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Social Communications in Central and Eastern Europe: The Challenge of Freedom

By László Lukács

More than seven years have passed since the changes in Central and Eastern Europe, two thirds of the decade till 2000 is over. It is time to analyze the situation of the Catholic media, make some statements and draw some conclusions. Seven years is a long time in the quickly developing field of the media, but a short time to build up well-functioning structures and institutions, and no time to follow up the political changes in the ways of thinking and attitudes of the people both in the societies and in the churches of the reform countries.

The Past

Speaking of the churches in the post-communist countries one must never forget the huge differences within the region. The media-landscape, too, varies from country to country. This is partly due to their situation before 1989: in Poland and Yugoslavia the Catholic press could develop continuously, even if limited by the government. In Croatia, Cardinal Seper founded a publishing house in 1968 in the spirit of Vatican II, and this initiative could survive against all the vicissitudes of the times. In Slovenia the publishing house Druzina (family) with its popular weekly has had a good name and success even under the communist regime.

In Poland at the end of the 80s there was a dynamic growth in the media. There were 30-40 weeklies, monthlies with a great circulation. Some titles supported the growing Solidarnost movement and the quiet revolution of the country.

Within a very restricted framework and under censorship, there were some publications even in Czechoslovakia and Hungary. In other communist countries, however, none or only samisdat publications existed; theological books and periodicals were smuggled into the country with much courage and effort, manuscripts were typed with typewriters in 5-8 copies.

If we try to make a comparison, we could say that besides the excellent and well established Catholic media of Poland, the relatively free church press in Yugoslavia, the restricted but existing press in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, there was nothing like Catholic media in the other communist countries, so they had to start their activities from zero in 1989-90.

Many people in the churches of the reform countries lived in the euphoria of freedom in the first years after the changes. They fostered the illusion that under the new conditions the church as institution can be built or reconstructed as churches or any other buildings: they have to be designed, planned, and then constructed following the instructions of project managers and architects. Seven years later one must realize that this is not the case in most countries.

From a critical point of view it is true that a well-designed, well-organized, well-equipped, well-governed, well-controlled reconstruction of church life could have been much more effective, much less expensive, leading to results at a higher speed of development. On the other side, however, there were lots of new initiatives in various fields of church activity. The charismatic

Varying media landscape

Spontaneous Growth Instead of Organized Strategy

personalities of the past made a lot of effort to start various pastoral activities of any possible kind, including also the Catholic media. They had hardly anything for their endeavours: no experience, no proper professional knowledge, no financial resources. The first publications were made by retired doctors of medicine, engineers, or by ambitious young people like university students. They were amateurs in the best sense of the word: loved what they did and invested all their talent and time in doing their best. Needless to say that the quality of their products was mediocre or even poor at least at the beginning. A lot of money, time and energy was wasted in needless efforts, in useless parallel activities. The lack of professional knowledge and of a minimum organization and structure caused considerable damage in more than one country.

The present situation

The essential resources for all types of media are news agencies. By now six Catholic news agencies have been founded: KAI (Poland), IKA (Croatia), Magyar Kurir (Hungary), ARI (Ukraine), BLI (Russia) and KTA (Bosnia). There are well functioning press offices keeping regular contact with the journalists in Prague, Budapest, Ljubjana and Vilnius, perhaps also in Lviv and Kiev.

Their function is threefold: to keep their own believers (either directly or via the different weeklies or periodicals or parish letters) well informed; to be in touch with the secular press; and to send information to the rest of Europe. Fulfilling this third task the greatest difficulty is the language barrier: they cannot send information abroad in their own mother tongue, only in English, French or German (Italian, Spanish), if they want to be read also in Western Europe. Some of them have already created a bulletin in one of the „foreign“ languages.

As far as the printed press is concerned, there is an immense – perhaps greater than necessary – variety of publications. A surprising but also embarrassing richness, with various advantages and disadvantages. By now there are several national and a lot of diocesan weeklies and monthlies in all post-communist countries, even in countries like Belorus, Bulgaria, Albania. The European part of Russia has a weekly since 1994 and since 1995 there is another weekly for the Catholics in Siberia (two hundred thousand in number, but in area the biggest dioceses of the world).

