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A Culture of Resistance: Mass Media and Its Social Perception in Central and Eastern Europe

Abstract: In this paper the author interprets the changing role of mass media in social processes over recent decades. Society's perception of mass media is also investigated, with a focus on Central and Eastern Europe. The author explores mass media's position in the societies of the region, asking how these societies interpret media messages. He analyzes the context of people's reservations about media messages (people's misgivings, conditioned by social history). One of the key arguments of the paper is that the majority of audiences in the countries concerned have grown more sceptical of mass media messages than have the audiences of Western European countries. According to the author, various social groups consider that the mass media is heavily politicized and that its construction of reality has little in common with their own interpretations.

Keywords: social theory, systems theory, mass media, mass media message, perception of mass media, social development in the Central and Eastern European region

In recent decades, one of the most marked elements of social change has been the increasing role played by mass media (Luhmann 2000, 2005). This trend has been driven by general changes in society that have repositioned the role—and moreover the weight or dominance—of mass media in modern society. In the present article I will explore this change in the context of social theory, which analyzes the role of mass media in modern society's general system of communication (Luhmann 1995, 1998a). In particular, I will analyze changes in the role and social perception of mass media in the Central and Eastern European region from the angle of systems theory. Special focus will be placed on assessing mass media's social position in the region and on issues relating to the interpretation of messages received from the mass media.

Accordingly, I will discuss some of the special characteristics of the mass media in Central and Eastern Europe, in a historical era that is still considered to be best described as “modernity” (cf. Habermas 1990; Luhmann 1998b). From the perspective of systems theory, the organization of communication has become global in the age of modernity and it is now possible to speak solely of a single (world) society (Luhmann 1990; Stichweh 2000). Nevertheless, the concept of world society does not imply that when examining communication within that context it is not worth taking account of regional differences. The diverse levels of development in various parts of the world require the application of a comprehensive social theory that emphasizes the unity of a social system giving rise to such differences (Luhmann 1998a: 162).

The mass media of the Central and Eastern European region is viewed as it is: embedded in general social processes. In the following sections I will take a closer look at special regional characteristics in combination with impulses coming from other regions of world society. In this context, the global transformation of the mass media in recent decades is regarded as a general process, accompanied by changes in society's relation to that media. Due to the structural connections of global society, the general characteristics of how mass media is perceived clearly hold true for the Central and Eastern European region as well.

The following is a discussion of the above-mentioned general changes, against the backdrop of the Central and Eastern European region. In order to pinpoint the specifics of Central and Eastern European mass media and the social perception of that media, I will emphasize the differences that stem from the diverse characteristics of Western European society and Central and Eastern European society. Accordingly, I will focus on an area whose social development has been identified as being between the Western and Eastern types. By the Central and Eastern European region I mean an area characterized by similar traditions of social development and where social conditions have been affected by both Western modernity and Eastern despotism. The following countries are regarded as belonging to the region: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia. And yet the CEE countries include Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Bulgaria, Romania.

Central and Eastern European Mass Media and Its Social Environment

One of the highlighted questions, therefore, is how the different weight of democratic traditions affects the functioning of the mass media and people's relation to mass media messages. The democratic tradition is inseparable from the organization of modern society; in ideal cases, the tradition dates back centuries and has created broader overall social organizations specifically for the operation of mass media. Such an organization may, by its very nature, act against monolithic and mono-contextual rationalities and thus against the manipulability of individuals. In Western societies the institutional system of the mass media has gone through such a long and autonomous process of development—free from the direct influence of any other element of society—that it has managed rather effectively to instill in the minds of individuals operating in the mass media the rationality of the media as a subsystem of society (see [Briggs and Burke 2010](#)).¹ On the other hand, publicity—even if it is expected to meet some exaggerated requirements from time to time ([Habermas 1989](#); cf. [Curran 1991](#); [Peters 2007](#))—also increases the role of social forces that may constitute a counterpoint against the trends of manipulation.²

However, autonomy is missing not only in the various subsystems of Third World countries but also in the Central and Eastern European region (although there are substantial differences in the extent to which that autonomy is absent). The difference in comparison to the

¹ The increasingly widespread adoption of codes of ethics for the press, radio, and TV and their gradual development into something of a general norm clearly indicates the process of mass media's evolution as an autonomous subsystem.

² For more details on this, see the part of Luhmann's *Die Politik der Gesellschaft* (2002: 274–318) dealing with public opinion and publicity.

Western model is, of course, not exclusively characteristic of the region under review. According to Hallin and Mancini's media-system typology (Hallin-Mancini 2004), the Southern European areas are also following a different path of development. The Mediterranean, or polarized pluralist model, is characterized, like the Central and Eastern European region, by the limited autonomy of the mass media (Hallin-Mancini 2010). At any rate, the greater dependency of media on its political and economic environment in Central and Eastern Europe has been explored and described by a number of scholars.

