

PREMISES OF "CULTIVATING" CIVIC ATTITUDES IN THE ROMANIAN MEDIA SPACE

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1. Introduction

The events of the late 80's in the Eastern Europe caught the world in a definite surprise. The policies of the Western Powers had been proven to be obsolete, due to the new situation that confronted them with the emerging democracies in the Warsaw Pact Area. The time for a definite dichotomy: *democracy* vs. *authoritarian* regime had been gone, things had started to be clearer: Europe will end up as a peaceful and democratic continent. The "red devil" disappeared.

However, no more than in the early 90's (let's say 1992), Eastern Europe is still fighting with the red ghost: Hungarian right¹ oriented reforms had proven to have many failures, the Polish shock therapy was still with fewer results than expected, Czechs were losing the heavy industry investments, Romanian "original democracy"² was facing riots and internal turbulence, Bulgaria was "diving" into its crisis, and the list may continue. Therefore, the "clearness" of the 89-90 had vanished.

Were these societies prepared for facing the reform? Who were/are responsible for entailing the new values, norms and behaviours required for the new "order"?

Any reform is *an institutional reconstruction process that has been designed by the elites and offered and imposed to society by contagion, persuasion or coercion* (Dumitru Sandu, 1999). This implies that the basic actors of the reform are those that design the transformation, basically the elite, the rulers.

On the other hand, the reform does not have any substance if the interaction with the population did not exist in the social space. To put it in other words: the masses should be an active actor of the transformation.

¹ In Eastern Europe *left* means conservatism and backwardness (sovietism and communism) and *right*, whatever reformism implies (our note).

² In the *leftist* way (our note).

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If we assume that the masses are also a major partner of this interaction, then we will have to consider that there is some cognitive potential for them. That is, in a simpler way of saying: they have got the *know-how* for the democratic institutionalising procedures.

Our thesis in this essay is not only that mass-media introduce new concepts and values in the post-communist societies via direct messages and focused oriented broadcasting, but also using indirect messages, or, as we will discuss later, *already institutionalised actualities*.

How can mass media address this kind of messages? How can we assume that mass media are present in the democratisation processes? In the following chapter of our essay we will analyse some of the aspects that are related with this problem. We will also propose a model of social interaction that has been, in our opinion, proven to be adapted to the real events .

Afterwards, we will also present some of the problems of the mass media interaction in the developing democracies. We will focus on the composition of the interactive space of the social reform, that is, the civic space (according to the proposed model). In the area of civic activities there are many types of social actors implicated, therefore the tendencies of their activities might also be divergent rather than converging to a finality that was defined (The Democratic institutionalisation of a social system).

As for finalising our paper, we will draw some conclusions that will define our opinion and our hypotheses that cope with some predictions.

Our ideas are inextricably linked to the reality of the post-communist Eastern Europe and they do not refer intentionally to any other region of the world.

2. The Interaction of the Mass Media with the new institutions.

2.1 Transformation, mass communication and who is implicated.

The beginning of institutionalisation of a democratic regime has to be facing some provocative elements. In Offe's terms (1998:2-16) the institutions are mainly measured by "internal socialisation and beliefs, on the one hand, and the implementation of goals or the control over resources, on the other".

Consequently, in terms of the Institutionalism theories, the transformation in Eastern Europe should be analysed through these two criteria. However, if we can still discuss the possibility of a design, the output of the analysis might be used in some predictor models.

The first criterion, of the "embracing" of the new values and norms can be put together with the performance of the social actors implied.

In simple terms, the elites and the population are together implicated in the processes of this “socialisation”. As for the mass dynamic of values, we can affirm that the “new order” should fit into their common good, or, at least, what is generally accepted and defined as a common good. On the other side of this process, the elite class is supposed to present a stable progress and desirability of the expected transformation. In this “collaboration”, Eastern Europe has faced a controversial situation, due to the lack of the performance of the elites and the dangerous risk taking action (e.g. unemployment, inflation, change of social security system, etc.) that have not been initiated by population (as opposed to some planning elite).

