

Central and Eastern Europe:

Challenges and Realities

By László Lukács

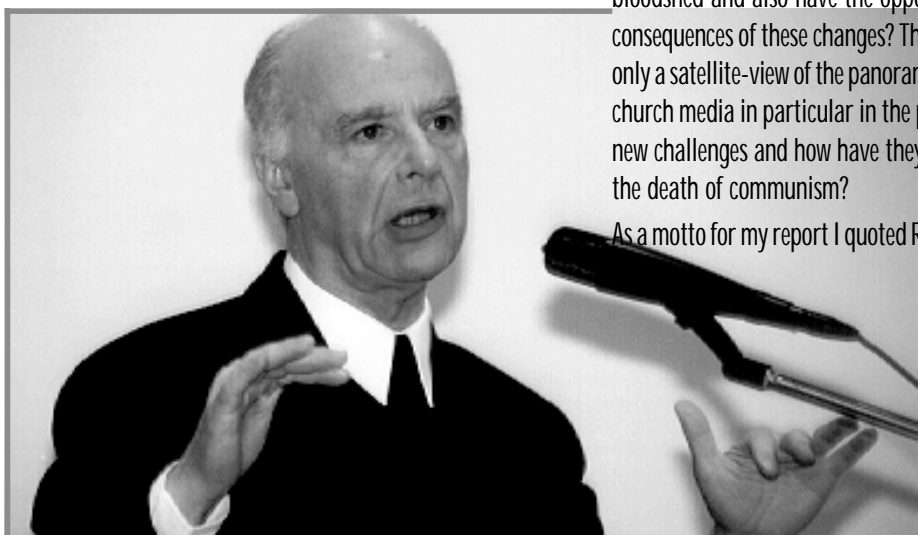
„The future of mankind cannot be built up against the believers or even without them; and the future of mankind cannot be built up against the communists or even without them.“ (Roger Garaudy)

It is unprecedented in history that with the collapse of the Soviet Union one half of a whole continent including more than twenty countries, gain back their political freedom without bloodshed and also have the opportunity to build up their democratic system. What are the consequences of these changes? The limited span of time given does not allow a detailed report, only a satellite-view of the panorama of the new challenges for the churches in general and of the church media in particular in the post-communist countries. How did the churches react to the new challenges and how have they changed their activities in Central and Eastern Europe after the death of communism?

As a motto for my report I quoted Roger Garaudy, the once famous Marxist philosopher. He spoke at the Marxist-Christian dialogue-conference in Salzburg in 1965. We can add: the communists have disappeared. Will the Christians also ever disappear from the scene of history?

Let me make just one preliminary remark. Though the Communist ideology and the party-system was basically the same in Eastern Europe, there were great differences in the situation of the Churches in the different countries. One extreme is the example of Poland where the Church has always been very strong with a fervent Christian faith and a strong influence in society (second only to Ireland in Europe), the other extreme is Albania, the country where religion was officially and legally forbidden and where this was sanctioned by the constitution of the state, or in as far as the Churches themselves are concerned, the Greek Uniate Church was suppressed in most countries of Eastern Europe by law, while other Churches could continue their activities, even if it was in a very limited way. The Catholic media landscape also varied from country to country.

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



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existing press in East Germany and Hungary, there was nothing at all like Catholic media in the other communist countries, so they had to start their activities from a zero-point in 1989-90.

For shortness' sake I would like to characterise the new situation of Central and Eastern Europe after the political changes of 1989-90, by describing three illusions, three types of transition and six needs of the present and the future.

1. Illusions of the past

1.1. Freedom = Earthly Paradise

The greatest desire of the nations and people in the Soviet bloc countries was freedom and independence. They wanted to get rid of the Soviet oppression and achieve national independence, but they also wanted to get rid of their own dictatorial governments. Freedom was almost divinised in the expectation of most people. It was seen as a sort of Paradise: according to widespread illusion: if one becomes free, one will be happy. Political freedom automatically leads to a free market system, and people will be happy overnight, following the model of the countries of the first world. At the same time nobody realised that freedom is ambivalent, it also has its shadows and even its dangers. The result of political freedom was not a growing commonwealth to all, but the growing gap between the rich and the poor: big capital accumulated in the hands of few, whilst the majority of the population have become poorer. The danger of Latin-Americanisation is on the threshold. Along with McDonald's and Mercedes cars inflation, unemployment and social insecurity also arrived in these countries. Disillusion could not be avoided for long. That is one reason why in a number of post-communist countries the communists could return to power in the mid-nineties, this time democratically elected by those who were discontented with the results of newly gained freedom. „Back to the slavery of Egypt.“