This may also explain the rather clear-cut criticisms that have been made concerning the functioning of the mass media (Jakubowicz 2003, 2007; Jakubowicz and Sükösd 2008; Sajó and Price 1996; Splichal 2004; Thomaß and Tzankoff 2001; Ondrášik-Škop 2011; Školkay 2011; Dobek-Ostrowska 2011). Furthermore, it cannot be a mere coincidence that the characteristics of that functioning have, for quite some time, been an important element of public discourse as well. The castigation of mass media's bias, the highlighting of its direct economic and political relationships, and the frequently accompanying moral arguments—with occasional expectations about strengthening the rules or more effective enforcement of media ethics—equally underline the manipulative content of mass media, how people are influenced, and how their freedom to make decisions is restricted. Nevertheless, while the public discourse has revealed phenomena, it is still not possible to argue that convincing explanations of the causes or reasons for those phenomena have been provided; apart from a few exceptions (e.g., Thomaß 2001) the relationship between mass media and functionally structured society has not been interpreted.

One of the key questions in describing the mass media in Central and Eastern Europe is what role the polycontextual worldview of modernity—which asserts the autonomy of the various social subsystems—plays in the functioning of the mass media. In the case of regions where the resulting polysemic nature is not as marked as in the West, mass media is always exposed to external manipulative tendencies. The manipulation of the mass media may, however, be stronger in areas where the separation of the various subsystems has taken place not through a process of transformation over centuries—reflecting the internal evolution of social communication—but where the structure of society has changed in response to the challenge imposed by the modern, polycontextually organized society of Western Europe. Although the changes started by external impacts have caused the autonomy of various subsystems to develop, the self-referential functioning of these subsystems (including the mass media, *inter alia*), has not evolved as yet, and the functioning of other subsystems is still determined by the conscious intervention of the political system, which has continued unchanged in a monopoly position.³

The restricted self-organization of the mass media is related primarily to the fact that throughout the centuries—apart from occasional brief periods—the development of Central and Eastern European societies has always been affected by external factors, for the most part by the ruling political power (Janos 2000). Consequently, the mass media has

³ This principle of the functioning of the “existing socialism” is perhaps most thoroughly discussed in János Kornai's study *The Socialist System* (1992). It can be realized even without a more detailed argument that would digress from the underlying train of thought of this study that not even the past two decades following the systemic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe could have brought about social changes that would have created social subsystems that are fully autonomous and independent of politics. (From a social-theory view this would be even more improbable because such processes take a far longer period of time.)

had strong pressure even on its own rationality, which is focused on being informative. A more fragmented social continuity—conditioned by a social history (Szucs 1988) that, from the end of the fifteenth century on, was characterized by profoundly authoritarian political regimes in successive periods—arguably offers more room for the domination of rougher power relations (Szelényi 2006). In contrast to the social development of Western Europe, there is a much higher likelihood for the occurrence of a phenomenon which is rather frequently encountered in the transition from pre-modern to modern society, that is, that the rationality of a particular social subsystem has a greater chance of appearing in the functioning of other subsystems and of impeding the development of their autonomy, or of being able to override temporarily the autonomous functioning of already self-referential subsystems and affecting, from time to time, the features of communication within the various subsystems (Berend and Ránki 2002; Berend 2003).

These trends are also strengthened by the fact that the dominance of a central power is generally characteristic of the Central and Eastern European region.⁴ In contrast to the West's development, in this area the rationality of the central (economic and political) power frequently or strongly overrides small communities, which are evolving on the basis of the order of fairness, or in other words, small circles of freedom (Szucs 1988). The social relationships created by the ruling power of the day at any point in time are more dominant in this region, and offer less room for the bottom-up development of social groups (Bibó 1991). In addition to the organization of modern society in general, this trend is also typical of the subsystems of politics, the economy, and, self-evidently, the mass media. At this point the top-down role of the state power structure in Central and Eastern Europe during the century preceding the change of system should be considered (Fejtó 1971; Gerschenkron 1962; Kornai 1992; Szucs 1988; Wallerstein 1974). The (predominantly) political will can always override the autonomy of the mass media, especially because there is a strong continuity between the present institutions of mass media and those of the period preceding the change of system. It is the above-mentioned features that most likely explain the stronger dependence of mass media on the prevailing political and economic power at any point in time (European Commission 1996; Dobek-Ostrowska and others 2010; Dobek-Ostrowska and Głowacki 2011). In connection with this more restricted autonomy, despite the passage of nearly two decades since the change of political system, it is still possible to guess—with a very good chance of being right—the composition of the power governing a given country from the news communicated by the country's public media at the particular time.

Society's Perception of the Mass Media and Its Messages

As a consequence of the above social history, there are good reasons for the issue of manipulation to be taken into consideration when evaluating media conditions in Central and Eastern Europe. On the other hand, understanding the phenomena becomes much more

⁴ Even Alexander Gerschenkron's analysis of economic history (1962) discussed the greater role of the central power relative to the development of society in Western Europe. I should say that, besides in the economy, this dominance can also be observed in the case of other subsystems of the society of this region.

complicated if the restricted nature of mass media's functioning and the practice of manipulation is noted. Public discourse, however, is focused almost exclusively on this set of issues. In the public discourse, great emphasis is placed on the relationship between mass media and manipulation, and mass media messages are considered to play a significant role in forming people's views of the world. Although less frequently discussed, if at all, society's perception of the mass media and its messages is a special characteristic of Central and Eastern European societies; this perception weakens the power of manipulation and must definitely be taken into account.