Behind the promising results there are some tensions and difficulties, too. In several countries there is none or hardly any coordination among the publications, no dialogue among the publishing houses and editorial offices, no survey about the real needs of the readers, no analysis about the financial possibilities. What is more, in some countries the church press is divided also by languages (e.g. in Rumania or in Serbia) or even by rites: the Greek United church has its own weekly in both countries. The question to be put is clear: who has the authority and responsibility to decide which publications should be preferred and which should be stopped? Which areas of pastoral life are neglected or forgotten? A serious warning sign of a possible crisis is that the circulation of many publications is diminishing. A new and reasonable project for the written press, a pastoral plan for the media is unavoidable.

One compelling factor for making a realistic strategy for the media is not yet present in most post-communist countries, and this is – surprisingly – money. Because of their poverty most Catholic publications rely on Western aid agencies. No one can deny the urgent necessity of this subsidy for the media. But in consequence the church leaders or media professionals are not forced to make a feasibility study and a realistic strategy to achieve an economical balance for

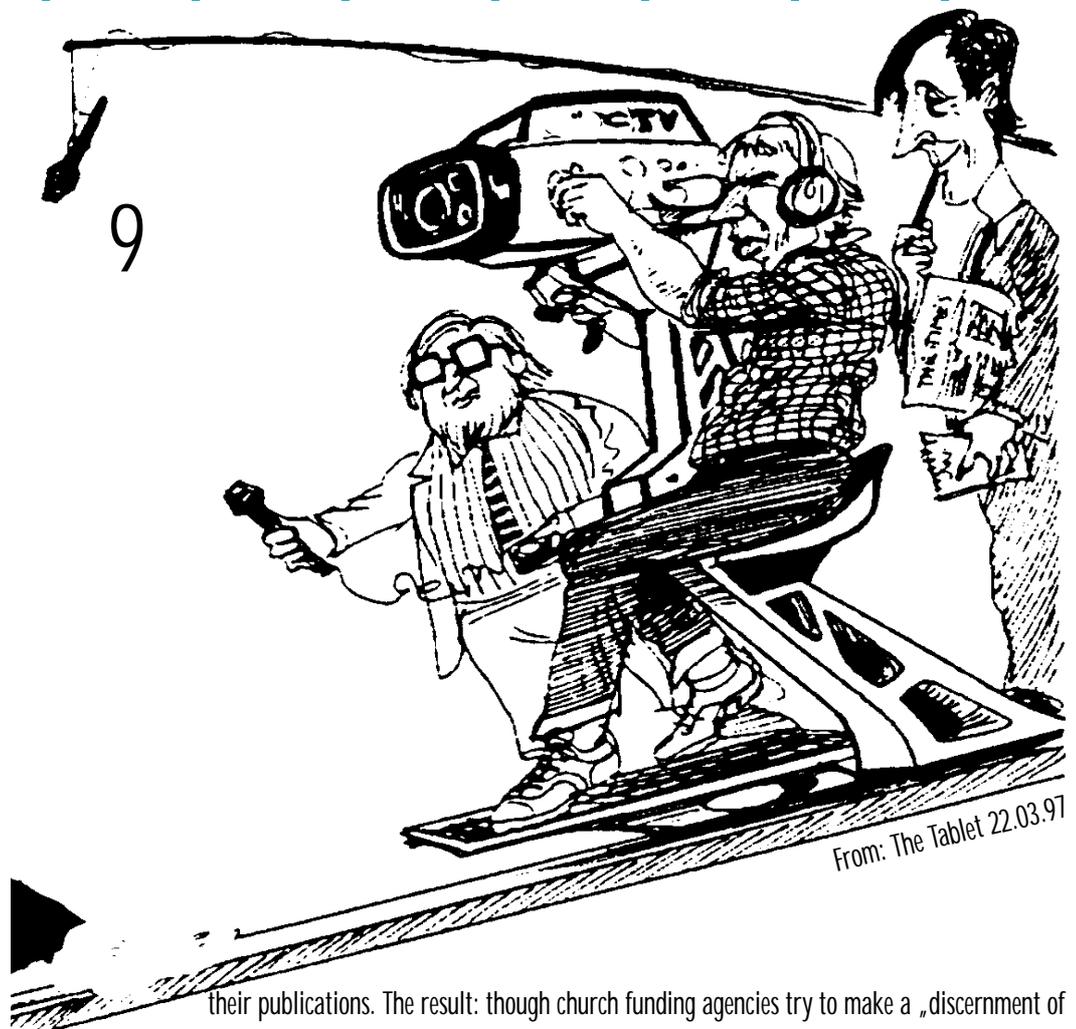
Lack of strategical planning

News Agencies

Immense Variety of Publications

Hardly any Coordination

Dependency from Western Aid Agencies



their publications. The result: though church funding agencies try to make a „discernment of spirits“ and select among real needs and unreal dreams or wishes, yet in some cases it is not quality or the real existing need or expectation of the readers that keeps a publication alive, but good personal contacts with some funding agencies.

The lack of real analysis of the situation and strategic planning leads to some unreasonable and unrealizable wishes and dreams. Quite a number of church leaders and church members dream about a Catholic daily newspaper, some about a nationwide radio or even television station with a daily program of 24 hours, without taking into consideration their financial and human resources, and their situation in a pluralistic society, without pondering the advantages and the risks of such an enterprise.

After four or more decades of persecution, fear is one of the most typical syndromes of the adult population. Not even people in the church are spared from it. Three types of fear can be frequently detected even among the clergy and the hierarchy. One is suspicion or even *fear of Western Europe*, the churches in Western-Europe included. Those who attended the special Synod of Bishops about Europe in 1991 could have this astonishing experience. Those who