

Polish media wars

By Mikołaj Chrzan and Paulina Siegień

Media the first target

If you want to build an authoritarian state, and more and more evidence suggests that it is precisely what Jarosław Kaczyński wants, one of your key tasks should be gaining control over the flow of information. Thus, it comes as little surprise that right after PiS (Law and Justice) won the parliamentary election in 2015, the media were one of the first targets of the new government's "reforms". First, they took what was easiest to take – the public media, that became a propaganda tube for the current Polish government overnight. The private media are still awaiting their turn, and it is bound to come, as PiS has been looking for a way to subjugate them for a long time.

Personnel replacement on a massive scale

All the Polish governments after 1989 tried to exert some political control over the public media, but the changes forced by PiS in the very beginning of their term were unprecedented. Apart from remodeling the management's structure involving, for instance, the formation of a new supervisory body – the Council of National Media – responsible for appointing management boards for public television, radio and the Polish Press Agency, the transformation also entailed personnel replacement on a massive scale.

In just a few months over 130 of staff were handed their notices – mainly employees of information and current affairs editorial boards. The dismissals reached even the less popular publishers. A group of journalists from the foreign branches of the Polish Radio were fired, among them employees of the Russian and Ukrainian editorial offices. Official reason – "restructurisation". Still, the dismissals occurred in an atmosphere of accusations of espionage and acting to the detriment of the Republic of Poland (foreigners working in these editorial offices were asked, for instance, to declare their nationality). Offices whose "formula" has been changed were next restaffed with proponents of the ruling party.

Ensuring positions for people connected with PiS was one of the aims of amending the public media act that already went through parliament in December 2016. One of the prime examples of this new personnel policy was the appointment of a new correspondent of the Polish Television in Berlin. Cezary Gmyz (author of the notorious article where, without resorting to facts or evidence, he claims traces of TNT were found on the wreckage of the presidential airplane that crashed in Smoleńsk in 2010) launched a few months long campaign against Marcin Antosiewicz, the former Berlin correspondent.

Gmyz publicly accused Antosiewicz that one of his relatives served in the communist security service, that he did not speak German (because he did not pronounce umlauts), and that he presented the German rather than Polish perspective on the events related.

This won Gmyz the position of the correspondent of the Polish Television in Berlin, which perhaps best illustrates what moral and ethical stances are valued by the current management of public media. Numerous journalists working in public media complain about the atmosphere of distrust, spreading self-censorship – it is best not to touch upon certain topics if you do not want to lose your job – and open interference of the management into their work.

From public to national media

As mentioned above, a new supervisory body in charge of the public media was created – the Council of National Media. In this case, the name selected for the new institution turns out to be crucial and most meaningful – PiS does not want media to be “public”, they are supposed to be “national”. Expressions such as: national, Polish, public, civic, social, seem to have gained completely new meanings in the ruling party’s vocabulary.

Their ideological point of gravity shifted to the category of nation. Just after the first wave of remodeling went through public media, the true meaning of “national television” became apparent. Currently, the main news programme broadcast by the Polish Television can easily be mistaken for archival news footage from before 1989 – mainly on account of the persistent propaganda of success and attempts to discredit the opposition, both parliamentary and any kind of public opposition that cannot be labeled “national”. The content changed in other media as well.

Management in charge of the “national media” puts particular emphasis on historic, patriotic and religious (only catholic) broadcasts. Polish post-war architecture was defined by the doctrine of socialist realism, defined as esthetics “socialist in content and national in form”. The public media in Poland became socialist in form and filled with national content.

The symbols of today’s government (rather than public) media propaganda are the television news tickers. They are used to inform the audience, for instance, that the people protesting against the government’s actions are a “paralimitary arm of the opposition”, “defenders of pedophiles”, “barbarians”. At the time this text is being written, a hunger strike of hospital residents is going on in Poland. We are told that the young doctors, who earn about 500 euro per month and expect salary rises, are demanding milliards.

Public advertising disappears from private media

Despite verbal abuse and accusations of “serving foreign countries”, “inciting a coup”, “treason against national interest”, etc., the hardest blow PiS has dealt the unsympathetic private media so far, was the withdrawal of state-owned enterprises from advertising. Public advertising disappeared from “Gazeta Wyborcza” and “Polityka”, for instance. At the same time, the state-owned enterprises eagerly buy advertisements in the media that openly identify themselves with the ruling party.