Therefore, an approach to this complex issue from a more finely differentiated perspective must also involve analyses relating to the perception of mass media, as well as a partial revision of the earlier findings of studies. I say this because earlier analyses emphasized the limitations of autonomous mass media messages in Central and Eastern Europe and thereby the variety of forms of manipulation (Bajomi-Lázár and Hegedűs 2001; Bajomi-Lázár and Sükösd 2008; Giorgi 1995; Gunther and Mugham 2000; Paletz and Jakubowicz 2003; Peruško and Popović 2008; Sükösd and Bajomi-Lázár 2003). However, it is not possible to account comprehensively for Central and Eastern Europe's special features without interpreting mass media messages. When referring back to the work of the Birminghamians, particular attention must be paid to the solely linear process of decoding—one that is self-evident in the Shannon-Weaver model (1963). The question that will be most exciting in exploring the special features and relationships of the region is how the special features of social development in Central and Eastern Europe restrict the intent to influence people—an intent that is indubitably present in the functioning of the mass media of this particular region.

The region's media perception is determined by the duality that is expressed in its social development. This can be described not only in terms of top-down organization but by opposition—also conditioned by social history—to the central power of the day. Those aspiring to seize power have nearly always tried to develop conditions in which they have the controlling—ruling—position, in contrast to, or in ways markedly different from, the self-constitution of individuals or small groups. On the other hand, this special structural characteristic, which has been observed for centuries in the social development of Central and Eastern Europe, is bound to trigger a counter-reaction on the part of individuals and small communities that have fewer or weaker connections (compared to Western Europe) with the economic and political power (Hável 1985; Schöpflin and Wood 1989). Such a form of development, however, is unique to Central and Eastern Europe; in areas east of this region the central power is so dominant that it restricts the possibilities of bottom-up community evolution even more strongly. It is not a mere coincidence, therefore, that the phenomena we are analyzing cannot be observed east of Central and Eastern Europe due to the region's different social history and resulting media conditions (for example, see Smaele 2010; Khabyuk 2010).

A multitude of forms of skepticism toward the ruling power of the day can be identified in Central and Eastern Europe, ranging from ambivalent relations with the official mainstream on the part of the majority of society, through attitudes to the payment of taxes (as an obligation enforced by the top of society), to the relation to public power in the cults of Švejk, Sándor Rózsa (a legendary Hungarian outlaw), Maksim Bojanić, Konrad Wallenrod,

Ondraszek, or Juraj Jánošík (famous outlaws of the various countries of this region).⁵ Consequently, during socialization in early childhood, people internalize interpretations that are contrary to those suggested by the holders of power. This trait is also present when a person is interpreting the abundance of information supplied by the mass media; it is a factor that even accommodates interpretations differing from or in some cases opposing, or contrasting with, the mass media's interpretation of reality, which is influenced by economic and political force fields.

When analyzing Central and Eastern European media phenomena, and particularly society's perception of the media, it is definitely worth discussing regional characteristics of the issue of confidence in relation to the above. The issue of interpersonal trust and citizens' trust in social institutions shows the regional characteristics that make it easier to understand the region's special relation to mass media messages. As is well known, a higher level of confidence in society toward institutions and a higher level of acceptance for the legitimacy of these institutions increases the likelihood of cooperation with the government in place at any given point in time. Trust in institutions is also an expression of the opportunity for cooperation with the spheres of power in society, manifested in institutions. The majority of empirical investigations of this issue also take the public media into account, since it is part of the state institutional structure embodying public power over citizens. However, if it is remembered that most of the institutions of public media are regarded by people as superior to them in the hierarchy of society and that people see messages from the mass media as messages from the center, then the institutions of nationwide commercial media should also be regarded as part of this field (especially in Central and Eastern Europe).

In recent decades, surveys related to trust have found typically low levels of trust in the course of the development of Western societies (Dalton 2004; Etzioni 1993; Norris 1999; Putnam 2000). However, one specific feature of Central and Eastern Europe is that the level of this particular trust was significantly lower even than the level of trust measured in the West (Kornai and Rose-Ackerman 2004; Rose-Ackerman 2001; Sztompka 1999). This finding inevitably raises the question of a crisis of legitimacy in Central and Eastern Europe (Offe 1994), which in my view is not limited to questioning the democratic system and its values. The low level of trust in institutions in Central and Eastern Europe is also obvious in relation to the transmissions of media institutions. Thus the majority of citizens express not only their skepticism toward the institutions that are considered to be the most corrupt and low performing (e.g., political parties, parliament, the police, the judiciary, etc.). According to empirical studies, this distrust is also evident in relation to mass media institutions; therefore, people's reservations clearly apply to the reality conveyed by that mass media, too.

⁵ It is interesting to see how in Poland the culture of opposition appears currently even in word choice: a contribution payable to the central budget pursuant to an act of law adopted in 2003 by municipal governments whose tax revenues exceed the rate specified by the act is referred to as "*janosikowe*" in reference to Juraj Jánošík, a famous eighteenth-century Slovak outlaw, a figure of popular opposition, and a character that has long developed into a veritable hero. (The state budget uses a fund created from these contributions to provide financial assistance to municipal governments that are short of funds.) The use of this word is at the same time an indication of the change in society, illustrating how the creation of a meaning that originally came from the lowest strata of society has spread to be gradually adopted by the whole of society and how it produces a commonly shared meaning reflecting opposition.

