# THE COMPARISON OF GENERAL TRENDS OF MASS MEDIA IN NEW EASTERN EUROPE COUNTRIES
## (on the example of Armenia, Ukraine and Belarus)

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The article aims at exposing the features of the media institution, particularly, its operation under conditions of transformation and presents a review of the basic functions performed by this institution in post-Soviet countries.

In transitional societies the role and status of mass media differs from those in the countries with developed democracy. The freedom of speech and thought, political and ideological pluralism, the right to receive and spread information, etc. have become a reality. Media not only react to political events, but also affect them. It is part of the politics: the media create the agenda, become a mediator and instrument in shaping domestic and foreign policy, adjusting and changing the public opinion.

The purpose of this article is to perform a comparative analysis of the most important aspects of sustainable and professional independent media systems in Armenia, Belarus and Ukraine.

Understanding the role and status of mass media in transitional societies is even more important because in recent years a steady trend

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is observed towards the globalization of information process. However, it appears this process did not expand well even into Eastern Europe, which considerably affects the conditions of media's activity.

## Introduction

The emergence and development of communication technologies have caused the formation of a new social space – the mass society. Such society is characterized by presence of specific means of communication – mass media. Rapid development of mass media in the 20th century has led to the change of worldviews, transformation of cultures, and formation of a new virtual world of communication.

In transitional societies the role and status of mass media differs from those in the countries with developed democracy. The freedom of speech and thought, political and ideological pluralism, the right to receive and spread information, etc. have become a reality. Media not only react to political events, but also affect them. It is part of the politics: the media create the agenda, become the mediator and instrument in shaping home and foreign policy, adjusting and changing the public opinion.

Despite the fact that certain aspects of media functioning are well studied, the research of media's role in the political processes of transitional countries, particularly the practice of comparative studies of the status, functions and specifics of media patterns of different post-soviet/ New Eastern Europe countries is quite topical in both theoretical and in practical sense. A glance on traits of the current stage and perspectives of political situation in these countries strengthens the understanding that using such an approach is very timely. Such undertaking is even more important because the steady trend towards globalization of information process in the recent years did not expand well even to Eastern Europe, which considerably affects the conditions of media's activity.

The purpose of the article is to perform a comparative analysis of the most important aspects of sustainable and professional independent media systems in New Eastern Europe countries (secondary analysis of quantitative data). This research was conducted as part of the RESET project (OSI-HESP, September 2009 – June 2012) "European Visions and Divisions: Comparative Studies and Advances in Teaching Sociology" in May 2011.

## Quantitative analysis

*The essence, goal and objectives of the MSI.* The characteristic of mass media in NEE countries will be given using Media Sustainability Index (MSI). International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) prepared the Media Sustainability Index in cooperation with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) [1].

The MSI is index of media sustainability which was prepared as a tool to assess the development of media systems in the countries. The Europe and Eurasia MSI was first conceived in 2000. Then IREX added a study for the Middle East and North Africa in 2005, and in 2007 launched the Africa MSI.

The main goal of the MSI is benchmarking and assessing changes in media systems across Europe and Eurasia.

*The object of the MSI* – the media systems in Europe and Eurasia.

*The subject of the MSI* – sustainability of the media systems in Europe and Eurasia. By "sustainability" IREX refers to the ability of media to play its vital role as the "fourth estate".

*Characteristic of the MSI.* The MSI allows policymakers and implementers to analyze media systems – consisting of both traditional media types and new media platforms – and determine the areas in which media development assistance can improve citizens' access to news and in-

formation. The MSI reflects the expert opinions of media professionals in each country and its results inform the media community, civil society, and governments of the strengths and weakness of the sector.

The MSI assesses five "objectives" in shaping a successful media system:

1. Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.
2. Journalism meets professional standards of quality.
3. Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable, objective news.
4. Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence.
5. Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

These objectives were judged to be the most important aspects of a sustainable and professional independent media system, and served as criteria against which countries were rated. A score was attained for each objective by rating between seven and nine indicators, which determine how well a country meets that objective.

