

Abstract **Sabina Mihelj**

A Decline of Publicness: Rethinking the Transformation of CEE Media After 1989

Professor of Media and
Cultural Analysis at the
Loughborough University,
United Kingdom

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Since the fall of communist rule, media landscapes in Central and Eastern Europe have undergone a dramatic transformation. An integral part of this transformation was the shift in the relationship between the media and the public realm. The dominant narratives chart this process in terms of a shift from a state when the public realm was suffocated under the weight of party-state control, or was limited to dissident and underground publications, to a situation where mainstream media, having severed their links with the state and become dependent on commercial revenues, were increasingly capable of sustaining a realm of public

debate insulated from political interference. Over time, this narrative was complicated somewhat, to acknowledge the existence of forces that undermined the ability of CEE media to foster publicness, and instead turned them into vehicles of a progressive recolonization of the public realm by a variety of political and economic actors. To simplify, if the 1990s saw a rapid opening-up of publicness in the region, the 2000s and especially the 2010s have been marked by the gradual shrinking of the public realm, evidenced in the declining levels of freedom of speech and the growth of oligarchic media ownership, and accompanied by a more general process of democratic deconsolidation.

This paper seeks to challenge this dominant narrative, and proposes instead that the post-1989 transformation is more accurately described in terms of a progressive decline of publicness. This decline, I argue, is not unique to CEE, but forms part of global developments that encompass the crisis of public broadcasting, the blurring of lines between promotional culture and political communication, and the rise of post-truth politics. Grasping this process requires us to do two things: first, rethink the notion of publicness, and second, revisit our understanding

of the relationship between the media and the public realm during communist rule. The paper will accomplish this by drawing on the results of the Screening Socialism project, which investigated the nature of broadcasting in five communist countries, and by building on insights from recent work on the nature of journalism, promotional culture, social media, and other developments in CEE media after 1989.