suffered under a totalitarian dictatorship and proved faithful to their faith and vocation, look at the Christians of the West as liberal, secularized, who betrayed their church and Lord. This fear and suspicion has diminished but not yet dissolved in a lot of persons. On the other side, for many theologians and church leaders this phenomenon may initiate a healthy self-examination, whether the topics discussed are really relevant and whether the language used is understandable for everybody.

Secondly, many church officials have *fear of the journalists*. Generalizing some bitter experiences they condemn all the journalists and all the media, blaming them for most of the corruption and sin in our societies. The relationship between the church and the press is not cloudless in many countries. More patience and effort should be invested to create better public relations for the church. (According to surveys in 1990 the church proved to be the most trustworthy institution in Hungary. According to recent polls their credibility degree is among the least trustworthy institutions.)

Wounds to be healed: Fears and Mistrust

Fear of the journalists

Thirdly most of the clergy have never confronted different views and have little experience and skill to have a dialogue with people who have different ideas or ways of thinking. In a monolithic society like the communist regime no culture of dialogue could develop. There is *fear of dissident thinkers*. In the spirit of the Council Vatican II Christians ought to learn this attitude and the Catholic press can be their master for good or evil.

There is one more serious wound to be healed. This has probably been experienced also in East-West bilateral talks or negotiations or at international conferences. It may be called „*persecution syndrome*“ and is still to be felt in a lot of Christians, first of all among the clergy. In other words: it is difficult to forget the times of oppression and persecution and change the attitudes caused by the continuous pressure of discrimination. As a consequence the oppressors are to be blamed for all the failures, mistakes and weakness of persons and institutions in the church.

The system of self-control, the examination of conscience for the past; strategic planning, realistic analysis of the situation, feasibility study for the future was replaced by some heroic courage and faithfulness of the victims. The time of oppression was a favourable time for charismatic personalities and private adventures, but destroyed even the need for cooperation, organized structures, flexible adjustment to the external situation even in economical sense. The outstanding partisans of the past are often unable to be enrolled into a regular army. As a result many people in the church think they have a right for all subsidies, even without a realistic budget and regular control.