### Methodology and scoring system of the MSI

*Methodology of the MSI* [2]. The scoring is done in two parts. First, a panel of local experts is assembled in each country, drawn from the country's media outlets, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), professional associations, and academic institutions. Panelists may be editors, reporters, media managers or owners, advertising and marketing specialists, lawyers, professors or teachers, or human rights observers.

Additionally, panels comprise the various types of media represented in a country. The panels also include representatives from the

capital city and other geographic regions, and they reflect gender, ethnic, and religious diversity as appropriate. For consistency from year to year, at least half of the previous year's participants are included on the following year's panel. IREX identifies and works with a local or regional organization or individual to oversee the process.

Panel participants are provided with a questionnaire that explains the objectives, indicators, and scoring system. Each panelist individually reviews the questionnaire and scores each indicator. Descriptions of each indicator explain their meaning and help organize the panelist's thoughts. For example, the questionnaire asks the panelist to consider not only the letter of the legal framework, but its practical implementation, too.

The panelists then assemble to analyze and discuss the objectives and indicators. While panelists may choose to change their scores based upon discussions, IREX does not promote consensus on scores among panelists. The panel moderator, in most cases a representative of the host-country institutional partner or a local individual, prepares a written analysis of the discussion, which is subsequently edited by IREX editorial staff.

IREX editorial staff reviews the panelists' scores, and then score the country independently of the MSI panel. This score carries the same weight as an individual panelist. The average of individual indicator scores within each objective determines the objective score, and the average of the five objectives determines the overall country score.

*Indicator Scoring*

Each indicator is scored using the following system:

0 = Country does not meet the indicator; government or social forces may actively oppose its implementation.

1 = Country minimally meets aspects of the indicator; forces may not actively oppose its implementation, but business environment may

not support it and government or profession do not fully and actively support change.

2 = Country has begun to meet many aspects of the indicator, but progress may be too recent to judge or still dependent on current government or political forces.

3 = Country meets most aspects of the indicator; implementation of the indicator has occurred over several years and/or through changes in government, indicating likely sustainability.

4 = Country meets the aspects of the indicator; implementation has remained intact over multiple changes in government, economic fluctuations, changes in public opinion, and/or changing social conventions.

*The results of comparative analysis of mass media in Armenia, Ukraine and Belarus (secondary analysis of MSI in 2009 and 2010 years).*

The main goal of comparative analysis of secondary data of MSI was to observe general trends in functioning of mass media in the NEE countries and also to emphasize on their similarities and differences. This comparative analysis was done by using MSI data of Armenia, Belarus and Ukraine and the actual observed situation in media in NEE

*Diagram 1*
*Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information*



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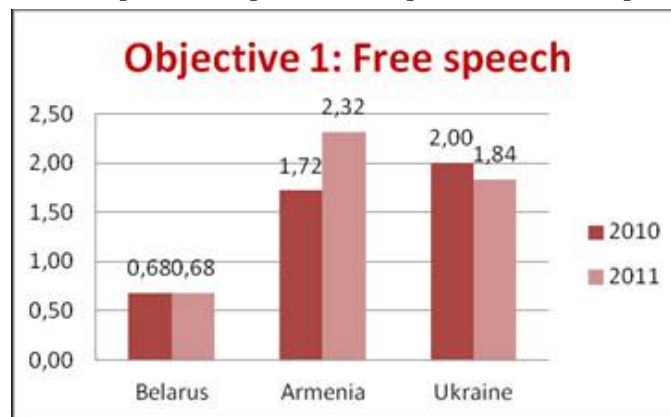
countries during 2009 and 2010 (but authors of MSI designate it as 2010 and 2011 years) [3,4,5,6,7,8].