1.2. Freedom = boom in religious practice

The euphoria of freedom also reigned in the Churches in the first years after the changes. They fostered the illusion that the only reason for the diminishing number of church-goers had been the fear of the atheist regime, the loss of faith only being due to the atheist communist dictators. The collapse of communism was expected to lead to a boom in church-life. The Churches are by now completely free, and there is a certain but modest growth in Christian practice, but the expected blossoming of church-life has not been achieved. Atheism is not identical with communism, there are a lot of non-believers who do not belong to any political party. Marxist materialistic theory could not convince people. Consumerist materialistic practice, however, has more and more followers.

1.3. Rebirth of church life = construction of institutions

A further illusion among some church leaders was that the Church as an institution can be built or reconstructed as houses or other buildings can: they have to be designed, planned and then constructed following the instructions of project managers and architects. Ten years have passed and one must realise that in most countries this is not the case. Church life can only grow and develop in a slow and organic way, with fresh and effective initiatives, but also with much



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failure and frustration. Though the Churches are free they often have to act under the pressures of the circumstances. The greatest challenge (but also temptation!) was that the Churches had the opportunity to claim back their properties in most countries. A historical chance – whether for good or for evil? Should the Church fight for the returning of its once confiscated properties (raising the hostility of those whose interests would be hurt), or should they try to reach the souls and minds of the people? How can they evangelise without material means? But what good is richness without spiritual values? The Church under communism enjoyed the sympathy of both believers and non-believers – the Church-institution with growing material background has lost not little of its popularity.

2. Three types of transition

2.1. From personal microcommunication to a freedom of expression

In times of oppression hardly any free communication was made possible in these countries on institutional and official levels, neither in the whole of the society nor in the Church. The free cells under the totalitarian dictatorships were the small underground base communities whether of Christians or of atheist-liberals. These small groups were the centres for communion and communication, for a small number of people but in a very personal and intensive manner. A dynamic micro communication system functioned with little or no macro communication. Social communication was in the hands of the party bosses. The press was centrally managed and controlled. Freedom of expression was very restricted and truth was deliberately distorted. Still to a certain extent the media was easily handled by the average person. Their information was one-sided or even distorted, but always in the same direction, so one could safely read between the lines.

The „good old days“ of dictatorship are over. The media are free, open for everybody. The huge media concerns entered into even this part of Europe, radio and TV channels are sold to commercial enterprises. The entertainment or infotainment industry dominates the TV. Sensation mongers rule the press. The media in these countries have lost the dull, sometimes stupid innocence of the past. They are no more accountable, one can easily be lost in the jungle of the freedom of expression. The wind doesn't blow from one definite corner any more, it is constantly changing: instead of a safe harbour one has to sail on rough water. People have to learn: the once hated prisons are not 100% uncomfortable places. One can perhaps like their quiet safety, even from within.

2.2. From silence to speech, from monologue to dialogue

The freedom of expression and so the freedom of the press is a natural entity within a free society, even if there are lots of evil excesses and the press can become one of the worst enemies of humanity with its manipulative power. There are certain tendencies in the Churches of Western Europe where Catholic journalists do not exercise their profession with due responsibility and love for the Church. Most Churches of Eastern Europe, on the other side, could not yet overcome their underground way of living and thinking. Secrecy and lack of information is still reigning, the faithful are not sufficiently informed and are not given an opportunity to express their views and exchange different ideas either with their fellow Christians or with the clergy. This is why one

can hardly speak about public opinion and a real inner-church dialogue. The reception of the Vatican II has not yet been finished, and the challenges for the future are to understand and welcome the synodal process launched by the Council and the idea of the Church as communion – with all the consequences for the field of social communication.

The dialogue has to be learnt and exercised in two directions: within the Church and with the world in which we live in.