The validity of these conclusions stems from the historical realities of the region. I see Central and Eastern Europe as a region characterized by a system of social relationships in which the political elite of the day and the mass media evolved (in their history dating back centuries) in a way that can only conditionally be linked to the will of the majority of society. Consequently, the social distance results in a greater difference between the media's institutional perception of society and the majority of individuals' perception of society. Another consequence of the more fragmented development of societies in Central and Eastern Europe and their top-down, organized socialization is that the social positions of individuals and groups evolved in a manner much more subject to political decisions that were forced on them than as a result of their personal and/or collective efforts. I would highlight two consequences of this social development; both also affect the perception of mass media in this region directly and equally feed skepticism concerning media messages.

Although Claus Offe only perceived the threat to the process of democratization in Central and Eastern Europe as a possible consequence of distrust in institutions (Offe 1994), the low level of trust observed in this region offers a number of positive attributes as well. As has been pointed out by a number of scholars, distrust, or limited trust in institutions, is also an expression of people's or social groups' rational actions (Cleary and Stokes 2006; Hardin 1998). Skepticism concerning the public power embodied by institutions and operating in a dysfunctional manner for the citizens may be a precondition for people's (social groups') successful enforcement of their interests and a starting point for socially adequate action. This is especially the case in Central and Eastern Europe, where citizens' distrust is conditioned by social history.

Here skepticism originates from the experience of historical situations in which the central government, embodying economic and political power and its associated institutions, enforced its will against the personal and collective self-constitution of the majority of society. This perception appears in attitudes to mass media messages. The distrust of manipulated media messages, which represent the preferences of the holders of power (operating instead of an informative versus non-informative distinction as the binary code of the mass media system), has been internalized over centuries; such distrust implies people's social self-assertion, alternative interpretations, and a culture of opposition.

These processes are further intensified when such interpretations are also presented in media segments that are not supported by the state. This is where interpretations of reality that are radically different from those of the central power can appear (Downing 2001). It should be added, however, that such viewpoints stand less chance of being publicly expressed in Central and Eastern Europe because of the much more confined space allowed for them by the state power, which is much more authoritarian than in Western Europe. Such state control, however, does not predominantly affect the culture of resistance, since that is conditioned by social history. As a consequence of this feature of social communication there is a much stronger social basis and tradition of alternative interpretations relative to the central power and of a culture of opposition than in the case of occidental social development. This special feature is inevitably reflected in the perception of mass media as part of institutional power.

Encoding and Decoding in Central and Eastern Europe

Consequently, a negotiated and particularly oppositional interpretation of mass media is a lot more profoundly present in Central and Eastern Europe. In other words, a skepticism that is conditioned in and by society as a whole and that is, in many respects, independent of the structural characteristics of milieus, has developed in Central and Eastern Europe in regard to the holders of power at any given time, and this habitualized perception profoundly affects the perception of material conveyed through the mass media.

Thus, one question that may well be worth exploring in detail is how the class-specific phenomenon observed in the critical culture research of the Birmingham school (Hall and Whannel 1966; Hall et al. 1980; Morley 1992; Morley and Chen 1997)—with the theory relating to the different characteristics of encoding and decoding—can be extended to the interpretation of mass media consumption in Central and Eastern Europe. In the study by Stuart Hall et al. (1980), in contrast to the interpretation of reality offered by the mass media, reflecting hegemonic social positions, the groups that are not interested in maintaining the social status quo, or whose lifeworld is not as closely connected to the media's majority message, have their own interpretation of the media's deliberate and manipulative messages and it is profoundly different from the intended encoding. I believe the different interpretations, and the polysemic interpretation of different mass media messages, could be applied even more widely in exploring the region's mass media and its impacts and effects. In other words, research should be conducted into how, in Central and Eastern Europe, skepticism to the mass media is manifested in different ways across society but is practically omnipresent; it is a skepticism conditioned by the historical development of society and concerns the messages conveyed by the mass media from the central power.

Therefore, reference to the polysemic nature of interpretations of the mass media can provide a new aspect in the study of Central and Eastern European societies. However, the success of the analysis may largely depend on applying the theoretical framework developed in the course of studying Western society by aligning it to the specific features of the Central and Eastern European region. On the other hand, this approach also requires that the analysis reflects the new insights encountered in the process of encoding and decoding mass media messages. The characteristics and effects of mass media can hardly be mapped without such insights. Not even the Birmingham critical culture research, which stakes out a new direction in studying perceptions of the media perception, can be fully applied in this region.

The class structure analysis by the Birmingham school is based on the social conditions of the seventies and the eighties, when it was still more appropriate to start from a model of cultural organization in which society is monolithic and hierarchical. This approach has lost its effectiveness in explaining phenomena, particularly during the period when society shifted toward milieus (Hörning and Michailov 1990; Michailov 1994; Rössel 2005; Schulze 1993; Vester 1998). It is rather problematic to talk about an oppositional interpretation in relation to milieus, which reflect each other less and less in their social semantics, since, owing to the fact that the monolithic structure is gradually relativized, or grows less and less important, the cognitive schemes of large social groups are increasingly oriented not toward one another but to the internal value systems of milieus (Schulze 1993).

In my view, however, this oppositional interpretation is indeed present in the social semantics of Central and Eastern Europe. In contrast to the explanation offered by the Birmingham school, the opposition does not lie in the system of relationships between (antagonistic) social classes. It is much rather the order of power created by political will, operating alongside ad hoc political decisions (Szucs 1988), and the majority of society's different perception, that produces the greater weight of alternative and oppositional interpretations in Central and Eastern Europe. The institutionalized media system could much more aptly be seen as a vehicle for the assertion of the rationality determined by the system of relations of a narrow political elite than as a reflection of the majority of society's perceptual expectancy. Moreover, post-transformation, the region had an inherited media system with these structural characteristics as a consequence of the media's strong structural embeddedness and the organization of the political elite, which only partly distanced itself from the old logic of leadership. There is a strong continuity with the semantics of the previous era.