All three post-Soviet countries are characterized by the following:

- There is a gap between media laws on the paper and reality. Legal and social protections of free speech are largely not enforced.
- Licensing of broadcast media is corrupt and politically motivated.
- High level of crimes against journalists. These cases are not prosecuted appropriately and perpetrators of the crimes went unpunished.
- Right of access to information is low and enforced only for governmental media and journalists.
- The access of Internet is not require state registration (except Belarus)

The score for this objective surged in Armenia during 2010 year (2011) [3]. This increase was a result of decriminalization of libel and defamation laws and the government's finally forward with awarding broadcast licenses. The Armenian law on access to information is very liberal and progressive. However, in real life it is still very difficult for journalists, especially investigative journalists, to obtain and use government documents in their reporting. In many cases, even mayors' decisions are not accessible. Also in Armenia free expression is becoming the dominant theme online. Traditional media often pick up topics from these online sources.

This objective suffered setback in Ukraine during 2010 year (2011) [5]. This resulted from increasing violations of journalists' rights, unequal market conditions created by state financing of municipal and state media, with some outlets paying taxes while their competitors are financed from taxpayer's money and the access to official information become more problematic and limited - even very basic requests, which

a few years ago could be obtained by phone calls, now often require journalists to submit written requests to the press office – costing them a tremendous amount of time.

*Diagram 2*

*Journalism meets professional standards of quality*
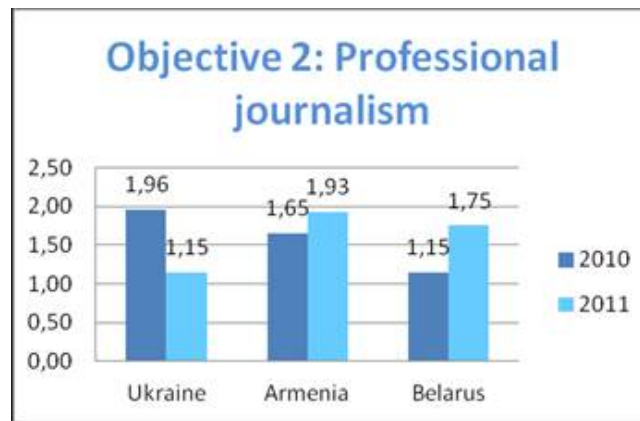


All NEE countries are characterized by the following:

- There are paid-for stories in media. Journalists rarely conduct detailed verification of the information they present, they do not undertake preliminary investigations, and they often insert their own opinion into their reporting.

- Journalists and editors practice self-censorship. Self-censorship is motivated by political interests of the owners and fear of distribution obstacles, future limits on access to information, and retaliatory unlicensed software checks.

- Journalism is marred with media corruption, laziness and lack of correlation between a high-quality journalism product and the money earned by a journalist.

- At national channels, there are too many entertainment programs, and people cannot get analytical and useful information in news programs, with few exceptions.

- Quality niche reporting and programming exist, but are insufficient as yet. The lack of financial resources makes having narrowly specialized journalists an expensive thing for a media outlet to develop and maintain. Therefore, journalists must be versatile and work on a number of different topics.

The score of this objective has dropped in Ukraine during 2010 year (2011) [5] due to intensifying political and economic pressures, censorship and self-censorship of journalists. The low profitability of media business in the post-economic crisis period influences media managers heavily: they have to secure short-term profits and forget about strategies for the next three years or beyond. This approach, in turn, leads to a greater readiness to publish paid-for positive news coverage, and to select topics and genres that are best-selling to increase ratings or audiences.

This objective showed improvement in Armenia and Belarus during 2010 year (2011) [3, 4 and 7, 8] due to little lasting progress in the professional quality of journalism and respect for ethical norms. In Armenia, while political and social reporting continues to be of low quality, niche reporting has grown in recent years, in some cases due to donor funding. There has been significant growth in ecological and investigative journalism. Also there is a progress in providing better technical equipment on the national channels and broadcasts.

All these countries are characterized by the following:

- In terms of objectivity and bias, there should be a distinction among print, broadcast, and online media. But print media are vastly polarized and often serve as a mouthpiece for either pro-government or pro-opposition forces; broadcast media are controlled by the government to a considerable degree.