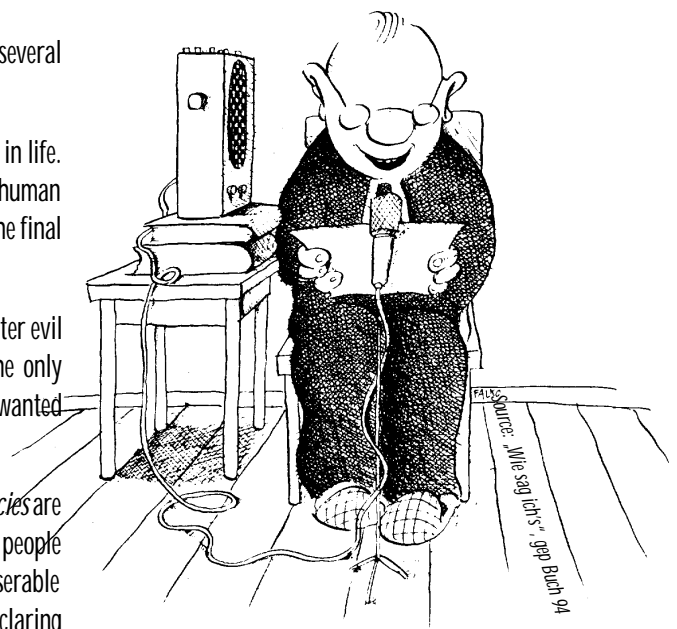
Following the guidelines of *Communio et Progressio* the role of Catholic press is not only to spread the faith and make official church documents available for the faithful, but also to create and promote public opinion. „Since the Church is a living body, she needs public opinion in order to sustain a giving and taking between the members. Without this she cannot advance in thought and action“, (Nr. 115). For this „individual Catholics have the right to all the information they need to play their active role in the life of the Church“, (Nr. 119). And: „Catholics should be fully aware of the real freedom to speak their minds, which stems from a feeling for the faith and from love“, (Nr. 116). The task is even more difficult in a relationship with the world. Monologue can be converted into a genuine dialogue only if both (or all) participants are ready to speak and to listen, when they are well informed and well disciplined, when they are stable in their views but humble and open to take the views of others into serious consideration. The Church in the countries of Eastern Europe was closed into a ghetto where a hostile press was led and controlled by a hostile ideology which attacked the Church in a continuous monologue and in which the Church had no chance for defence, response or any type of apology. No wonder that the spirit of dialogue has died out and contemporary culture in general is still considered as a dangerous enemy to be mistrusted. This defensive attitude is reinforced by the ongoing or restrengthened hostile tone of the new press which claims to be liberal. The liberal journalists of today are in fact the same persons as the Communist journalists of yesterday who fire against Christian ideas with the same fervour but now from the opposite direction. The new liberal press of the free market system wants to be sold and is therefore mainly a „gossip-monger“, chasing scandal stories even in the life of the Church or serving the anticlerical propaganda of the once-Communists sitting in influential positions even today.

On the other side, in the society there is an immense expectation from the church in several respects.

a/ Many people in these societies live in a *spiritual vacuum*. They cannot find their way in life. Marxist ideology went into bankruptcy, no other valid philosophies have appeared on the human horizon, except practical materialism and consumerism. This, however, cannot answer the final questions of life: why do we live and what is the meaning of our lives?

b/ *Moral corruption*, the lack of all firmly established laws turns out to be an even greater evil than economical crisis. People cry for a better and more effective education, and the only credible institution for a proper education seems to be the church. Church schools are wanted by many people, believers and non-believers alike.

c/ With the introduction of private enterprise and free market economy *social discrepancies* are rapidly growing. A small group of society is getting wealthy, while an immense number of people live, with a growing bitterness and poverty, beneath the living standard and under miserable conditions. The only institution who could and should be in solidarity with the poor, declaring



Source: „Wie sag ich's“, gep Buch 94



Source: Chasqui 64, 12/1998

a clear *option for the poor*, is the Church, thus making credible its endeavor for a new Evangelisation.

How can the Church answer all these challenges without the proper means of communication, without getting into real dialogue with the whole of society, even outside the Church? How can the Church find its place in the society without paying attention to the „signs of the times“, without listening to the voices

— perhaps harsh and rude — coming from outside and without inviting all people of goodwill to help in the human development of the nation?

2.3. From persecution/discrimination to freedom — or to privileges?

Ten years have passed since the collapse of communism. Still the most frequently quoted argument to explain any type of misery today is: „It is the heritage of the communist dictatorship“. It is now time to discover: with the passing of time there is less and less reason to use this argument. We have to turn to our future, and we can hardly use the reference of the past anymore. This phenomenon is in particular vividly experienced in church-life. A peculiar „persecution syndrome“ is still to be felt in a lot of Christians, mainly 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.