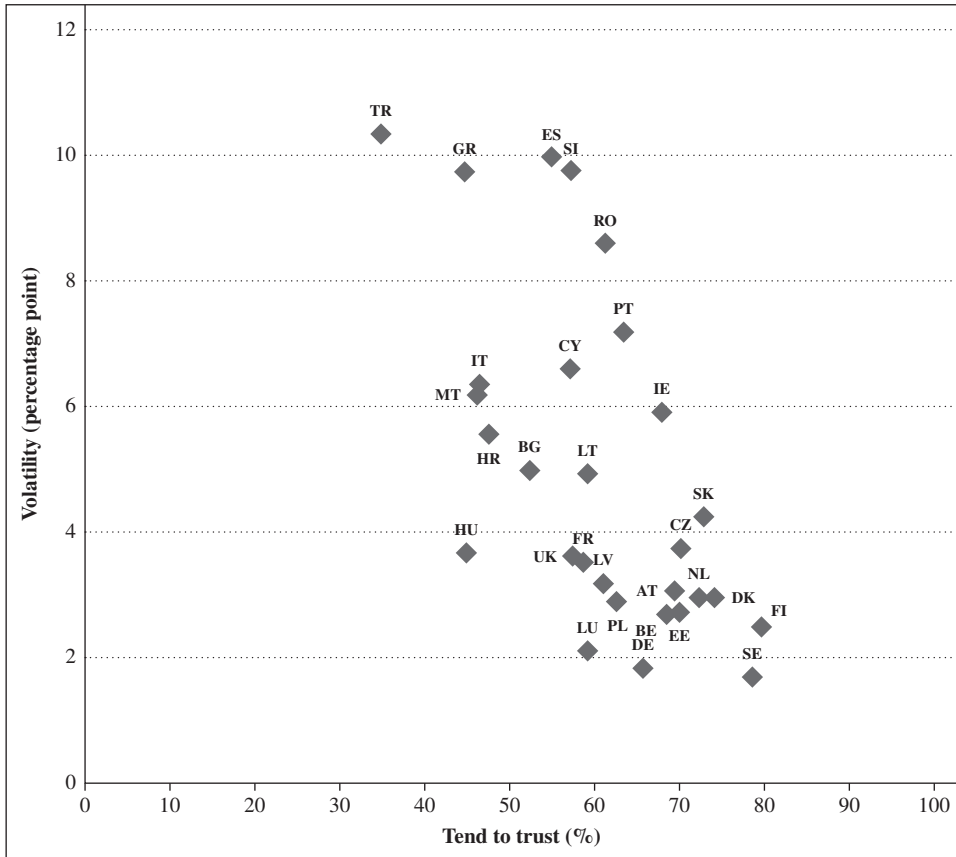
The arguments presented here are intended to establish the media and social theory foundations for the subject. However, it is also worthwhile to conduct an empirical study of the characteristics that can be concluded to exist from a scrutiny of the region's special social history development. Unfortunately, for lack of reliable data, we can not analyze the characteristics of attitudes to media messages in the communist period as researchers were not then able to make such investigations. The characteristics of recent decades, though, can be identified with the help of the Eurobarometer database.

Our data relating to Europe comes from the period between 2004 and 2014. The data, by country, shows attitudes to the media's message. The figures indicate confidence in the various media, and volatility. Values along the X axis of each figure represent the averages of the values obtained from the various waves of data capture, while those along the Y axis indicate the yearly "volatility" of confidence, that is, the difference between the averages of the values measured in the various years. The two figures show the characteristics of confidence in radio and the press. Skepticism toward the media is assessed primarily in comparison to the West.

A comparison of data relating to confidence in the press and radio with data from Western Europe shows that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are characterized by low levels of confidence. Trust in these media is significantly lower in the region⁶ in comparison to both Western and Northern areas. The arguments I have made so far are also confirmed by the fact that the confidence index in the Central and Eastern European region is most similar, in the Hallin-Mancini typology, to that of countries with a Mediterranean or polarized pluralist model (cf. Hallin-Mancini 2010; Dobek-Ostrowska 2011): in other words, to the media system of a region where the media is centrally organized and is determined by the prevailing economic and political dominances, as in Central and Eastern Europe.

⁶ Only the Czech Republic and Slovakia deviate from other countries of this region, probably because commercialization of the media, which adapted media content to recipients' expectations, took place more quickly in those two countries. And after decades dominated by discredited political propaganda, the sudden takeover of popular culture probably resulted in higher rates of satisfaction with the media content than in other countries of the region (Volek 2011; Trampota-Končelík 2011; cf. the impacts of this change on journalists: Volek 2010).

