

The State of the State: A Meta-Analysis of State Involvement in Television Broadcasting in the Former Czechoslovakia

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ABSTRACT

With the collapse of Communism in Europe, the geopolitical terrain of the east and central portion of the continent was redrawn according to the changes caused by the implosion of the Warsaw Pact. Czechoslovakia is unique in that this change actually resulted in the vivisection of the nation into two separate countries, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. As every other aspect of post-communist nations was up for change and scrutiny, so was broadcast media in these countries. In this article, I will employ a qualitative meta-analysis in order to compare changes in the respective television broadcast systems of the two newly formed countries by analysing existing academic literature and research on the subject.

Keywords: *Propaganda, Czechoslovakia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Communism, Broadcast, International Relations, Political Science.*

INTRODUCTION

Europe has become more united as a continent because of the advent of the European Union and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and Communism. However, far from being a monoculture, Europe is made up of different regions representing different peoples that do not always share the same characteristics in how they regard the state and its involvement in society. Although geographically connected, some regions (and the states within them) have a different history that has shaped their culture in more autocratic ways than the nations in other parts of the continent. This difference of ways has included rules regarding the media and its independence from state interference.

One interesting example is the former Czechoslovakia (which of course at this point has split into the two nations of Slovakia and the Czech Republic). What's special about this former nation is that during its short periods of independence it was typically one of the more democratic and pluralistic societies in Central/Eastern Europe, but mainly on the part of the Czechs as opposed to their Slovak neighbors. This pluralism extended to the field of media and its position as a free entity in society. After the fall of Communism and the

Velvet Revolution, the new countries of the Czech Republic and Slovakia began to develop their own systems of media and philosophies of how they relate to the state. In this article, I explore the existing academic, governmental, and otherwise peer-reviewed literature on the changing environment in broadcast media post-Communism in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. To do this I utilize a qualitative meta-analysis of these publications regarding television broadcast media and its place in the evolving societies of the two nations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Tomas Trampota (2016) on the European Journalism Centre's website:

The contemporary Czech media system is the outcome of 20 years of history, starting with the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Until November 1989 all mass media in Czechoslovakia were governed by the state, state organizations or political parties in the National Front under the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. (pg.1).

After the breakup of the country, content became more diversified, with the Czech Republic having more variety of broadcast media. Andrej Skolkay (2016), also taken from

the European Journalism Centre's website, notes that "A common history and shared language skills allows for easy penetration of Czech-language media, including broadcasts in both languages..." (pg. 1). Thus, like much of their history the Czechs and Slovaks share a common thread, this time in media content. However, also like much of their history, the paths that the Czech Republic and Slovakia took with disentangling the broadcast media from the state became different (if not diametric). The Czech Republic, in line with its democratic traditions, embraced an independent broadcast media through the lens of western-style free-market capitalism. However, this was not always beneficial in its outcome. Jan Jirak and Barbara Kopplova (2008) assert:

...the presumed and declared desirable role of the media...intheearly1990s became just a front for a rapid, uncompromising privatization of the media (subordinated to the logics of accumulation of profit and power). A strong industrial sector of media emerged, which was not restrained by any feeling of responsibility towards society, whether at the economic, cultural or ethical, let alone aesthetic level. Czech society quickly and without reflection accepted innovations in content, form and technology which the development of media communication has been offering ever since the late 1980s. (pg.8)

The media in the Czech Republic during the 90s merely changed one master (the Communist party) for another (the wild impetus for pure profit). This was part of a general transition in the country from state media to (ostensibly) public broadcasting, with a powerful private sector. State media, such as under communism, is run absolutely by means of control of funding as well as by final editorial say of content by the state. Public broadcasting shares some diluted characteristics of state broadcasting. Regarding public broadcasting, in the words of Monika Metykova (2004) the "general characteristics of [public broadcasting]...share the following defining elements: some form of accountability to the public, some element of public finance, regulation of content...and regulated entrance [limits to the number of competing channels]" (pg. 224). The Czech Republic sought to weaken public broadcasting even further through its encouragement of private broadcasting, which is television broadcasting owned by individuals or entities outside of the state entirely (and therefore independently

funded by non-governmental means).

