

**MORE THAN 'MEDIA MEMORY IANE': MEDIAELCOM RESEARCHERS
EXPLORE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF THE 1990'S TRANSFORMATIONS
ON TODAY'S MEDIA IN ESTONIA, POLAND, CZECH REPUBLIC
AND (REUNITED) GERMANY.
DORTMUND, GERMANY, NOVEMBER 8, 2023**

What do the Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland and Germany – quite distinct at first sight – have in common in terms of their media structures? The answer is one kind or another of a “restart moment” of both the state and the media system in the early 1990s; albeit in decidedly distinct “flavors”: While Estonia became once again an independent state albeit with detrimental border losses, Poland managed to transform the political system without changing its borders. This happened elsewhere: Czechoslovakia not only changed the political system, but also split into the Czech and Slovak Republics. In Germany, the opposite happened with two states becoming one. But absorbing an established system into the “new” federal states did not always go smoothly.

It is against this historical background that today's media systems in the four countries have been shaped. Differences, similarities, and their relevance for public discourse in the 2020s were discussed at an event titled “Political change and the media. The Polish, Czech, Estonian and German publics after the transformation of the 1990s” in Dortmund on November 8, 2023.

The Dortmund-based Erich-Brost-Institute, the German member of the Mediadelcom research consortium, had teamed up with partners to bring selected project results and a new comparative perspective to a media-interested audience. *Auslandsgesellschaft NRW*, *Europe Direct Dortmund*, and journalists association *DJV* helped to organize and promote the event. Some 75 participants—citizens, journalists, students of TU Dortmund University, mostly from its Institute of Journalism—accepted the invitation to discuss political, social, and media issues of the four countries at the *Auslandsgesellschaft* in Dortmund city center.

Four Mediadelcom researchers all discussant guests of moderator Louisa von Essen: Project coordinator Halliki Harro-Loit for the Estonian team, Lenka Waschková Císařová of the Czech team, Michał Głowacki for the Polish team, and Marcus Kreutler as the representative for the German team hosting the event.

The guests gave a unique insight into how the media in their countries developed in the course of political transformation: Whatever made the international news in 2023 – political conflict about public service broadcasting or media

regulation in Poland, media ownership and concentration issues in the Czech Republic – can often be traced to decisions taken in the 1990s or early 2000s. Among the guest countries, the Estonian situation turned out to be the least known to the German audience: While Halliki Harro-Loit could report that journalism assumed an important social role in the young country and that Estonia was the highest-ranking of the four countries in Reporters without Border's media freedom index, she also pointed out relevant risks. Russian propaganda's influence, especially on Russian-speaking Estonians, was the most topical one, but also questions of media ethics versus the influence of media ownership.

Perhaps surprisingly, the German case induced several questions and follow-up discussions with members of the audience: From a Western-German perspective, the impact of reunification on the media is not too apparent – after all, the “new federal states” legally joined the Federal Republic. While Germany's Eastern neighbors frequently followed Western models in constructing an all-new media system, Germany had continuity in one part and revolution in the other. In the former GDR, this meant a redesign of the “nervous system” of society, including a quick introduction of public broadcasting structures modelled after the Western ones. Practically overnight, the Western-German Press Council was also competent for journalistic conduct in the East. But perhaps the most significant change happened in the press sector, where the trust agency managing privatization of economic assets in the new federal states applied economic criteria with little consideration of journalistic pluralism. Larger regional newspapers were quickly sold to big Western-German publishers, with the result of regional monopolies – a structure that had had been rare in Western Germany, but is now more common: Older members of the Dortmund audience could relate, as the city had lost two of its formerly three independent newspapers in recent years.

So, is there a preferred way, a recipe for successful media system transformation in times of political transformation or sometimes even the birth of new state entities? All the panelists pointed to both risks and opportunities that could be seen in their country cases. While the German path did not leave much room for journalistic startups and new media brands, “copying” established structures in public service broadcasting brought a stability to that sector that its Polish counterpart is yet to find. On the other hand, the German print and digital news landscape is still surprisingly divided – much more so than in the Czech, Estonian, and Polish cases, where such partial continuity was not an option. But starting from scratch comes with its own risks: Czech media companies, after a phase of foreign investment, are now mostly under control of few domestic owners. Privatization has long been associated with press freedom, and the risk of oligarchisation only became apparent along the way.

To conclude the discussion, Louisa von Essen asked her guests for their perspectives on challenges that are common to young journalists in all four countries: The panel agreed on the key role professional moderators of public discourse will have to take to bridge political, but also generational gaps. Halliki Harro-Loit pointed out that listening to each other is an essential competency in an age of information overflow. Michal Głowacki seized the opportunity for a forceful appeal not to take media freedom or even the democratic system for granted: “We have to stand for these rights again and again”.

Marcus Kreutler

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