

PÉTER BAJOMI-LÁZÁR

Party Colonisation of the Media in Central and Eastern Europe



Party Colonisation of the Media in Central and Eastern Europe, Péter Bajomi-Lázár, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2014, 273 pp.

In his book, Péter Bajomi-Lázár, Head of the Institute of Social Sciences at the Budapest Business School, analyses how the concepts of Media freedom and media pluralism have been implemented in practice. In

order to do so, he refers to the findings of field research concerning patterns of «party colonization of the media» that he conducted in Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania and Slovenia.

It raises two main questions: Why is there a lack of media freedom in Post-Communist countries as opposed to Western Europe? And how do you explain variations between these countries? In order to answer to these questions, the author first demonstrates how media systems are shaped by a number of factors, such as the institutional framework of the media; politicians' attitudes toward the media; citizens' commitment to media freedom; journalists' professionalism; investors' attitudes towards the media. The size and state of the economy and the ability of external political actors to enforce standards (e.g. the European Union) have been also analyzed to find out what kind of benefits – other than suppressing criticism and gaining favorable coverage – political parties may gain from controlling the media. «Party colonization of the media suggests that policy proposals aimed at improving media freedom should focus on the institutional framework not only of the media, but also of parties and party politics. In particular, proportional electoral laws that favor coalition governments, and party laws that improve party funding and internal party democracy may ultimately restrain parties' needs and opportunities to colonize the media, and hence may be conducive to higher levels of media freedom and lower levels of party/media parallelism.» (p. 236)

The book also intends to assess how different patterns of media colonization affect media freedom. Freedom of speech should be used as a framing principle for regulation in the media sector. It is a pillar of the complex architecture of fundamental rights and should be seen as a guidance principle in the regulatory strategies selection. For instance, the press is – by far – the media whose content regulation by administrative entities has been the most limited. Indeed, «unfettered self-regulation» of the press has been perceived as a cornerstone of a free press and an open democracy. This phenomenon has been widely experienced in many of

the former communist countries since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Through a comparison of the media and political systems in East-Central Europe and Western Europe, the author identifies plausible causes of the extensive and intensive party control over the media. He argues that differences in media freedom and in the politicization of the news media are rooted in differences in party structures, between old and new democracies. For instance, he demonstrates that the lack of resources of «young parties» in the EU's New Member States makes them «more likely to take control of and to exploit media resources». His findings also confirmed that one-party colonization of the media would lead to lower levels of media freedom and higher levels of party/media parallelism than multi-party colonization. «This may be explained by the fact that multi-party configurations work as a system of internal checks and balances: when all parties can delegate members to the supervisory bodies of the media, their representatives can mutually constrain one another's colonization efforts so that no single party has too much influence; as a result, a certain amount of media freedom and pluralism prevails and some outlets or programs may preserve their critical approach to the government.» (p. 232)

Then, in order to explain variations in media freedom and the politicization of the news media in and across countries, the next five chapters focus on detailed case studies of the media policies and party backgrounds in five post-communist countries: Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia. These case-studies aim to answer crucial questions such as: «Why is it that the media are relatively free from political pressures under one government, but more constrained under another? Why is it that some parties while in office compromise media regulation and its implementation, and others do not – or do so in different ways, with, perhaps, less manifest outcomes?» And finally, «what party configurations lead to excessive politicization of the news media and, consequently, enhance party/

media parallelism?» (p. 231)

For each country, Bajomi-Lázár analyzes the significant impact of «contextual factors» on the shaping of media policies and media systems in these countries, from the 90's to nowadays. «Despite obvious differences between countries, several recurring patterns have been found. The five country case studies suggest that one-party colonization of the media is more likely to occur 1) under single-party governments; 2) under parties with highly centralized decision-making structures; 3) under unified parties with a high degree of party discipline; 4) under parties or governments with a strong ideological agenda (...) At the same time, party colonization with or without a dominant party is more likely to occur 1) under coalition governments; 2) under parties with democratic decision-making structures; 3) under factionalized parties; 4) under ideologically diffuse parties and governments; 5) under parties that try to gain popular support by way of co-opting opposition networks and of providing these with access to resources; and 6) under pragmatic leaders who are 7) personally more tolerant of critical media.» (p. 233)

By its innovative approach, linking traditional methods of media studies to political science, this book proves particularly original. However, unlike traditional media analyses, it doesn't study the media's influence on voting behaviors but looks into reasons why political parties would seek control over the media, other than gaining favorable coverage. And unlike most of other political science works on this topic, it doesn't focus on the relationship that political parties intent to have with the State either. Instead, Bajomi-Lázár revisits political actors' motivations and explores the relationship between the political parties and the media. His book represents a major contribution to both media and political research in Eastern and Central European Countries.

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