There were attempts at maintaining political control, but these were not as savage as some of the other former Soviet-vassal states. Revisiting the subject five years after, Jirak and Kopplova (2013) write:

Though politicians do seek to control public service media, Czech media in general operate in very liberal political and legal environments. Comparing the contemporary development with the media situation prior to 1989, Czech society has reached more or less all the objectives which were articulated in 1989, including freedom of expression, media content produced independently of the state, unrestricted access to information, [and] lack of political control... (pg. 185).

Slovakia, on the other hand, went the opposite way in many cases. This is not necessarily surprising, as Slovakia has proven not to fit neatly into the mold of some of her neighbors. Skolkay (2004) noted that although "Slovakia became a fully independent state on 1 January 1993...its economic and cultural development was different from other regions of the states it was part of during the twentieth century," and that "Consequently...broadcast media have reflected this difference" (pg. 205). Private broadcast media (as opposed to saturating the market) were not, and to a certain extent have not, been allowed to run rampant like the Czech Republic circa 1990s. Furthermore, a number of rollback measures have crept up from time to time, seeking to return the broadcast media back to a more state-controlled entity. This devolution fits in more so with the traditional mold of central and eastern Europe. Matus Minarik (2000) observes that:

The talk of state-censorship, individual freedom, deregulation and market competition is not old-fashioned at all in Slovakia and other Central and East European countries. Recent experience of state-censorship and strict regulation during communism, and a total absence of individual political freedoms and market competition turned these terms into a powerful and topical language in Slovakia and elsewhere. (pg. 5).

The Czech Republic and Slovakia had certainly begun taking different paths towards broadcast media and its relationship to the state. Andrew K. Milton (2001) writes that "...the persistence of institutional connection between the media and the government, state, and political parties

has left the media in a politically dependent position,” going on to say that “This dependence is manipulated by politicians across the political spectrum in an effort to sustain electoral success and political authority” (pg. 493). Even as recently as 2007, well after Slovakia was to bring its laws on broadcast media’s autonomy in line with the rest of the E.U., problems persisted with government interference. Milton (2007) revisited the issue and concluded, “Since its separation from the Czech Republic, Slovakia has been a particularly difficult place for the operation of the newly free media” (pg. 19).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Taking into account the common genealogy of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, I analyse existing research and documents that relates to the two countries and their broadcast media systems. As there has been no direct comparison between the two nations on this subject, I believe it is a worthwhile contribution to academia. I examine what the literature says about the state’s role in broadcast media and how it compares between the two countries. In order to do so I have three research questions that I apply to the literature (such as books, peer-reviewed journal publications, and government documents) on both the Czech Republic and Slovakia:

- What has been the legal connection of the state to broadcast media?
- What has been the role of political appointments regarding media licensing and oversight boards?
- What has been the nature of the state’s involvement in public television broadcast?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

I employ a qualitative meta-analysis of the existing body of literature and research in order to provide a better understanding of the broadcast media environment in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as well as their media development after the Velvet Revolution (when they were both still one nation), through the Velvet Divorce (when Czechoslovakia split into the two separate countries), and on through the 90s and early 2000s. According to Rita Schreiber, Dauna Crooks, and Phyllis Noerager Stern (1997) “The term *qualitative meta-analysis* was first used by Stern and Harris in 1985 to refer to the synthesis of a group of qualitative research *findings* into one explanatory interpretative end product,” which

in other words is “...a way of knowing-what-we-know and further extending findings” (pg. 312). Margarete Sandelowski (2004) elaborates:

Also referred to as qualitative meta-synthesis, qualitative meta-data- analysis, and meta-ethnography, qualitative meta-analysis is a distinctive category of synthesis in which the findings from completed qualitative studies in a target area are formally combined. Both a analytic process and an interpretive product, qualitative meta-analysis is...intent to ascertain systematically, comprehensively, and transparently the state of knowledge in a field of study (pg.892).

It is the theoretical development approach of qualitative meta-analysis that I will employ for my article. In this way I provide an article which clearly articulates the differences between the two sister nations of the Czech Republic and Slovakia by analyzing the existing literature and research on their broadcast media. I am looking at the articles and academic literature as an aggregate whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Therefore, my units of analysis are (qualitative) peer-reviewed academic publications. Furthermore, my research has also cited sources that appeared in the bibliographies of previous academic publications, thus establishing a reputable pedigree of research and peer-reviewed publications.

