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POLAND: BETWEEN HYBRID MEDIA SYSTEM AND THE POLITICIZED MEDIA SYSTEM

ANDREJ SKOLKAY

Dobek-Ostrowska, B. (2019). *Polish Media System in a Comparative Perspective. Media in Politics, Politics in Media*. Berlin: Peter Lang. ISBN 978-3-631-77568-4, 288 pages.

Professor Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska, renowned Polish expert in media comparative studies, has published a book in English *Polish Media System in a Comparative Perspective. Media in Politics, Politics in Media*. This book is translated and updated version of the first Polish edition under almost identical title (*Polski system medialny na rozdrożu. Media w polityce, polityka w mediach*), published in Wrocław in 2011.

The book should be of great interest to scholars in the EU. Obviously, Poland is an important political actor, currently facing attempts of the Law and Justice lead coalition to transform society from by and large liberal one into a more conservative outlook. These attempts should sooner or later affect the media system too. Indeed, there are reports about biased public service media (PSM) reporting that have become a mouthpiece of governmental propaganda. This propaganda aspect was very much visible during election campaign before the Parliamentary elections in October 2019 (Organization for Security and

Co-operation in Europe, 2019). Thus, one can wonder what role do Polish journalists and Polish media play within this political context? The author answers this question early on: “journalistic professionalism and culture . . . are determined by the attitude of the media and of journalists toward politics, politicians, and political parties. This is reflected in the intensity of the mediatization process and the quality of publicizing politics in the main . . . media” (p. 17). In other words, the author suggests that apolitical, or more precisely politically neutral, unbiased, journalists/media are a key indicator of professionalism of journalism/media sector. Obviously, the fundamental transformation of a society as envisioned by the Law and Justice Party and its allies, as already presented in biased reporting on the part of the PSM, ultimately goes against this goal. Therefore, perhaps, it should be added already here (as it is done later) that there might be present opposite impact, i.e. of politics on the media. As we mentioned earlier, there are two sides of this relationship – on the one hand, how the journalists and media approach politics (the government, Parliament, authorities, and political parties) and how these latter entities approach media and journalists (in short, what the media policy is about).

The book has three key parts plus conclusion and annexes. The first part is entitled “Polish Journalists and their professional culture”, the second part “Mass media in the logic of political actors”, the third part “Mediatization and politics coverage in the media” and the “Conclusion: The Polish media system on the

map of Europe”. The first part is about journalists and the media in general, the second part concerns political actors, and the third part tackles the output of this interaction. Perhaps, what could be more or independently discussed is the media system as such. In fact, the discussion on media system is present, but this is not that clear from the general outline as mentioned above. This discrepancy is result of the main methodological approach that the author uses, namely Hallin and Mancini approach to analysis of media-politics mutual relations. More specifically, the author is interested in part of Hallin and Mancini (it is not their original idea) analytical concept, namely *political parallelism*. This concept, which at the same time necessitates comparative “dual” media-politics analytical approach, suggests very close mutual coexistence of the media and political system. It is of course rather popular concept, especially in highly politicized countries. In fact, the “system analysis approach” on which this concept is based, goes back deeply into past, as Dobek-Ostrowska mentions, as it was defined or coined by Deutsch, Easton and Newcomb at least half century ago. Furthermore, the author refers to the inspiration found in works of Blumler and Gurevitch (*politicization levels* and models of the relations between political actors), the concepts of *media logic* and *party logic* by Mazzoleni, the models of politics coverage in media (Patterson; López-Escobar, Sabada and Zugasti), the concepts of *colonization* of politics by the media, as coined by Meyer, and the *mediatization* of politics by Strömbäck and *systemic parallelism* as defined by

Jakubowicz. It would be helpful here if the author discussed these inspirations more in depth, since some of these concepts may be in mutual conflict or at least may potentially offer different interpretative frameworks (e.g. the politicization levels and models of the relations between political actors versus the concept of media logic and party logic as well as the mediatization of politics and especially concepts of colonization of politics by the media). In other words, the latter concepts put sometimes perhaps too much emphasis on the role of the media as an independent social actor, and indeed, political actor (in a sense having impact on politics). Practically, the concept of media logic seems to be replaced in the reviewed work by the concept of *journalistic culture*.

The author presents what she calls in introduction “the area of analysis”. This area of analysis, or perhaps a careful selection of factors and indicators for further analysis, includes the political context, economic context, technological context, society context and media production context (p. 15). Interestingly, the author suggests additional or other factors in the conclusion of her study, worthy of consideration for further analysis: the Internet access, social media use, press freedom, as well as foreign media ownership, political freedom, media censorship, and democratic standards (p. 215).