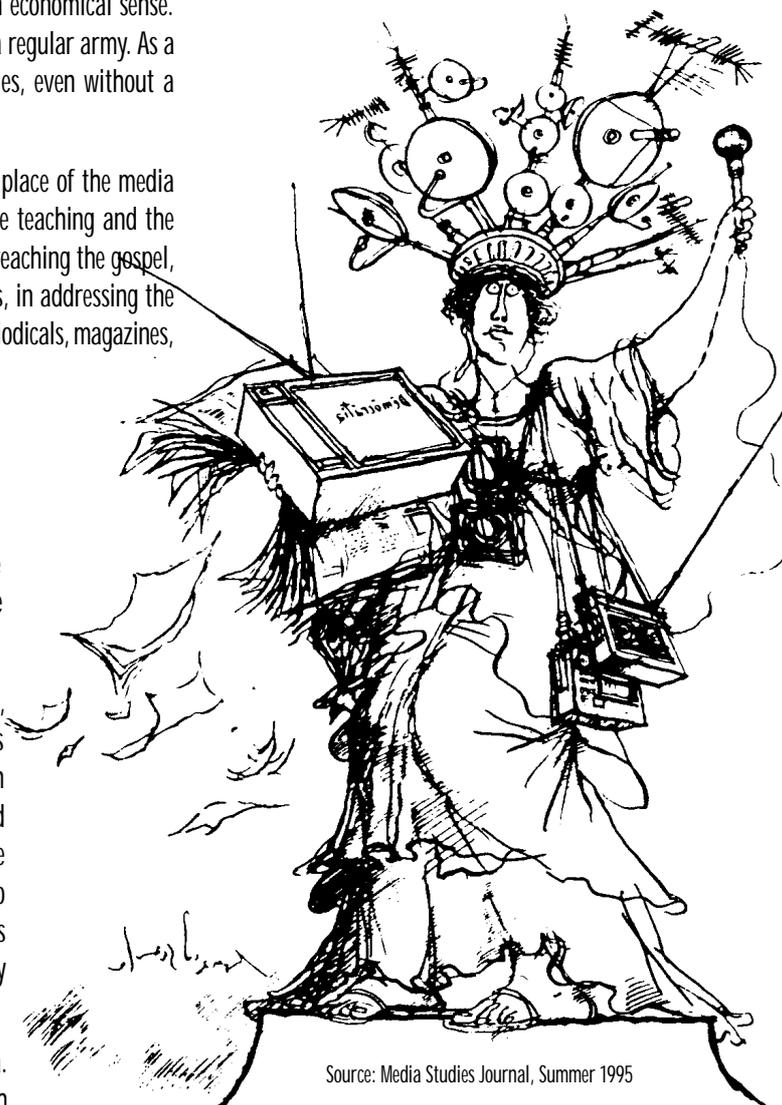
If a pastoral plan is made for the dioceses and the country, the role and place of the media should be considered and determined. How can it be used in fulfilling the teaching and the prophetic and missionary task of the church? How can the media help in preaching the gospel, in the new evangelisation of society and the church, in teaching catechesis, in addressing the non-believers, and helping the formation of adults? Written publications (periodicals, magazines, brochures, books, booklets), radio and TV programs, audio and videocassettes, all types of audiovisual equipment, CD and internet should be used. Planning should be preceded by an overall survey of the needs on the part of recipients, the exigencies and capabilities of the communicators, of the technical and financial possibilities. Such a survey may enable the decision makers both in the field of pastoral and of the media to state priorities, draw guidelines and give orientation, and also to set up a concrete plan for action with concrete steps to be taken and concrete timing.

In this way a pastoral plan for Catholic communications may be created, setting all the measures that can and should be taken in the future. Countries with a developed Catholic communications' system can help not only with money but perhaps with their expertise. The aid, however should be adjusted to the real situation of the respective country. The counsellors may not arrive with fixed clichés based on the media-life of their own country, but have to undertake a learning process to adjust their skills to the real possibilities and needs of the country, to the cultural and social context of that very church.