*Diagram 3*
*Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news*
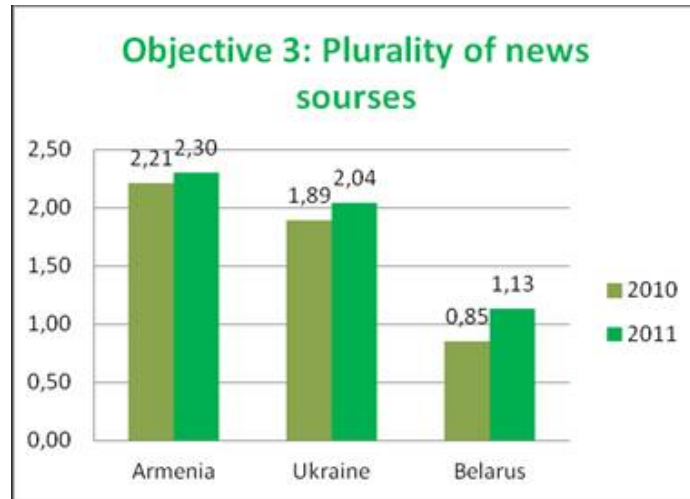


- Citizens' access to domestic and international media is not restricted by the government. The problems surrounding access are more acute in the regions, especially for rural populations.
- There are some independent news agencies, which gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media. However in many cases the officially registered owners are nominal directors and not the real owners or decision makers. The general public is aware of who the media owners are.
- Most of the broadcast outlets with news programs produce their own news and information programming.

This objective has increased in Armenia during 2010 (2011) [3, 4], generally due to the development of new media, which provide more diverse and independent information sources. But panelists agreed that the public media do not reflect the views of the political spectrum, are partisan, and often do not serve the public interest. Further, they agreed that public media are not independent of the state or ruling party. Cov-

erage is somewhat balanced outside of election periods, but during the campaign season it can take unpredictable swings.

Scores dropped for this objective in Ukraine and Belarus during 2010 (2011) [5, 6 and 7, 8]. This happened because of the agencies have gradually switched to free dissemination to local media and survive for the time being through the sale of exclusive interviews, analytical pieces, and outsourcing contracts with international agencies.

*Diagram 4*
*Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence*



These three post-soviet countries are characterized by the following:

- Mainstream private media outlets operate as profit-generating businesses with efficient management; however, there are lots of media outlets subsidized either by politicians or the state. Local authorities continue to give out funds to weak municipal newspapers with low circulation and low quality.

- Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources, and among them are hidden business and political advertising that influence editorial policy.

- At the national level advertising business is significantly monopolized and corrupted.

- Agencies and many advertisers tend to use more regional media to cover all of country in their campaigns rather than relying on nationwide publications.
- Independent commercial media outlets do not receive official government subsidies. (Armenia is exception).

This objective's score has highly decreased in Ukraine during 2010 year (2011) [5, 6]. While profitable, well-managed, and professional media businesses exist, many media are just mouthpieces of political and business interests. State and municipal media financing of such outlets, and the lack of transparency in spending, create unfair competition. A narrow segment of successful and well-managed media fight for survival amid unfair competition in a non-transparent and corrupt market.

In Armenia this objective scored slightly lower than the previous year, due in part to a noticeable drop in government distortion of the media market. Most panelists agreed that with a few exceptions, the media in Armenia are not efficient or well-managed businesses. They also agreed that there are almost no newspapers that operate as for-profit businesses and that the lion's share of advertising is in the broadcast sector, particularly television.

The objective scored a high increase in Belarus during 2010 year (2011) [7, 8] due to the government's impact on the media market as a whole. For example, in Belarus the government controls much of the commercial and industrial sectors and is not shy about steering advertising away from independent-minded media.