RESULTS

Musing on the nature of the dynamics between the Czech and Slovakian people, Blanka Kudej (1996) quipped that “[The] story of Czechs and Slovaks is the story of different peoples whose fates sometimes have touched and sometimes have intertwined” (pg. 71). This analysis has found that to be a very apt statement. The focus of this article has been to conduct a qualitative meta-analysis on the nature of the interactions between the Czech Republic and Slovakian states in regards to their respective television broadcasting systems. In order to conduct a qualitative meta-analysis on this subject, extensive research and the thorough searching for English language academic publications on television broadcasting in the former Czechoslovakia (after the fall of communism followed by the Velvet Divorce) was conducted. The academic and government material acquired and analysed (these materials representing the units of analysis for this article) was distilled from a variety of different sources; such as use of university libraries, databases, etc. The wide

net which was cast in order to acquire academic work of a sufficient level of diversity and scale was designed to fulfil a critical requirement in conducting a qualitative meta-analysis. This requirement would be conducting enough research of a sufficient degree and of a diverse enough nature to derive a conclusion which, in a sense, is an academic synthesis of the articles and publications. This in turn represents an academic whole that is greater than its aggregate.

It is commonly assumed by western observers that Czechoslovakia was and has been (in the form of its successor states) an exemplary example of democracy and pluralism in the post-communist world as well as central and Eastern Europe in general. The analysis of this article has suggested that this may be inaccurate. The Czech Republic has been a much more liberal and open society than Slovakia has regarding its television broadcasting, but only to a point and in its own fashion. There are some overlaps in the methods which both countries have brought to bear politically in order to influence television broadcasting in their nascent countries. But the motivations for the legal machinations which both countries have conducted are very different, and the outcomes in terms of using television broadcasting to build a more open nation has also been dissimilar.

The first research question asked was “What has been the legal connection of the state to broadcast media?” In both countries, the analysis found that the two nations inherited relatively intact autocratic bureaucracies which the communists left behind. These extended into the realm of television broadcasting, and thus the new political elite/former dissidents in the Czech Republic and Slovakia found themselves in charge of this monolithic broadcasting entity. Disappointingly, the former freedom fighters in both countries found that it was extremely hard to disengage from the use of government controls to bend the television broadcasting systems to their political will and designs. Thus the analysis found that both countries maintained government levers of power over the media which were left behind by the communists, who in turn inherited them from the fascists, who inherited them from the nationalists, and so on. In both countries it is not necessarily about the current ideology which happens to be in power, but of what that power happens to do with the levers of government

once seizing control of the country.

The Czech Republic and Slovakia both share a political aversion to letting go of power over television broadcast media, and perhaps this has more to do with the bureaucracy of media control which the political elite in those two countries inherited from the communists than their respective cultures. The political muscles flexed to invoke state influence in television broadcasting in both countries have been parliamentary control and interference in funding of public television as well as politically motivated appointments and terminations of officials associated with television broadcasting regulatory councils in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

This dovetails neatly into the next research question of the article; “What has been the role of political appointments regarding media licensing and oversight boards?” Again, the Czech Republic and Slovakia utilized the same methods of influence over television broadcasting oversight boards. This was the overly politicized appointments of yes-men by the legislatures of both the Czech Republic and Slovakia as well as the dismissal of uncooperative board members by the utilization of parliamentary powers to recall the heads and members of television broadcasting boards and councils. The excuse for recalls has been ostensibly related to areas of performance and finance, but whatever government in power could exercise parliamentary majority to not only shuffle around board members to suit their inclinations but to also withhold funding which the oversight boards need to survive. All this heavy-handedness runs contrary to the liberal reputation which Czechoslovakia still maintains even fourteen years after its dissolution. But at this juncture is where the Czechs and the Slovaks, like their history has often shown, split away from the path that they had both been sharing.

True, both countries exercised parliamentary controls over board committees and funding in order to influence television broadcasting to suit their political tastes. But the directions the new political elites in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in terms of where they wanted to take their respective countries were very different. This is where the analysis has suggested that a comparatively liberal cultural component with the Czechs versus the historically autocratic Slovaks comes into play with just how and to

what ends they used political influence over television broadcasting (and what the result was for their country).