The implementation of goals, as *the second criterion*, was doubtfully efficient, due to the large gap between general definition of the “common good” and the short-term desirability within the social groups. The most typical example is the positive declaration of a factory worker towards “privatisation”, but the opposite representation of the “privatisation” of her/his own place of work. As for the “concrete version” of the goals’ presentation, there had been also different “images” due to the main actors involved. As we described before, the opposition “conservatism-reformism” had been present in the public place in various ways: from the extremist communism, through “Perestroika” and “Glasnost”, “original democracy”, the “third way”, to extremist liberalism, “jungle law” ideologies, and so on. Presented in either elaborated or naïve ways, these “*abstract*” definitions of goals have been causes of a confusion among the public representation of the “future”.

This difficulty of perception, along with the formation of political opinions among the society, created a peculiar dissonance in the space of the public communication. In this space new institutions can come as opposed to disorder. As we stated before, the building of the new institution through a public space can be defined as a reform process. Moreover, the reform can be diffused in the society by using different methods, such as coercion (which is beyond our field of interest, since we are focused on the transition to liberal democratic form of regime in Eastern Europe. Coercion, besides social control systems in a mature democracy, is a type of negative sanction that is not correlated to the features of “Democracy”), social contagion and persuasion. All these operations take place in a public space that is, also, embodied in a wider environment that is defined by social needs, interests and cognitive activities.

For the purpose of the analysis, we will relate to the concept of reform from a narrower perspective: as a communication process.

The sociality of this process is almost absolute; due to the fact that all the actors of the given society are implicated. Moreover, the outcomes of the transformation are important for the entire organisation of the society.

2.2 Who is/are concerned with it? (The major actors)

There is no classic or new theory that can explain everything that happened in Eastern Europe in the last decade. The social area of the changes has been a theatre of many unpredictable events that could not be linked easily to the historic background. However, one of the most powerful explanation comes from the classical “structuralism”.

One of the most accepted theories regarding the successful democracies deals with the class-organisation of the society. It is generally accepted that **the middle class** represents the largest society segment that strengthens the democratic rule and organisation. It is, therefore, a matter of the structure of the society to distribute and institutionalise the values of an opened regime.

Civil society does not exist without a background, mainly created by the “middle” people. It is very difficult to define the middle class in comprehensive terms. For many scholars, the concept is taken for granted, but without many basic explanation.

In economics, the most widely used criterion for defining this concept is determined by the average income of the individuals or units of analysis (family, householding, etc.). For Culturalists, for example, the level of education is more important. Bourdieu goes even further, by defining a “cultural capital”, that, for some of his critics at least, represents a set of resources that are able to define the social class of belonging.

Thus, it would be a difficult task to take into consideration all the approaches of the definition of this concept. However, due to the fact that we are interested of the classification by the actors of the social and institutional changes in a post-communist reality, we interpret the “middle class” as *a part of the population that contains the majority (a) of the actors and set up, respect and interact within the generally accepted rules and limits of the society (b), due to the sufficient amount of resources (human, social, economic, cultural and politic) at their disposal (c), without describing marginality, deviance and anti-social behaviours and without effectively ruling the given society.*

Therefore, we consider the following operational dimensions of the concept:

- a. **Volume.** Middle class must have a sufficient size of the society, so that its opinions are sufficiently expressible (Alport's definition of the public opinion).
- b. **Institutions.** The rules and values are typical for every social class, and generally accepted by the members. However, these institutions are rather wide oriented, with a broad setting. They are not focused on any particular organisational, ethnic or administrative cultures. (The middle class is not a social group).
- c. **Resources.** The amount of the resources (overall: human + social +...) is larger than the poor part of the society, but smaller than the elite members.

Given these operational definitions of the middle class, we will concentrate briefly on the concept of democracy. Considering both Almond and Verba's "Civic Culture" and Putnam's "Making Democracy Work", we will focus on the following dimensions of "democracy":

- Civic Engagement (Citizenry);
- Political Equality (Democratic beliefs);
- Solidarity, trust and tolerance;
- Associations, social structures of co-operation.