During the first six months of the term, the right-wing “Gazeta Polska Codziennie” noted a 330% increase in revenue from advertising. Perhaps it is worth mentioning that “Gazeta Wyborcza” sells over 115,000 copies per day, while “Gazeta Polska Codziennie” less than 20,000.

Government institutions were forced to cancel subscriptions to titles expressing unfavourable opinions about the ruling party. Unwanted newspapers and magazines disappeared from petrol stations belonging to two biggest state-owned oil companies – Lotos and Orlen.

If this situation can possibly have any positive aftermath, the only thing that comes to mind is the appearance of a few social-media projects on the Polish market, financed mainly through donations. One of them is Oko.press – a portal going back to the roots of journalism, where meticulous fact-checking is used to look through politicians' claims, monitor reforms, and study various current political and social phenomena.

Polish point of view in focus

Probably by the time this text is published the draft of the new media act prepared by PiS will have been made public. Early in the autumn of 2017, its content is still a mystery, and the only thing known for certain is that the Polish government is very intent on not allowing the public opinion and the media to acquaint themselves with the project too soon. According to various representatives of the government, including Jarosław Sellin, Deputy Minister at the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, the project is ready and is going to be put to the vote by the end of the year.

The long-announced reform is to be focused on “deconcentration” and “repolonisation”. “Repolonisation”, that is limiting foreign capital to 15 – 20 % of shares in a particular medium. It is expected to occur as a result of deconcentration of capital in media companies. And even though writing about the practical meaning of “repolonisation” is a bit like reading tea leaves, it is interesting that the call for making the media national again is an element of a broader ideological programme, where anti-German rhetoric and the issue of sovereignty are given particular importance.

According to the Polish government and its proponents, German media corporations exert too much influence on the Polish public opinion through their publications and broadcasts. The term “Polish-speaking media” was coined in the Polish right a few years ago. It denotes media publishing in Polish, but not actually “being Polish”, that is, not presenting the “Polish point of view” (one of the key elements of the ruling party's rhetoric). Needless to say, in this definition Polish stands for that presented by PiS and its followers.

The expected media act raises serious concerns, as it applies to all the major market players and cannot really be condemned from the point of view of logic, as there are countries in Western Europe, like France and Germany, for instance, where the media market is also quite restricted and subject to numerous regulations. Interestingly, in 2016 Russia restricted the participation of foreign capital in the media to 20%, thus prompting shareholder transfers in 2700 enterprises. It might be beneficial to consider this as a possible scenario ahead of Poland, keeping in mind that in Russia this process unfolded virtually uninhibited and without any kind of protests.

Jarosław Kaczyński is an utterly practical man, able to skillfully use the symbolic for political purposes. This is why “repolonisation” also has a purely pragmatic dimension. Numerous indications suggest that PiS is particularly bent on gaining control over the local media, where most of the press releases belong to the Polish Press Group, part of the German Verlagsgruppe Passau. If Kaczyński succeeds (and it is said that a buyout of the Polish Press Group by one of the state-owned companies has already been informally proposed to the management) PiS will gain a powerful tool of exerting influence over local communities right before the local elections scheduled for autumn 2018. The local governments are Jarosław Kaczyński’s headache, as they enjoy considerable autonomy under Polish law and numerous local leaders use it to openly stand against PiS government’s politics.

There is little doubt that hard times are ahead of the Polish media. What the journalists find most discomfoting themselves, and interestingly, they agree on this regardless of affiliation or political orientation, is the lack of professional solidarity. A group divided in two is easier to manipulate and cannot defend its vital interests.

Paradoxically, problems experienced by journalists on both sides are quite similar. Essentially, they all have to deal with a sense of looming danger – some fear that even though he is generous today, Kaczyński may soon change his mind as to who is his friend and who the enemy, especially since he treats the media in a purely instrumental way. For others, the political and economic pressure becomes problematic.

Still, what worries most, and is exemplified among others by the situation of media in Hungary or Russia is the indifference to certain changes and political atmosphere that limits freedom of speech. Just like in other parts of the world, media in Poland are in crisis stemming from the loss of society’s trust, so maybe they should not be expected to stand in defense of the journalists.

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