The Slovaks, as noted numerous times in the publications researched and throughout this article, have generally practiced and been more comfortable with an authoritarian governmental system (as they had been subjected to one at the hands of the Hungarians for a millennia) than the Czechs. After the split, Vladimir Meciar and his Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) immediately began to take control of television broadcasting in order to practice “nation-building,” but what this boiled down to was a backslide into the authoritarian past which Slovakia had so recently emerged from. The geography of Slovakia fit partly in with how television broadcasting panned out after Meciar’s interference since there were very few options for terrestrial broadcasting frequencies other than public Slovakian television (which the HZDS intended on keeping that way). In using parliamentary control over television broadcasting licensing and regulatory boards, Slovakia was able to quash significant political counterpoints to the state’s narrative by neutering the private sector (making sure that the government ultimately decided the content and manner of television broadcasting through its grip on public television). Thus Meciar and the HZDS exercised its parliamentary influence over television broadcasting boards to return the monopoly of television broadcasting control back to the Slovak state and in alignment with an autocratic culture and society.

The Czech Republic’s parliamentarians had other designs for their political influence of oversight boards. Instead of neutering private television broadcasting and consolidating their grip on information control like the Slovaks, the new political elite in the Czech Republic didn’t seem enthralled to return their state to an autocratic one in the model of their past. Instead the Czech politicians wished to embrace a western style culture by limiting the funding and advertising time allotted to public television, while simultaneously exercising parliamentary authority to begin granting licenses to new private television stations and to create a more business friendly environment in general in the country. But this laissez faire capitalism approach created its own problems (the Slovaks, it would seem, did not hold sole province over growing pains after communism). The quality of television programming and news

reporting in the Czech Republic suffered, as content began to focus more on tabloid sensationalism and base entertainment rather than providing the Czech citizens with important information in how to participate both civically and politically in their new successor nation to the former Czechoslovakia. This is in addition to failing to meet other educational and cultural functions which public television’s mandate spells out. So although the Czech Republic did not practice the absolute state dominance and censorship which Slovakia had begun with the advent of Meciar and the HZDS, the efforts of the capitalist-oriented Czech parliamentarians to influence television broadcasting deprived their constituents of content that wasn’t profit driven as well as civically and culturally disengaged.

This leads to the third research question in the article, namely “What has been the nature of the state’s involvement in public television broadcast?” Between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the analysis has shown that there is one major difference. In Slovakia’s case, Meciar and the subsequent governments made the private television market a very difficult place to set up shop. This had the political benefit of meaning that television broadcasting in Slovakia was essentially a government monopoly. In the Czech Republic it was the opposite. The Czech politicians were very compliant with the needs of private television broadcasters, but they crippled public television’s influence compared to the private broadcasters by using parliamentary law to limit the amount of advertising time that Czech public television was allowed to air (thus crippling Czech public television financially of any non-direct governmental funding). This made the independence of Czech public television very weak, although on paper it seemed to be locked in as an independent and politically insulated entity.

This dominance of public television, and the use of this dominance by the state to shore up its position politically by controlling the narrative, is where the Czechs and Slovaks meet back up again (in terms of methodology of political arm-twisting). Meciar and the Slovakian political elite wanted to keep the state strong by controlling absolutely a fully functional public television broadcast apparatus (which was reminiscent of Slovakia’s communist past), while at the same time keeping any other voices from the private sector absent from the cultural

discourse of the country.

Exercise of control over public television in Slovakia was done by the appointment of political yes-men to oversight boards and by threatening to withhold funding. The Czech Republic sought to weaken Czech public television by cutting off public television's income stream through parliamentary legislation limiting the amount of advertising time allowed on Czech public television, while allowing private television in the country to advertise more or less at will. This made Czech public television a non-competitor against its much richer, private television broadcasting rivals. However, (like the Slovaks) what public television there was left, the Czech political elite set out to dominate. To do so, the Czechs utilized the same sort of funding blackmail as their Slovakian neighbors, and like them they also appointed sympathetic board members to oversight councils. But the Czech culture of independence revealed itself again when things got too close to the past with government interference in television broadcasting. During the Christmas Television Crisis of 2000 (when Czech parliamentarians were a bit too brazen with their political manipulations in the roster of public television broadcasting oversight boards), Czech citizens filled the streets of Prague in the largest protests since the fall of communism. The Czech government fired recalcitrant employees, censored broadcasts (momentarily lapsing back into lockstep with their Slovakian neighbors), and even cut broadcasting altogether, before eventually acceding to the protestors and fulfilling their demands for a non-politicized makeup of the broadcasting councils.