Altogether, they constitute the *civic-culture* orientation, as it is defined by Almond and Verba (1996, Romanian version of "Civic Culture: Political attitudes and democracy in five nations": 59-61). *A pluralist culture based on communication and persuasion, a culture of consent and of diversity, favourable to change and which implies the activism of every individual, the equality of rights, the liberty of opinions and the solidarity of the individuals, which will found every relations between each individuals on trust and co-operation is CIVIC (Democratic) CULTURE.*

Our aim in the proposed analysis is not to study the resources implied in the civic culture building but to schematise a broader perspective of this complex reality: institutional building and the relationship between individuals and the state (public) institutions, as a systemic set of communicational functions.

Consequently, we consider that the democratic culture has been founded on structured evolution of the middle class in the mature democracies:

The US, Great Britain, France or Germany, for example, have an overwhelming middle class society: private owners, entrepreneurs, employees, and so on are, basically, part of the middle class. They are the actors that count in any social institution of democracy.

If the elite might initiate any reform process, then it is for the population to adapt and to institutionalise the rules and values. Also, the decision making process in every mature democracy is totally dependent on the middle class actors. Politically, they represent the voters, socially, they represent the social movements' initiators, participants and organisers, economically, they are those who sustain the state and the policies of the elite (the governors).

Returning to Eastern Europe, one can express one question: is there a middle class in these societies?

The question is difficult to answer. Post communist organisation of societies has been drastically changing. The formation of a such social structure is yet to be completed. However, a pre-structure has been already settled, therefore, it has to evolve. Our thesis in this essay is that the evolution of this structure is totally depending on the media.

2.3 How do the media interact with the middle class (how are the actors concerned by interchange?)

While the elite strata are presenting the values using mass-media, individual social actors are confronting these desirable representations with their immediate needs and expectations. The conflict emerged as an area of mechanisms of solving the dissonance. In this context, the emanation of latent variables is the background of the "natural" (by this we understand non-forced) process of social building.

The role of mass-media in the formation of this antithesis, as well as in the process of solving it, is crucial. First, the media are implied in creating a new image of living standards. Copying the Western Style, new television channels, newspapers, magazines in post-communist countries have put as desirable value the "middle-class lifestyle", not to mention the political declarations of the media actors.

In terms of social building, this conflict area is the real scene of institutional building in everyday life world. People are solving the dissonance using their own rationality. The rationalisation process came to fill the gap of social norms and, consequently, institutions in that have been already built.

Our thesis is related to the construction of social capital, as a main resource in “making democracy work”, using Putnam’s terms. The main hypothesis that we inquire is that **social capital resources can be provided to the mass by the media channels, since they are part of the most plausible sources of positive information towards the reform processes.** To explain this, we have to focus on some terms that will provide us with a logical model of the dynamics of the institutional reconstruction throughout the communication spaces.

The social space of the reform is defined by individual behaviours. By this, we understand entrepreneurial, political and symbolic set of attitudes and comportments that are present in the society. The typology of the political elites that we presented before is helping us in presenting the main political trends in the transition period in Eastern European Countries.

Due to the historical background of the global transformations, no previous regime projection could supply any feasible social model of a better organisation than the modern and mature democratic society. This assessment does not imply any doubts. Nonetheless, in post-communist countries, the embodiment of democratic values in a general symbolic corpus at the macro level, has faced some resistance at the level of the individuals. They can affirm that they appreciate these symbols in a positive way, but their behaviour is rather typical to an expectancy, passive stage, than to an active activity. Social surveys are often showing this controversial fact. We would like to call this “unshaped” behaviour a “substitute” one. Sometimes it can manifest itself in an organised way, such as “nationalism”, “fundamentalism”, but in the end these types of “substitution” models conclude themselves as either “conservatives” (most likely) or “democratic”.

The main interesting phenomenon is that a great part of the population is still in between of these two poles of the axis “pro” or “anti” reform. The attitudes in this context are not consistent, and the behaviours of the individuals are not manifesting discursively. These people are investing their resources in a way that is not strictly defined, and their expectations are not linked with the outcomes of their investments. They “win” when they do not expect to win or they lose when they have great expectations. The correlation of the investment of the symbolic resources and the dynamic of the amount of the other types of resources is negative.

