# Media Democratization in Russia and Eurasia

## Peter Rollberg
### The George Washington University

The complicated and often contradictory process of democratization in Russia and Eurasia is both dependent on and reflected by the transformation of these countries' mass media. As print and electronic media are essential factors in a functioning civil society, they often represent embattled territory within the post-Soviet space. The violent deaths of over 30 journalists in the past decade – the cases of Georgy Gongadze in Ukraine in 2000 and of Anna Politkovskaya in Russia in 2006 made worldwide headlines – drastically demonstrate the significance attributed to media in post-Soviet societies.

There is scholarly consensus that post-Soviet media, particularly the dominant medium, television, have "helped to re-consolidate elite power rather than empower citizens."[1] What is subject to debate is the question of what societal elements facilitate and constrain the independence and freedom of media, especially television, which has remained the most influential medium in these countries. What role do market forces play in the process of media democratization, and how do state structures regulate, suppress, or use them? What degree of informational pluralism has been achieved in the newly independent republics? What are the prospects for transparency and the participation of civil society in Russian and Eurasian media?

Using the four fundamental models proposed by Siebert et al.[2], it can be assumed that post-Soviet media underwent an evolution from a *Social Responsibility* model that had emerged in the last years of perestroika and glasnost and matured in the first post-communist phase, to an *Authoritarian* model that was forcefully implemented in the early 2000s. However, the classification requires some fine-tuning: even in the most liberal years of glasnost, Soviet media retained essential features of what Siebert called "the Soviet model," and even in the most intrusive years of the Putin presidency (2002-2003, after 2012), the Authoritarian model contains libertarian and consumer-driven features. Scholarly research on post-Soviet media was in high demand in the late 1990s and in the first

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[1] Sarah Oates. 2007. "The Neo-Soviet Model of the Media," *Europe-Asia Studies* 59: 8, p. 1280.

[2] Fredrik S. Siebert et al. 1963. *Four Theories of the Press*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

years of the new millennium; the number of media-focused publications indicates that this field was seen as a promising one. However, in recent years, a noticeable disillusionment in the emancipative potential of mass media has gained ground among scholars. Media in post-Soviet societies are a moving target, influenced by technological, geopolitical, and cultural developments. That makes it hard, if not impossible, to arrive at a lasting analytical consensus about the post-Soviet media sphere, whether in regards to Russia, which keeps dominating its "near abroad" through media, or Ukraine and Belarus – one in turmoil, the other frozen – or in the Republic of Georgia. Even the applied common terminology requires refinement and adjustment depending on each case within a certain time frame – thus, the exact meaning of notions such as "censorship" or "self-censorship" can no longer be taken for granted since the terms originated from totalitarian society models. Equally problematic is the undifferentiated usage of the notion of "transition" from authoritarianism toward democracy, which has dominated the academic discourse on media for many years. As Tina Burrett has observed, the "continued application of the transition paradigm creates a false dichotomy. (…) The frustration that analysts express over the democratic deficit in the Russian media system must be replaced with realistic, empirically grounded expectations about the trajectory of political development in contemporary Russia."[3] Still, to completely avoid normative statements regarding the realization of democratic values in mass media would be just as precarious. Without denying national specifics for individual media systems, it seems fair to juxtapose the predominant western media model to the authoritarian/corporate state media of various post-Soviet nations. John Dunn aptly noted that "a modern western-type democracy is polycentric, with competing centers of power and influence, all of which have clearly defined functions and clearly delineated boundaries established by laws, constitutions or, failing that, long-established custom and practice; the corporate state does not allow for competing or alternative centers of power and influence, but instead the sole function of all structures is to serve the overall aims and priorities of the corporate centre."[4]

All post-Soviet media systems strive to present themselves as socially responsible, protecting civil society, and discouraging anti-social behavior while facilitating a sense of common values and strengthening nationhood. However, the factual ownership and decision-making structures reveal

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[3] Tina Burrett. 2009. "The end of independent television? Elite conflict and the reconstruction of the Russian television landscape." In: Beumers, Birgit, et al. (eds.), *The Post-Soviet Russian Media*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 72-73

[4] John Dunn. 2009. "Where did it all go wrong? Russian television in the Putin era." In: Beumers, Birgit, et al. (eds.), *The Post-Soviet Russian Media*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 50.

that most post-Soviet media are, above all, geared toward reinforcing the authoritarian status quo while gaining maximum profit. Economic and political power is so closely intertwined that serious media challenges to the ruling establishment are almost impossible. For this reason, both journalists and artists working in the post-Soviet media systems and their audiences look at media as patron-guided political players in themselves, promoting the values of the owners, not the common good. Just as in Communist societies, this is a passively accepted fact, not reason for outrage or protest. Western observers usually pay the keenest attention to the role of the media in Russia and Eurasia during national elections. While this is certainly a valid focus, the present issue of *Demokratizatsiya* aims at understanding the deeper overall media philosophies that characterize post-Soviet media systems and the type of identity formation that they are promoting. This includes information outlets and entertainment on all levels, from news programs to talk shows and serious artistic production.