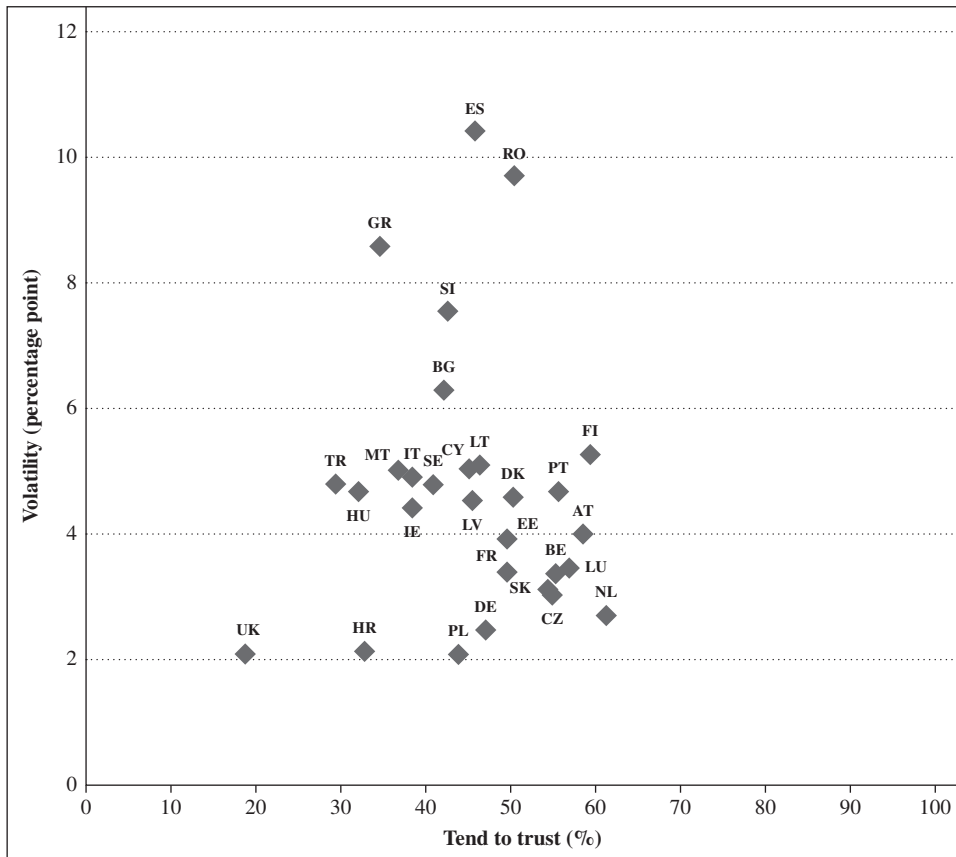
Figure 1
Trust in Radio



AT—Austria; BE—Belgium; BG—Bulgaria; HR—Croatia; CZ—Czech Republic; DK—Denmark; EE—Estonia; FI—Finland; FR—France; DE—Germany; GR—Greece; HU—Hungary; IE—Ireland; IT—Italy; LV—Latvia; LT—Lithuania; LU—Luxembourg; MT—Malta; PL—Poland; PT—Portugal; CY—Republic of Cyprus; RO—Romania; SK—Slovakia; SI—Slovenia; ES—Spain; SE—Sweden; NL—The Netherlands; TR—Turkey; UK—United Kingdom

Skepticism relating to media messages and opposition to its content do not, of course, apply to all the information received from the media. Such a cognitive strategy would not even be possible for individuals and groups, owing to the increased dynamic of modern society, since whatever we know of the world is increasingly derived from the mass media (Luhmann 2000). Although this social change has not reduced the importance of interpersonal communication (indeed, the spreading of broadband Internet is even offering new possibilities for this form of communication) (cf. Castells 2005), it has turned mass media into the primary source of our knowledge of society. On the other hand, even mass media itself is dependent on individuals' and groups' "interest to switch on" (Luhmann 2000: 33). In relation to this process, the cultural expectations of underprivileged social groups have also come to be catered for by the offerings of mass media. The gradual process whereby

Figure 2
Trust in Press



popular culture has gained ground over the past decades (Fiske 1990, 2011a, b)—as reflected in the trend of tabloidization (Esser 1999)—has occurred in Central and Eastern Europe as well, where the same process of aligning mass media messages with the expectations of these groups is underway (Szynol 2010; Volek 2011; Köpplová-Jiráková 2011; Trampota-Končelíková 2011). Obviously, therefore, it is definitely not in the cultural contents of mass media that the culture of alternative interpretations and opposition is reflected (in terms of system theory terminology—in the mass media’s entertainment segment), since this is the very segment in which the mass media has, during the recent period, strongly aligned itself to the expectations of underprivileged social groups.

In my view, the distrust of mass media messages and the resulting resistance is manifested in the decoding process in the particular area of programs of the mass media where the application of different social semantics is most deeply conditioned by social history. In conclusion, it may well be claimed that the central power’s construction of meaning and reality, which is forced upon the whole of society, is manifested primarily in the fields of economics and politics. These are the areas of communication in which individuals and so-

cial groups can most profoundly experience the central power's semantics—which are so fundamentally different from their own individual and collective meaning-creation. I believe this explains why there is such strong skepticism in Central and Eastern Europe in regard to mass media news and reports.⁷

In addition to social-theory considerations, the above conclusion is also confirmed by a variety of empirical facts. The rejection that is reflected in the size of the audience for this area of programs is another sign of reservations about the media's manipulative creation of meaning. In other words, in this region, as a consequence of alternative interpretations and the culture of opposition, political programs—which are identified as reflecting the central power's standpoint—and politics as a whole are unpopular and citizens are not very active in forming political opinions (in contrast to Western Europe). Particularly limited interest in such media content is shown by unfavorably positioned groups within the class-based hierarchy.⁸ Our conclusion is further confirmed by the fact that this rejection does not mean the rejection of mass media as a whole—that is, not all meanings created by the media are rejected. In the programs in which the messages of the mass media are most closely aligned with the expectations of the majority of society no such skepticism, or much weaker skepticism, can be observed. This is reflected in the undivided popularity of mass media's entertainment programs—which are not directly affected by politics—among most social groups and milieus (in spite of the concerns of intellectuals).