Obviously, these are all relevant indicators, and at the same time such a complex matrix of factors that only a team of researchers could tackle all of them at the sufficient level of analysis and in due time. Indeed, the author further

explains that she is primarily interested in “the relationship between the mass media and the political parties” (p. 16), a selection which she justifies by the fact that this relationship “constitutes the foundations of every democratic political system” (p. 16). This is interesting observation which describes the Polish media system more than one would perhaps expect. I mean traditionally, discussions and research focus at the relationship between the government in power and the media and/or journalists. If the author focuses at political parallelism, this suggests that the majority of the media seem to be in such a politicised situation, and probably for a longer period. However, in a healthy liberal democracy and in a professional media system, the media and journalists should not be unambiguously and permanently politicised. Certainly, at the minimum, the PSM should not be a propaganda tool. Indeed, the author explicitly mentions that she is not focusing on “the development of the mass media and the importance of the state” (p. 16). What is so specific in the Polish case (or in any similar case) that one has to discuss political parties, and not the government’s role (media policy in general) first? This question is answered a few sentences later, when the author mentions that she is actually interested “in media strategies (or lack thereof) of political actors” as well as in “the media content devoted to politics” (p. 16). According to the author, there actually is not a typical political parallelism in the media in Poland. Nonetheless, there emerged a more concentrated political party system, leading to decreasing

number of relevant actors: “(f)ollowing the 2015 parliamentary elections, two parties dominate the political scene” (p. 17). This development is analysed with “the comparative method”, especially in “Central European context” (p. 23). Finally, the overarching goal is to prove (or disapprove) that “political parallelism is still present in Poland” (p. 18). This general research framework is supported by a set of more specific research questions (p. 23-24). Apparently, the relationship between political parties and the media is – perhaps paradoxically – not the most important aspect (or not present, with exception of politicised the PSM) of political parallelism in the Polish context – at least according to the author. This can be seen in the lessons learned. The key finding at a macro-level of media system is that while it was the legacy media that dominated the process of political communication, currently (not only in Poland) there is increasing role of the online versions of legacy media and of social media. Especially social media bring the “network logic” (which combines personal and party logic). Nonetheless, the legacy media still play a leading role in political communication in Poland.

Concerning de-professionalization of journalism, it was more influenced by the financial crisis (than by politics – unless we consider as politics financial and economic policies within this context) a decade ago (but not in Poland, there was no financial crisis), as well as by more broader structural and technological changes worldwide. Perhaps the most important factor here was the rise of social media in political

communication. Internally, the Smolensk catastrophe in 2010 and the 2015 parliamentary elections seem to suggest the impetus for faster de-professionalisation (and higher politicisation) of journalists/media in Poland. As a result, the coverage of politics oscillates between the party and media logic (a horse-race and personalization coverage). In summary, the de-professionalization of the journalistic profession is progressing faster in Poland, especially as it is reflected in the follow-up media coverage of politics. Nonetheless, the author argues that political parallelism did not develop in Poland, at least not in the form it did in Spain, Italy or Greece, with the exception of permanent politicisation of PSM. Concerning the latter, the author speaks about political instrumentalization. In contrast, the print media usually acknowledge their ideological preferences but this does not translate into unconditional support for any political party. Political parallelism is present mainly in opinion magazines and a marginal number of daily newspapers. The long-term explanation for this development includes the weakness of political parties at the beginning of the political transformation and economic independence of media companies. Considering the role of media owners in a comparative focus, there is a change from political media to commercial media in Central and Eastern Europe in general, with several cases in which the owner is involved in politics.

As a result of her analysis, conceptually, the author questions the usefulness of the three models of media systems suggested by Hallin and

Mancini (*Democratic Corporatism*, the *Liberal Model*, and the *Polarized Pluralism Model*) and instead suggests considering the Polish media system, at least till the 2015 parliamentary elections in Poland, as the *Hybrid Media System*, the term initially proposed by Chadwick. Since that time, the Polish media system has moved again (back) towards the *Politicized Model* (apparently identical with the *Polarized Pluralism Model*).

In general, the book is a very insightful contribution to a highly complex topic. Some smaller corrections might be helpful, such as at page 14: “1980s with the deregulation and privatization of the media in European Union member states” – correctly, there was no EU at that time, but there were European Communities at that time. Also, it would be useful for further references and at the same time polite to mention, at the first time, the full names of cited authors, when these are mentioned individually (for example, “led by Pisarek” or “published by Curry”, p. 22). It is questionable whether (or how deeply) there is “entrenched journalism in public media in Slovakia” (p. 214), considering the impact of politics on the media/journalists that can change (increase or decrease) after each elections. Sometimes it would appear to be beneficial to explain for a foreign audience a bit more some statements, for example, “(n)umerous articles by Bajka (1991, 2000), Chorążki (1996, 1997), Kowalczyk (2003) and Pepliński (2001) are worth mentioning” (p. 22). Since it is no clear what was their contribution, one can wonder why are these articles/authors worth mentioning?

Apparently, there are many questions that need to be answered in further research. In the Polish case, it appears that there are three key issues worth discussing, especially concerning relationship between the media/journalists and politics. The first is the quality of journalistic output or, in general, professionalism of journalists/media, the second the independence of the PSM, and the third, the role of social media and online versions of legacy media in politics and society. Clearly, these issues are to a lesser or bigger degree relevant globally. In the Polish context, after the 2019 parliamentary elections, politics will most likely play an increasing role in the media system. Thus, independence of the PSM will remain an abstract ideal, and journalists may become involved, willingly or not, into normative-ideological struggle with the Law and Justice Party lead government. It remains to be seen whether there will emerge parallel media system – most likely, the PSM and some outlets supporting the government, while some other media outlets, criticising the government.

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