This attitude may have dangerous consequences particularly in two areas:

Firstly: the system of self-control, the examination of conscience for the past, strategic planning, realistic analysis of the situation and feasibility study for the future have not yet been learnt and developed. The reason is that this type of activity is hardly known and exercised. The time of oppression was a favourable time for charismatic personalities and private adventures, but also destroyed the need for cooperation, organised structures, flexible adjustment to the external situation even in an 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 to all subsidies, even without a realistic budget and regular control.

Secondly: the desire for freedom („free Church in a free state“) has been fulfilled in our days, but some people in the Church accept it with sober disappointment. What they really wanted was not genuine freedom but a privileged position in state and in the society. Some still dream about the myth of the pre-war past as the Church was still part of the establishment with

bishops sitting in the House of Lords with a rich and influential Church. It is hard to accept the fact that we are living in a pluralistic, democratic society, where the church has to find its own place within the society.

3. Challenges and needs

3.1. Wounds to be healed: fear and mistrust

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 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 has not yet dissolved in a lot of people.

Secondly, many church officials have a fear of journalists. Generalising 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.

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

3.2. Need for money – help or hindrance?

Media is a costly enterprise. The words of the famous Italian general, Montecuccoli are true even in this context: „There are three things necessary in war: Money, money and money“. I need not speak about the lack of financial resources in all these countries and the fact that they cannot build up a church media without essential aid from abroad. We have to add, however, that money alone is not sufficient, what is more it may have some dangerous effects.

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 as a 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 their publications. The result: though Church funding agencies try to make a „discernment of spirits“ and select between real needs or unreal dreams and wishes, however in some cases it is



Source: Leadership, 8/1997

still 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 a real analysis of the situation and strategic planning leads to some unreasonable and unrealisable 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 a television station with a 24 hour daily program, without taking their financial and human resources into consideration, or their situation in a pluralistic society and without pondering the advantages and the risks of such an enterprise.

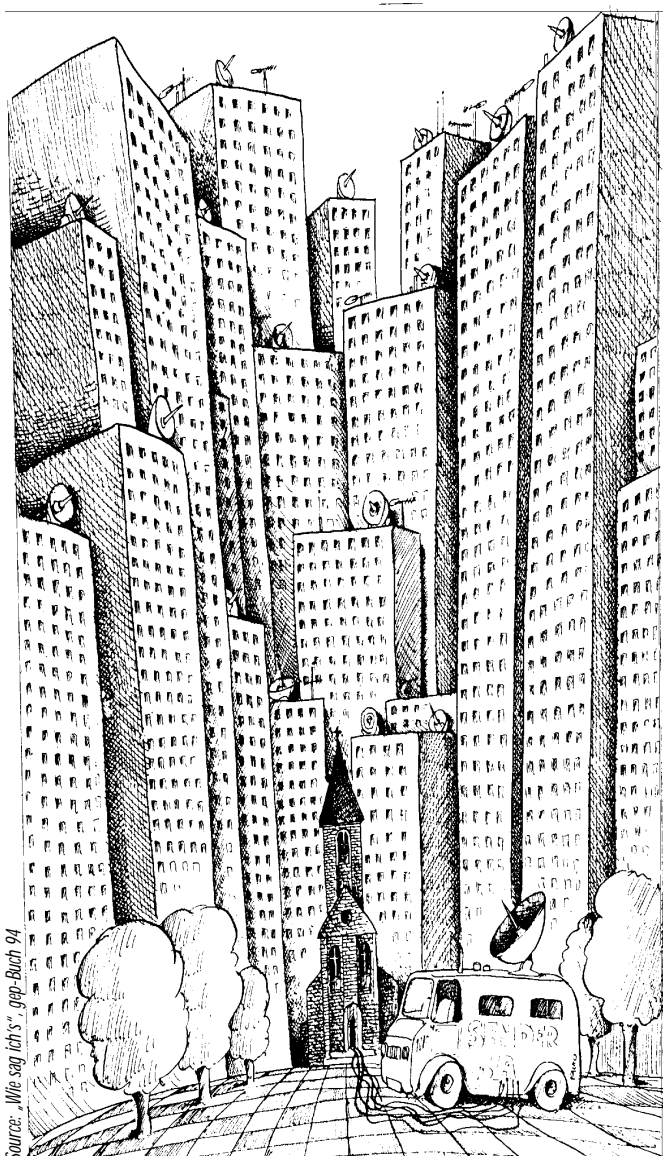
In this way a pastoral plan for Catholic communications may be created, setting all the measures that can and should be taken in the future. Countries with a developed communications' system can help not only with money but perhaps with their expertise. The aid, however should be adjusted to the real situation of the respective country. The counselors must not arrive with fix clichés based on the media-life of their own country, they 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.