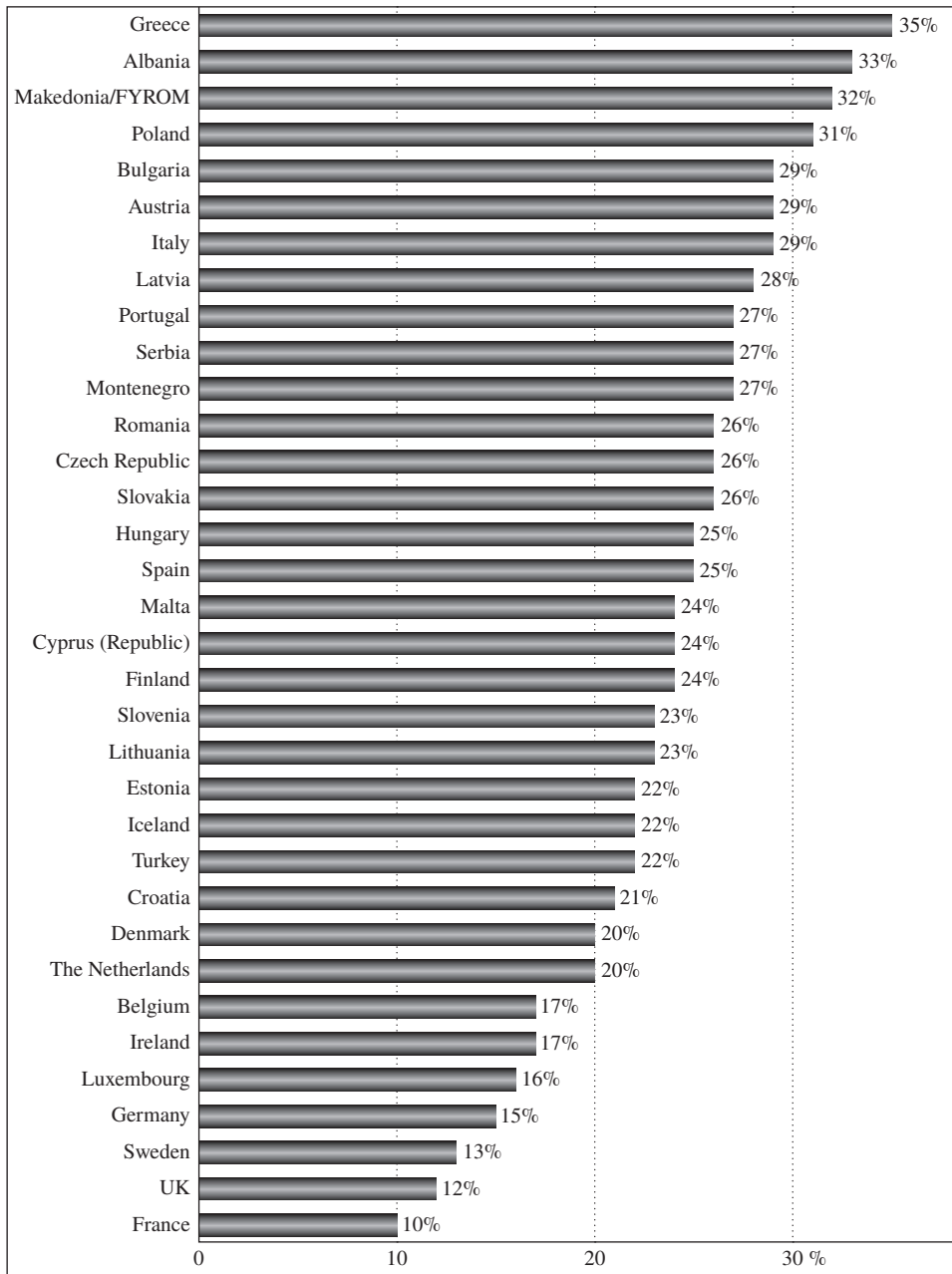
The assertion that the region's perception of the media is profoundly conditioned by social history is also confirmed by the fact that skepticism relating to media messages does not apply to the entirety of encoding. Reservations concerning media messages are significantly weaker in some segments in the region than in Western Europe. This relationship is illustrated by attitudes to online social networks. According to the 2014 database, the confidence index shows the very opposite proportions in this segment than in the media illustrated so far, which is dominated for the most part by the central power.