All three post-soviet countries are characterized by the following:

- Professional associations defend primarily business interests, and do not stimulate better-quality informing of the society or a higher level of professionalism.

*Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media*
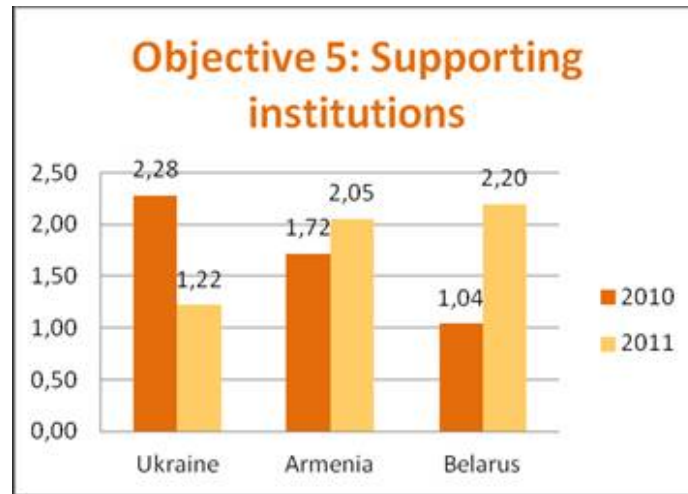


- Private printing facilities are available, and access to them is not constrained by political influences. Newspaper publishers and city authorities are leery of municipal government attempts to systematize distribution of newspapers and periodicals in bigger cities.
- The situation with retail newspaper stands and kiosks varies in different regions. The two problems inherent to the system are bribing at the level of the local government and strong competition.

This objective showed a sharp drop in Ukraine during 2010 year (2011) [5, 6]. Due to the economic crisis, overall demand has diminished, and the number of training courses offered has dropped accordingly. Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in government-handpicked companies, political, and restricted.

Scores in this objective have increased in Armenia and Belarus during 2010 year (2011) [3, 4 and 7, 8] due to improving of newspaper distribution, particularly print distribution in regional centers and

towns. Newspaper distribution has improved particularly print distribution in regional centers and towns. However, there are still no trade associations that represent the interests of media owners and managers. In a positive development, domestic journalism schools increased cooperation and had joint programs with German and Swedish media-development organizations.

## Conclusions

The characteristic of mass media in New Eastern Europe countries was presented through secondary data analysis of the MSI (index of media sustainability) with a goal to define general trends in functioning of mass media in the NEE countries and also to emphasize their similarities and differences.

According to results, media of Armenia, Belarus and Ukraine are characterized by a gap between media laws on the paper and reality. In terms of objectivity and bias, there should be a distinction among print, broadcast, and online media. In fact, print media of NEE are vastly polarized and often serve as a mouthpiece for either pro-government or pro-opposition forces; broadcast media are controlled by the government to a considerable degree.

Armenia demonstrates the highest level of free speech; also free expression is becoming the dominant theme online in Armenia. However, as far as one of the main indicators of democratic media, the plurality of news sources is concerned, the Armenian news sources did not provide their citizens with reliable, objective news. Meanwhile, this indicator has increased in Ukraine and Belarus during 2010, generally due to development of new media, which provide more diverse and independent information sources. Belarus demonstrates significant progress in increasing

the number and plurality of news sources in 2010, but the indicator of free speech in these years has not changed and remains rather low and an Internet access still requires state registration in Belarus.

In NEE countries there is a problem with professional journalism. Journalists and editors practice self-censorship. Self-censorship is motivated by political interests of owners and fear of distribution obstacles, future limits on access to information, and retaliatory unlicensed software checks. At national channels, there are too many entertainment programs, and people cannot get analytical and useful information in news programs, with few exceptions. Quality niche reporting and programming do exist, but are insufficient as yet.

The MSI will continue assessing the sustainability of the media systems in NEE countries. This will help to analyze media systems – consisting both traditional media types and new media platforms – and determine the areas in which media development assistance can improve citizens' access to news and information.

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