation, 2005, p. 191).

The legislation of the sector revolves around the law "on public and private radio and television"[1]; this law "aim(ed) to regulate the activity of electronic media in detail, including the public broadcaster, and the analog

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[1] Law No. 8410 of September 30, 1998. The text of the law is available at http://media.parlament.org.ua/uploads/files/f915.pdf

commercial media, cable and satellite television" (Londo, 2012), putting an end to a period of deregulation. The law established the birth of National Council of Radio and Television (NCRT) whose activities and responsibilities are set out in Article 7: among them, there are the monitoring of information programs of private national and local broadcasters, the assurance of real competition in the field of media, the determination of rules of operation and organization of public and private broadcasters. In addition, the cleavage national/local is well marked in several passages of the law; Article 20, for example, separates national and local licenses and, furthermore, provides that no person or entity may obtain local licenses for areas larger than 200,000 inhabitants.

Another key aspect of the law and subsequent amendments[2] is the attempt to untie the activities of media from political power: among the changes introduced in Albanian television in recent years, it has to be emphasized interventions on

> the composition of the regulatory authorities. The structure, based on a formula of balanced political representation, was turned into one including civil society, academia, and professionals. These moves were officially intended to reduce political influence on the regulator, but some of the regulator's latest actions were seen as politically biased (Londo, 2008, p. 104).

The lack of competition from public service broadcaster favored the growth of commercial television stations in viewers' choice; however, even "the most popular TV channels are not safe yet from the economic viewpoint, a situation which shows that the Albanian TV market is still far from being stable and independent" (Londo, 2012).

Poland: Particularization and Universalization

The democratization process which affected Poland has its roots in earlier decades, during which the Polish people expressed their impatience towards the communist regime. In this sense, there were two key episodes: the first in 1956, when a series of popular unrest in Poznan culminated in a general strike harshly repressed by the intervention of the Soviet army, and the second in 1970 with the explosion of riots among the workers of the shipyards of Gdansk, on the Baltic Sea. Both events highlighted the "congenital fragility of a communist party unable to find a compromise with the working class in the society" (Fejtő, 1994, p. 121). After the Gdansk strike, there was a worsening of repression and control of communist elites over every aspect of the life, which led to a reorganization of opposition movements culminated in the birth of Solidarnosc, an organization whose goal was to "affirm the autonomy of social bodies from the State-party (and) grow the participation of citizens in choices directly regarding them" (p. 126).

Ten years of battles and claims turned Solidarnosc into a relevant entity in Polish system thanks to the support of Catholic Church[3] and Western democracies. The presence on political scene of an organization like Solidarnosc weakened the regime, allowing a smooth transition to democracy. In this sense, the change of political system came along two distinct phases; with the partially free elections in 1989[4] there was a sharp polarization between two divergent positions, which is the continuity of the communism or antagonism to it represented by Solidarnosc. Afterward, even with the elections of 1991, a phase marked by a growing

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[2] Law No. 9742 of 28 May 2007 on Digital Broadcasting in the Republic of Albania.
[3] On the role of the Catholic Church in reinforcing Solidarnosc, cfr. Huntington (1993).
[4] Poland is the only Eastern Europe country in which, thanks to the victory of 1989 elections by Solidarnosc. There was the paradox of a non-Communist government before the actual fall of the communist regime.

fragmentation of the political system and the birth of a hundred political parties opened; Solidarnosc was divided into seven formations. Among the causes of this high fragmentation, there were both high social differentiation and generalized distrust of Polish citizens in politics: to such an extent in 1995, 65% of population declared they do not feel represented by any of more 270 existing parties (Kubiak, 1999).

The fragmentation and pluralism of interests and voices reverberated even on the media sector; within three years from the end of the regime, at least 60 illegal broadcasters arose and, in little more than a decade, over 400 television channels reached across the country (Soros Foundation, 2005). Similarly, distrust in politics and the lack of active participation in public life influenced the development of media. During the years of transition to democracy, in fact, the proliferation of hundreds of private broadcasters has not touched, unlike what happened in other countries of the bloc, the supremacy of public service. A turning point in Polish television system is represented by Broadcasting Act of 1992, which

> set up the legal framework for the regulation of the newly introduced dual pluralistic model of media typical for Western countries, were both public and private media co-exist. As a result, privately owned and commercially financed stations were allowed into Poland, and TVP ceased to be a state-controlled broadcaster and was redefined as public service (Szostak, 2012, p. 80).

The law imposed a series of constraints and limitations in terms of production and cultural freedom: Article 15, for instance, compelled broadcasters to appropriate 33% of overall transmission for products in Polish[5], while advertising could not exceed 15% of total programming (Article 16). Moreover, the Catholic Church had particular advantages by law, as specified in Article 18, which obliged operators to respect Christian values present in the Polish society, which prevented a full deployment of commercial broadcasters.

Despite the liberalization and the birth of hundreds of channels, private television sector is dominated by two giants: *Polsat*, with national vocation, composed of seven channels, and *TVN*, which has trans-regional structure and is composed of five channels. Therefore, as stated, media system in Poland is "highly marketed and plural, but remain subordinated to elite groups rather than developing a public service orientation" (Školkay, 2008, p. 33). Private television channels serve a delay of audience than the public service despite an offer mainly based on entertainment (Soros Foundation, 2005): in this sense, private sector suffers from some structural weakness, such as concentration in only two stations and the approval of the schedule around Western characteristics.

Klimkiewicz (2005) described the evolution of the Polish public sphere on the basis of two contradictory trends: the particularization and the universalization. On the one hand, the fragmentation of the party system in the years immediately following the fall of the regime has been accompanied by a growth of press and audiovisual media which have diversified and enlivened the media landscape; on the other hand, the adherence to the principles of free market has made it necessary to reach a wider audience causing a progressive approval in media content.

Conclusions: A National Way to Post-communism

The analysis of the transformation of media systems in two countries which escaped from a similar regime leads people to track some key elements of the detachment from the old model. First of all, the proliferation of mass media hardly correspond to pluralism, which is a qualitative representation and consolidation of a mature

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[5] News, advertising, sports, and teletext are not included.

public opinion, as already foreseen by Dušan Reljić (2004). In fact, in Albania and Poland, as in other Eastern European countries, the development of mass media did not mean a real circulation of them. Then, both media systems tended to organize around two big private companies in opposition to public sector, which reveals the tendency to shift from the fragmentation to a grounded "dual system". Lastly, with the end of the regime, there was a wide import of foreign products and formats, in particular American series and fictions. (Szostak, 2012).

However, Albanian and Polish media systems differ in some features: a distinction regards the weight of public sector; while in Albania the sudden outburst of private broadcasters relegated public sector to a secondary role, in Poland the primacy of public service broadcasting has never undermined, even due to a legislation reflecting "the uniform character of Polish society" (Stępka, 2010, p. 240) and common sense of national identity. As a result, Albanian media sector fragmented in regional and subnational networks, delaying the construction of a system based on shared values; in Poland, the centrality of public service smothered variety of commercial broadcasters.

Comparison between these two countries shows how, albeit in a similar socio-cultural context, media transition followed different paths (Carelli, 2013), and how media system is a valuable field to rough out a national way to post-communism in a very complex and changeable area of Europe.

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