Western European countries show the lowest level of confidence in regard to online social networks. By contrast, the highest ratios of confidence relating to this medium are observed in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and in some Mediterranean countries. I interpret the phenomenon on the basis of my social theory viewpoint. I believe this facet of mass communication has a wider scope for conveying personal messages independent from those conveyed by the prevailing power elite. Accordingly, online social networks offer interpersonal communication in which centrally organized politics has a significantly limited scope for shaping people's opinions. This is most likely the reason why Central and

⁷ It is important that a distinction be made between two fundamentally different groups of communications originating from news and reports. This area of programs includes world events in economics and politics, crimes, legal matters, and so forth, accompanied by the media's comments based on various ideologies. The distrust discussed in our analysis is perceived, of course, in relation to the media messages of the latter, since these are attached to messages which are encoded by the central power but with which the majority of society has the least connection (as a consequence of the differences in creating meaning).

⁸ This is also indicated by the fact that people learn about politics for the most part from the brief news inserts of commercial television and radio channels, and even in the tabloid press they only find the consequences of political decisions that affect their private lives. Members of these social groups are hardly interested in commentaries and discussions deriving from ideological positions and conveyed by the mass media; thus the scope of influencing these groups by media messages is also rather narrow.

Figure 3
Tend to Trust Online Social Networks



Eastern Europe, which is conditioned by social history and a culture of resistance, has more confidence in this medium.

Social Milieus and the Message of the Media

The above process of decoding the mass media entails a variety of consequences. In my view these are reflected in two opposite processes expressing the special characteristics of Central and Eastern Europe. On the one hand, the majority-perception scheme provides stronger protection against the mass media's encoded messages than was earlier assumed and it may enable individuals and social groups to preserve their own creation of meaning and construction of reality. While the region used to be viewed as an area more exposed to the political power of the time, our discussion here is meant to highlight that this evident special condition is only one area of social relations, and it is hardly disputable that societies in Central and Eastern Europe have no well-developed traditions or strong social power in terms of opposition to the political will of the central power (Arato 2001). On the other hand, the lower trust in institutional power, and the existence of constructions of reality that do not proceed from the institutional power, afford some protection for individuals and groups to make their own interpretations. At the same time, the distrust perceived in large groups of society explains why the authoritarian political powers that have come into existence more frequently in this region than in Western Europe can have only limited impact on the majority of society's construction of reality, and why those powers cannot acquire the sort of omnipotence observed in the Eastern European (Russian-type) process of social development (Wittfogel 1962).

If one emphasizes the power of alternative interpretations and the culture of opposition in Central and Eastern Europe, it ensues not from the self-evident assumption of a monolithic hierarchy but from the specific social development observed in this region. The skepticism of the majority of society concerning messages coming from the mass media can be deduced from a social situation in which the various social milieus experience the mass media's construction of reality as permeated by politics, and being both—though not with the same weight—imposed from the outside relative to their own interpretations of reality and not aligned with their own self-constitution.

On the other hand, in the case of social groups and milieus this perception pattern naturally entails different attitudes to the intended messages of the mass media. There is no room in this paper to discuss the issue in detail. Therefore, in the remaining paragraphs I will only highlight particular features of perception that can be derived from Central and Eastern European characteristics of trust in institutions, as certain social-capital research projects of the recent decade have provided important insights into regional perceptions of the mass media. Two findings are of particular relevance. In the course of analyzing trust in institutions, the writers of several research projects (Campbell 2004; Mishler and Rose 2001) have pointed out that income has a stronger influence on trust in institutions in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe: the lower a person's income, the stronger his or her distrust in the operation of public power. This relationship—which is far less strong in Western Europe—supports what has been said about social development in Central and Eastern Europe: it reflects the higher walls of social partition and the resulting distrust as a consequence of the fragmented development process and the dominance of the central power.

On the other hand, research into trust in institutions also shows that the members of social milieus who have less resources in social communication and are thus in a hierarchi-

cally less advantageous position have much stronger reservations in relation to messages coming from the center, and thus from the media as well. Accordingly, there is a greater chance that they will form negotiated or opposition interpretations. The importance of this finding should be highlighted, because in public discourse these underprivileged social groups are usually regarded as the groups most exposed to the central power and the most exposed consumers of mass media. While they are thus regarded in public discourse as being the most vulnerable—the ones who accept media messages with the least resistance—it is in fact these groups who have the strongest doubts concerning the creation of meaning coming from institutions to which they are subordinated.

This specific feature of the construction of reality in society does not seem surprising, due to earlier research conducted by Stuart Hall (1980). If solely this research result were to be taken into account it could be regarded as an argument for a social structure that could be described as a monolithic hierarchy. However, contrary to the findings of Hall et al., research into trust in institutions has also revealed a relationship that hardly reflects the research and social views of the Birminghamians, that is, it has also been shown (Campbell 2004; Mishler and Rose 2001) that in addition to the lowest income groups, distrust in institutional power is strongest in the societies of Central and Eastern Europe among those with the highest educational attainments. Accordingly, in the countries of this region the social milieus that are well positioned in the social hierarchy on account of their levels of education have the strongest skepticism concerning the institutionalized central power and thus to messages from the media.

Similarly, negotiated or opposition interpretations of the encoded messages of the mass media cannot be identified in Central and Eastern Europe solely through class hierarchy. One specific feature of the region's perception of the media is that, in the course of decoding alternative messages, the creation of meaning—relative to the reality presented by the media—is strong in different hierarchically positioned social groups. I think such a phenomenon reflects the special social development of this intermediate region, the political efforts to organize modernity, and at the same time the resistance that is unwittingly caused by top-down intervention in the process of social communication. Moreover, it also draws attention to the fact that the social facet of mass media's complexity can only be elucidated in relation to the complicated structural connections of modern society.

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