3.3 Need for professionalism

Church press was completely oppressed or strictly limited and controlled in most countries of Eastern Europe. Needless to say: no press, no machines (in many cases even simple typewriters were confiscated), no access to radio and TV and no Catholic journalists. What is more, due to the Marxist hegemony in culture, hardly any Christians had a chance to study arts in general or communication in particular. (As a result: the percentage of Christians is much less among those who studied literature or fine arts or philosophy, than among those who studied engineering or medicine.) Written and electronic press was in the hands of the party state. Consequently there were no or only very few Christian experts who could restart anything like a church press.

After the political changes when it became possible to publish Catholic periodicals and books and after the church had received access to public radio and television, doctors of medicine, engineers, teachers, students and other intellectuals with much good will and enthusiasm, with fervent Christian commitment but with no professional knowledge, edit Catholic monthlies and weeklies, make programs for radio and even for television. While the Catholic media field in Western Europe has an immense wealth in professional know-how, an elaborated network for Catholic publications and adequate financial background granted mostly by bishops' conferences, in the East a few lonely pioneers led a desperate struggle for economic survival, for improving their professional quality and for the training of young journalists.

The scenario has changed for the better in the past three or four years, still the quality of the Catholic media is lower than much of the secular media. Professionalism is badly needed not only in the content and creation of productions but also in management, to adjust to the market economy and try to make a responsible and professional budget of their own resources.



3.4. Need for media pastoral planning, cooperation

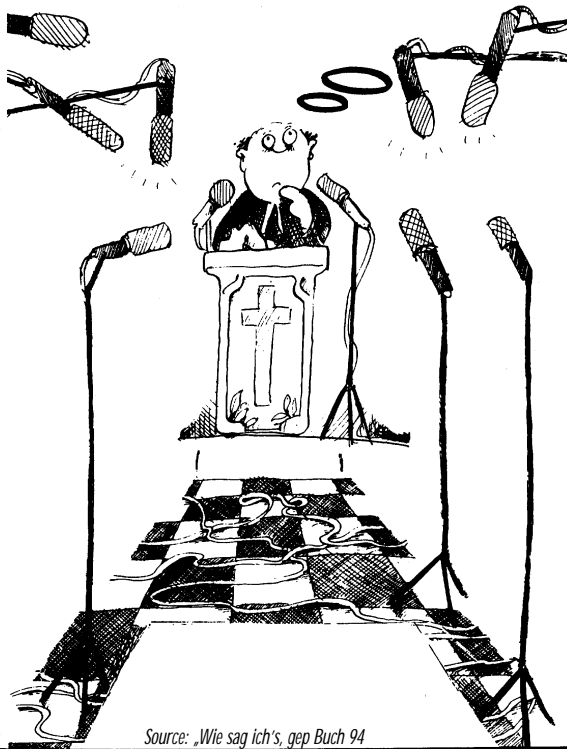
As far as the printing press is concerned, there is an immense – perhaps greater than necessary – variety of publications. A surprising but also embarrassing richness with various advantages and disadvantages. By now there are several national and a lot of diocesan weeklies and monthlies in all post-communist countries, even in countries like Belarus, Bulgaria and Albania. The European part of Russia has a weekly since 1994 and another weekly exists since 1995 for the Catholics of Siberia (who number only 200,000, spread in an area of the biggest dioceses of the world).

Behind the promising results there are also some tensions and difficulties. In several countries there is no or hardly any coordination between the publications, no dialogue among the publishing houses and editorial offices, no survey about the real needs of the readers and no analysis about the financial possibilities. What is more, in some countries the church press is also divided by languages (e.g. in Romania 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 ones 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.

3.5. Need for formation

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 quality films or programs with a deserved name and fame even in the highly competitive field of the media. The situation differs again from country to country. In Poland there are four training centres 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 in that country. It is strongly recommended that Catholic communicators should have a faithful commitment to the Church, but also a solid theological training.

We could continue enumerating the needs of these Churches in Central and Eastern Europe. But as I have to finish, let me do it in just one sentence. The challenge is immense, the possibilities and expectations are unique for these Churches. It is a real „Kairos“ to them and the call of the Lord must not be in vain, without our proper response. The grace of the Holy Spirit and the good will effort of so many committed Christians cannot remain in vain. We can trust in divine providence that our efforts will be accompanied by His blessing.



Source: „Wie sag ich's, gep Buch 94