The social representations of these classes of people towards reform processes are still reshaping and constructing. It is in this area of continuous construction of norms and values that we are interested in.

But where is the role of mass media in building democratic institutions when we discuss these social types?

The social classes of post-communist societies are still being in a struggle of building their own order. Which is, in the terms of the institutional theory, a process of construction of a set of norms that will generate rules of behaving. Moreover, these norms are justified by some values. Whether these values are fitting with the expectancies of the individuals, one can try to explain this by using the functionalist approach. However, defining functions in a dynamic system appears to be an impossible process, due to the fluctuating representation of what is desirable or not.

On the other hand, we assume that highly abstract by defined concepts, such as “democracy”, had been defined in the early years of the post-communist transition through strong ideological statements by the elite. Therefore, both the public discourses of the newly emerged leaders and the general need for a radical change had created a positive attitude to the processes of reform of society.

Nevertheless, it is also the elite that have failed or that did not comply with the expectations of the masses. Therefore, one can expect that it is not easy to implement a reform with a resistant population. Then, if not resistant, how co-operative is the population for all the changes?

We assume, therefore, that citizens face the following dissonance:

They invest in some risk based activities (social change) while they do not know for sure what to expect as an outcome and how to judge the outcome.

One of the first effects of the social transformation in the Eastern European countries (and, to some extent, former Soviet Union countries) was the beginning of the mass consumption products commercialising. Eventually, Eastern Europe has become a big market, where people could find many of the commodities that had been “forbidden” in the communist regime. A new institution has started to develop, that is mainly related to these economic behaviours that are typical in Western Societies. From Credit Cards to Supermarkets, Eastern Europe has been reorganised in the western style in this area.

The same situation has been created in mass media. In former regimes, censorship, strongly ideological oriented newspapers or television channels (that were controlled by the state and the communist parties), etc. had been daily realities.

After the changes in 1989, in Eastern Europe the idea of the “independent” newspaper, or “private television” has become more usual, until they reached a level of “normality”.

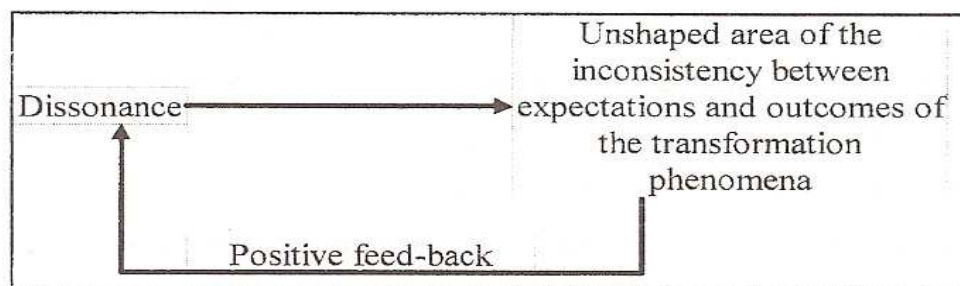
As a private organisation, a mass media establishment that does not belong to the state is producing money mainly by the “commercial” space that they sell to various associations or firms (mainly economic or political). Therefore, in the public sphere the commercial announcements, video clips or spots have already been accepted as a “normal” phenomenon.

The perception of this “normality” has been placed in a “space” of acceptance of the “new life-style”. From the newly formed consumption behaviour to the projection of the “modern” individual “should do” goals, mass-media have been a latent channel of the formation of new institutional norms of everyday life.

The process has not been a product of an educational campaign towards mass-media. The controversial events in the activity of the politicians, the criticising attitudes towards the negative outcomes of the reform processes and so on, have been providing a rather negative point of view towards the transformation processes. On the other hand, with or without any design, the public communication channels have been transmitting “images” that were based on **an institutional representation of a standard of life**.

