

# Book Review: Central and Eastern European Media in Comparative Perspective

by Blog Admin

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*Appearing more than twenty years after the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, this book takes stock not only of the changes but also the continuities in media systems of the region since 1989. To what extent are media institutions still controlled by political forces? To what extent are media markets operating in Central and Eastern Europe? Do media systems in Central and Eastern Europe resemble media systems in other parts of Europe? **Paul Brighton** finds a useful and informative set of insights into how our European neighbours' media landscapes are not so very different from our own.*



**Central and Eastern European Media in Comparative Perspective. John Downey and Sabina Mihelj. Ashgate. February 2012.**

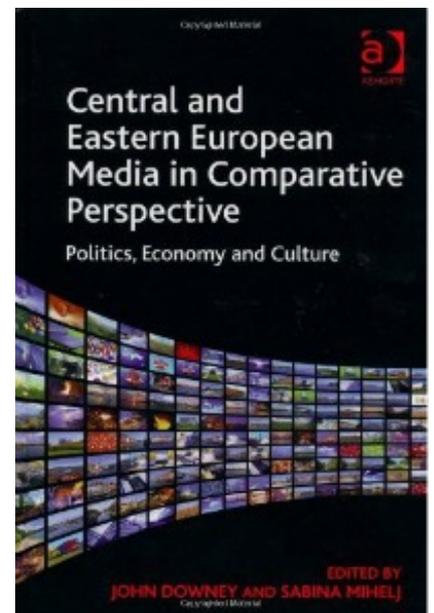
What happens to a country's media system when a totalitarian Communist regime disappears? One's first reaction, surely, is to assume that it becomes freer, less obviously controlled and more pluralistic. So far so good: but is there an accompanying price tag for that freedom?

The answer comes in different forms. The void left by abandoning what we might imagine to have been endless documentaries on collective tractor farming had to be filled somehow. It's actually quite hard to work out precisely how big that void was, at least from John Downey and Sabina Mihelj's recent collection, *Central and Eastern European Media in Comparative Perspective*. Understandably, the focus is on changes that have occurred since 1989; but a little more scene-setting about what exactly people in the former Communist regimes were watching, listening to and reading before the revolutions might have been useful, especially in the interests of the comparative research the book is championing.

The editors have consciously chosen to commission chapters from a selection of academics whose approaches are contrasting, starting from widely different premises. "In this book we have taken to heart the task of explaining why we have the media we have. Tied up with this is necessarily a critique of mediacentrism. If we wish to explain why the media are as they are we need to look at the outside of the media as well as inside."

No-one can accuse them of failing to meet this objective. One or two of the chapters spend much more time on the broader societal and cultural changes within nations as a whole, focusing only relatively briefly on the changing media landscapes towards the end of their pieces.

The most satisfying essays are those which manage to harness the sense of an overarching argument, diagnosing the fundamentals of national political, cultural and economic change; and which then proceed to a fine level of detail in explaining how this relates to, and is represented in, the respective media structures. Karol Jakubowicz's essay is particularly effective at synthesising previous research on the differences in pace of political reform, and relating this to media regulation. The countries that followed a distinctively southern European or "Mediterranean" model of change (Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Serbia and Albania)



are reasonably convincingly described as democratic. An intermediate group (Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan) is seen as oscillating between semi-democratic and semi-authoritarian. A third group, meanwhile, remains authoritarian (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Belarus).

The effects on their respective media regulation systems are then well and precisely drawn. The paths of “competitive politics” with its resulting media pluralism; the ambiguities of oligarchisation, involving self-censorship and vested interests; and the return to outright censorship are traced accordingly.

Other chapters provide similarly useful detail on the effects of transnational ownership. Not the straightforward Americanisation, or Murdoch “capture” that some might imagine, but a more European picture. Big players such as CME (Central European Media Enterprises), Axel Springer and others are increasingly dominant in the ownership patterns of Eastern European media. What are called “clone” media easily acquire prominent positions in the marketplace. So, for example, take a successful German product like “Bild”, clone it in Poland under a title such as “Fakt”, and Bob (or Axel) is your uncle! Even better, soften the market first by introducing harmless hobby journals such as “Computer Bild” or “Auto Bild”!

There are also usefully detailed chapters on how media regulation works in the emerging democracies. So who are the baddies here? Is it the USA and the global quangos such as the World Trade Organisation? Perhaps. “The US Ambassador to Hungary put pressure on the Czech Republic not to introduce quotas stipulated in the Television without Frontiers Directive.... Consequently... the minimum European works quota was not introduced.” So, does this mean that Eastern Europe has been brainwashed by a non-stop diet of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*?

Thankfully, it hasn't quite come to that. Just as UK viewers prepare to welcome the somewhat wizened visage of Larry Hagman back to UK screens in a Twenty-First Century *Dallas* sequel – albeit on a considerably smaller channel than in its heyday – we are heartened to learn that home-produced television is making its own comeback in post-Communist Eastern Europe. One sometimes reads academic media analyses and yearns for a bit of detailed analysis of what people are actually watching, listening to and reading, as well as background analysis of social trends. Well, it duly arrives in this collection.

It is, perhaps, a little melancholy to discover that such timeless classics as *Beverly Hills 90210* and *Baywatch* dominated the Slovakian viewing market in 1994; and that *E.R.* ruled in Bulgaria just as the immortal Mr Hagman, in his J.R. Ewing Stetson, was cock of the walk in the Czech Republic two years later. However, by 2007, *Slavi's Show*, a home-grown variety programme, was top of the ratings in Bulgaria; while the domestically-produced soap, the intriguingly-named *Surgery in the Pink Garden*, swept all before it in the Czech Republic. Moreover, the tyranny of the imitation reality television format hasn't quite duplicated itself to a standstill as it may now be doing here.

As often, there is plenty about newspaper ownership and consumption, and a welcome insight from Vaclav Stetka, into television viewing; but not much about radio or (perhaps understandably) new media. There is some discussion of the changing role of public service broadcasting across a range of countries; but little clarity as to where, if at all, radio fits into the pattern. A pity, because, with those exceptions, this is a useful and informative set of insights into how our European neighbours' media landscapes are not so very different from our own.

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