The ultimate conclusion of this article is that, although both ethnically Slavic peoples and both formerly subjugated by the communist regime and united in the Czechoslovakian entity, the Czech and the Slovakian people have very different cultural imperatives and preferences for governmental style which reveal themselves in their television broadcasting systems and to what ends the state uses them for. After independence Slovakia began the process of retrenchment, stifling the private market and dominating public television. The Czech Republic, profit-making imperative aside, openly sought a plurality of the market and an openness to economic reform. The byproduct of this was that television content was not conducive to the political and civic development process in the populace of the Czech Republic

which was necessary for synthesizing a pluralistic and democratic nation after over half a century of Soviet Marxist domination. But it was not a return to state censorship by any means. The one anecdotal time that the Czech Republic attempted censorship and blatant dominance of public television, the streets of their capital was filled with angry Czech citizens demanding political disentanglement of the state from television broadcasting.

It is that final anecdotal account of the Czech protesters which is a good way of pointing out the cultural differences between the Czechs and the Slovaks. The Slovakian populace offered no real resistance to Meciar and the HZDS as they re-muzzled television broadcasting and openly used public television as a weapon for waging political vendettas and providing slanted positive coverage of the state. The Czechs (on the other hand), during a time where it was blatantly evident that state interference in television broadcasting was occurring, shut down Prague and filled the thoroughfares and streets of one of Europe's major cities with its citizenry.

This analysis sheds light on some common assumptions about Czechoslovakia and the supposed pluralism which has happened since the Velvet Divorce. Czechoslovakia, when it was still a country, had a reputation for democratic traditions. But this isn't because the Slovaks have that sort of an autonomous, democratic culture but because they were part and parcel to a forced marriage of the Czech and Slovakian peoples in an artificial state which was carved out of the carcass of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was the Czechs who fostered that perception of democracy in the heart of Europe, as it was their cultural and political contributions which cemented their former nation's status of a democratic "diamond" in the autocratic eastern European "rough." This is one of the reasons there is a need for future research. Communism as a cultural force definitely left its mark on eastern and central Europe, but in its wake the different nationalistic and cultural traits of the formerly subjugated peoples of the defunct communist bloc have emerged. This has presented many problems in terms of geopolitical growing pains, but these cultural permutations have not reached their terminal point.

DISCUSSION

One of the major limitations to this analysis was

the general paucity of English language academic material. Although sufficient material was gathered to conduct the qualitative meta-analysis, the process of collecting enough English language academic material was quite extensive and extremely time-consuming (branching far out of what has been available easily at hand with conventional research databases and resources). Having fellow academics conducting future research into this field who have experience in the Czech, Slovak, or even Russian languages would be immensely helpful in expanding the sample of information available.

Another limitation of this analysis was not having sufficient time to go more extensively into the former eastern bloc as a region in greater detail. It is important to draw a distinction in researching the Czech Republic and Slovakia as that is the primary focus of this article. However, the former Czechoslovakia was two patches (the Czech Republic and Slovakia) that constituted one patch (the formerly unified country) within the mismatched cultural rug that was the eastern bloc. Part of the need to study television broadcasting in the Czech Republic and Slovakia is to gain a greater sense of the place of national culture in the realm of countries still transitioning and coming to grips from/with their communist past. This includes the entire region which composed the former bloc. However, one limitation to this study was a simple lack of time to conduct a full-scale regional analysis. One option to expand on this article without having to conduct an analysis of the whole region is to focus on the Visegrad Group (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary). These four countries have considerable overlap in the realm of history, culture, ethnicity, and subjugation at the hands of fell political winds which blew through this region during the twentieth century. Therefore, studying the Visegrad group would be a good way of building on the research which has been yielded in this qualitative meta-analysis on television broadcasting in the former Czechoslovakia.

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