There is an urgent need for education and training in the field of the media. Catholic communications need well trained experts who can produce high

Fear of Dissident Thinkers

„Persecution Syndrome“



Source: Media Studies Journal, Summer 1995

Urgent Need for Education and Training

quality films or programs with a deserved name and fame even in the highly competitive field of the media. The situation is again differing from country to country. In Poland there are four training centers for Catholic media, in other countries, however, education of Catholic journalists is still an unfulfilled dream. When possible, professional training should be achieved locally within the country, if there are institutions for higher education in the media. It is strongly recommended that Catholic communicators should have a faithful commitment to the church, but also a solid theological training.

Educational centers in the West could help young journalists to obtain a scholarship for a postgraduate course. The chief aim of such courses could be to raise the sensitivity of the participants to the universality of the church, to help them to create personal contacts all over Europe, to get into touch with their brothers and sisters in other countries, to get acquainted with the life of the church in different countries and cultural settings. (I dare make the observation that such an additional education could be very useful also for young media people living in the Western European countries.)

I do not want to stick to a eurocentric bias. But because of the distances and costs it is more difficult and expensive to create intercontinental relationships or initiatives on a global level.

The future of communications in the new countries

The lives of individuals and the lives of societies are based on communication in the widest sense of the word. Human beings can live only in relationships, in communion with one another. This statement is all the more valid to the church and the faithful. The aim of the means of social communications is to help the continuous communication of love within the church, among the faithful and the clergy, but also between the church and the world.

Beyond any pastoral activity, church press can help the human development of the societies, too, in two directions. It can give encouragement and guidelines to civil societies both inside and outside the church. Communist indoctrination discredited the term of community, of responsibility, deleted words like conscience and common good. Christians can build up an alternative way of living and thinking, following the goals of solidarity and subsidiarity.

Another new phenomenon in the postcommunist countries is overall relativism. It is caused by secularisation, by the rapid changes in society, by – some say – modernisation, by – theologically speaking – original sin. Whatever the causes are, the result is clearly to be depicted: people tend to live more and more dangerously, in a way leading to suicide, turning social order into chaos, instability. Francis Fukuyama writes in his recent book: *The real, healthy community... „is formed not on the basis of explicit rules and regulations, but out of a set of ethical habits and reciprocal moral obligations internalized by each of the community's members. These rules or habits gave members of the community grounds for trusting one another.“* (Trust, Penguin 1996. p. 9.) The decline of trust and trustworthiness, the decline of moral obligation has dangerous implications on society. If the church in Eastern Europe wants to be prepared for the Jubilee Year by the conversion of hearts, Christians must feel themselves called and sent to their fellow brothers and sisters in their newly born democratic society, and help them to find the only way of life which is Christ. Catholic media can help this task of new Evangelisation – which may help the survival of humanity even in the third millennium – perhaps also in the Western part of Europe and in other continents, too.

SUMMARY RÉSUMÉ RESUMEN

Sept ans après les bouleversements qui ont secoué l'Europe Centrale et de l'Est, l'auteur étudie la situation des médias catholiques dans cette région. Quoi que le paysage médiatique montre une grande diversité, il y a quelques points de convergence : notamment le manque de planification stratégique, une immense dispersion des publications, l'absence de coordination entre les différentes initiatives, la dépendance des agences d'aide de l'Ouest et une atmosphère de peur et de méfiance. Comme action prioritaire, Laszlo Lukacs recommande une planification adaptée et la mise en oeuvre de programmes d'éducation et de formation du personnel.

Siete años después de los enormes cambios en Europa Central y Oriental el autor examina la situación de medios católicos en esta región. A pesar de que el paisaje comunicativo muestre una imagen de distinta índole, comparten algunas características, como la falta de un planeamiento estratégico, una inmensa variedad de publicaciones, una coordinación insuficiente entre las distintas iniciativas, la dependencia de agencias de ayuda occidentales y una atmósfera de miedo y desconfianza. Según László Lukács las medidas más necesarias serían procesos de planificación adecuados, la realización de formación y cursos de capacitación para el personal.