Desirable products, a structure of style and so on, have created a pattern of behaviour according to middle class of the Western societies. From a symbolic level to concrete economic behaviour, this information has shaped the diffuse representations of a future, helping people with dissonance solving them by re-orienting their projection. In terms of social capital, the second socialisation through mass-media is providing people with norms and values that constitute a framework of everyday life controlling institutions. Moreover, the new definitions of situations of short-term future might organise the investments of the social actors. Therefore, the conflict area that has the feature of dissonance is re-shaping by this “imposing” characteristic of the public communication channels.

The following scheme is an attempt of formalising the idea:



*Fig no. 1:
The illustration of the social mechanism of the self-controlling system of the “abstract-concrete” dissonance and the area of the social representations of the “better future”*

Our thesis is that mass-media are interfering in the feed-back relationship between the two elements of inconsistency.

Moreover, they are providing the public sphere with normative elements that are reshaping the area of the inconsistency between the expectations and the outcomes. Consequently, people are reconsidering their investments and are changing their behaviours and their expectations.

3. Conclusions.

The relationship of the changing the individual behaviours and the public informational system are, however, ambivalent. Since the main characteristic of the mass communication organisations is that they provide the public with news, comments and, primarily, opinions towards the events that are happening, we expect formations of the negative images towards the concrete parts of the social processes.

A theoretical approach of the public interactions within the social transformation processes is very difficult to build. However, our intention was to schematise and emphasise the fact that not only direct messages of the main actors (elite) of the reform are constructing rules of behaviour of the population, but also some latent elements of the communication media.

The acceptance of the “new” values and norms is a dynamic process that requires the participation of all actors, not only the “target” of the process (in our case, the population). Using a metaphor, not only the pupils are learning in school, but also the teachers.

In the specific situation of the post-communist transformation we described the situation of the actors. The elite class has not yet defined either its origins, or their goal. The lack of consistency within itself, as well as within their “external behaviour” (that is the attitudes in the public space) might orient an analyst to conclude that “the teachers” are not efficient. Moreover, “the taught lesson” itself is dissonant. Therefore, one can expect that the process of institutional reconstruction might be inefficient.

Our statement is that public communication organisations are providing “the pupils” with new instruments that are helping them in solving the dissonance already created. From the street billboards, through commodities packages to mass-media major channels (national television channels, daily newspapers, etc.), the informational environment is re-shaping the social representations. The middle-class life-style is institutionalising as a reflection of what we called at the beginning of this analysis “the better future”.

Consequently, a positive environment for the reform processes has been already created by the public communication.

Considering the role of the media in forming the new middle class institutions, one cannot assume that everything depends on them. Even though we defined the reform as a communication process, it is not only for the mass media to accomplish all the functions of the social changes.

There are two major concepts of our thesis: civic education, as a process of institutional edification, and public communication environments (mass-media), as instruments of education. We would like to analyse the civic education process, as a theoretical approach of institutional transition processes, some elements of public sphere, as a specification of the environment of this process, and as our thesis, to build a model of this type of social interaction: mass-media \Leftrightarrow public sphere \Leftrightarrow institutional building.

We would like to provide some assumption regarding the conditions of the interaction and, as a by-product of this interaction, the efficiency of this “second socialisation”, regarding the grow of social resources.

Or, as an alternative statement: Is it possible to build democratic institutions by using mass-media?

We tried to demonstrate that it is not a question of possibility, but one of necessity. The cognitive power of the mass communication can substitute a “school” for every possible topic. Let us remember some “neutral” publications in the seventies. It had not been very likely to see on a coverage an African person, or another type of minority person. Now, from school manuals to dictionaries, images representing the variety of the humankind implicated in common activities are everywhere. A driver should not be necessarily a man, a white or something “traditionally” accepted. Anchor people are not necessarily top-models. Gender-free, race-free, socialisation market (subject of adds that had been not long ago considered taboo), etc. are everyday realities.

In Eastern Europe mass media have the role of presenting “normality as normal”. Without any preconceptions, anti-democratic nuances. Or, exactly on these so called neutral messages (movies, adds, types of presenting the news, shows, etc.) lies the potentiality of “revealing the normality”.

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