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CONFERENCE REPORT

THE PAST AND FUTURE OF MEDIA FREEDOM AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN CENTRAL AND EAST EUROPE

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The 7th International Central and East European Communication and Media Conference – CEECOM 2014 took place on June 12-14 in Wrocław. It gathered the attention of almost 180 media researchers from 30 countries, not only from Central and East Europe, but also from Western Europe, both Americas, Africa, and Asia, namely – from all around the world.

The conference held in Wrocław was the seventh CEECOM conference and – at the same time – a very special one, as it took place in the year of the 25th anniversary of the collapse of communism in many Central and East European countries and the 10th anniversary of the first CEE countries accession to the European Union. To underline the importance of these anniversaries, the conference was entitled: “Changing Media and Democracy: 25 Years of Media Freedom and Public Sphere in Central and East Europe”. The debates were focused on changing approaches to media freedom and the public sphere and the future of media and democracy models.

The event in Wrocław was the one of CEECOM Consortium’s conferences, which have been held annually in one of the Central and East European countries and are scientific events of great importance in the field of communication and media in this region of Europe. Previously, they have taken place, for example in Brno, Bratislava, Prague, and last year – in Kaunas. Each year the CEECOM conferences gain more and more significance as a meeting place and forum for media researchers and scholars who focus on research on state of media in CEE countries.

The conference was co-organised by four entities: the Polish Communication Association, the University of Wrocław, ECREA’s (European Communication Research Association) CEE Network, and ICA (International Communication Association). Most of the plenary sessions and panel discussions took place in the building of the Faculty of Law, Administration and Economics, opposite the Main Building of the University of Wrocław. Several plenary sessions were held in one of the most prestigious rooms of the Main Building of the University, namely Oratorium Marianum.

The chair of the conference was Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska, a professor of communication at the University of Wrocław (Institute of Political Science), who opened the proceedings. “The scholars from this part of Europe should be more visible,” said Professor Dobek-Ostrowska during the opening session of the conference. She also expressed the hope that the CEECOM conference would help them to achieve this

goal. She underlined how exceptional it was that the conference had gathered media scholars from all CEE countries (representatives of all of these countries were present at the conference). She said that this was very important as it gave further possibilities for network building. Professor Dobek-Ostrowska also said that the 25th anniversary of the collapse of communism was a good time to make summaries and pose questions about the past, present, and future of media freedom and the public sphere in CEE. "I hope we will be able to find the answers to at least some of these questions," she said.

One of the most important events of the first day of the conference was the lecture given by a honorary guest speaker at the conference, Professor Jane Curry from the University of Santa Clara (United States). The lecture by Professor Jane Curry was entitled: "Central and Eastern Media and their makers: Leading the transition and being transformed by it." Professor Jane Curry was able to share her experiences, as she had visited Poland many times: as a young media researcher in the 1960s and later often returning to the country.

Professor Jane Curry was granted Honorary Membership of the Polish Communication Association. The ceremony took place during the opening session of CEECOM 2014.

The conference attracted the attention of famous media scholars from major research centres around the world. During the three days of the conference, participants took part in three plenary sessions and 30 panel discussions.

The first plenary session was entitled: "From Authoritarianism and Communism to Democracy"; the second: "Central and Eastern Europe in a Comparative Perspective", and the third: "Public Sphere and Public Opinion". Within these three sessions, discussions were held by keynote speakers of the conference, world-renown media researchers including: Aukse Balcytiene (Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania), Wolfgang Donsbach (Technical University in Dresden, Germany), Tomas Trampota (Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic), Epp Lauk (University of Jyväskylä, Finland), David Weaver (Indiana University, US), Susanne Fengler (University of Dortmund, Germany), Francois Heinderyckx, the International Communication Association President, Andrzej Antoszewski (University of Wrocław, Poland), Elena Vartanova (Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia), and Peter Gross (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, US).

Worth mentioning is also the session entitled: "Media Freedom in Central and Eastern Europe", that took place on the third day of the conference. During that session, Michał Głowacki (PhD) from Warsaw University interviewed a special guest at the conference, Professor Andrei Richter, Director of Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. Among other issues they talked about the freedom of media, ways of understanding it, and methods of measuring and monitoring media freedom.

It is impossible to mention all of the hundreds of various issues undertaken during the 30 panel discussions within the conference. As there is no media freedom without democracy and there is no democracy without freedom of media, the relations between media and politics were one of the most important themes of the CEECOM conference discussions. However, as mentioned above, the range of the issues debated during the three days of the conference was much wider. Media scholars posed questions and searched for answers about Central and East European media systems, journalistic autonomy, and the condition of media. They wanted to know: what have we achieved during the last 25 years, where are

we now, and what perspectives do we have for the future. They undertook such issues as political transformation and changes in democracy, media and communication, journalism, and public sphere. They also discussed to what extent the traditional concept of media, journalism, and its accountability as well as media systems and policy had been challenged in the new media environment and if the development of participatory platforms and citizen journalism affect the public sphere and citizen participation. Finally, they debated the impact of contemporary media on political communication and the quality of democracy.

Additionally, the two special sessions were the integral part of the conference. The first was the benefis of Professor Walery Pisarek (Jagiellonian University, Pontifical University of John Paul II, Cracow), a famous Polish media researcher and the first Honorary Member of the Polish Communication Association. Since 1958, Professor W. Pisarek has worked for Ośrodek Badań Prasoznawczych (Press Research Centre), the first Polish media research institution (for 31 years as its director). He was also an editor of *Zeszyty Prasoznawcze*, the first Polish journal about media. Moreover, he is the author of dozens of books and articles on communication and media.

The second special session during the conference was entitled: “Remembering Karol Jakubowicz”. It was dedicated to the renowned Polish scholar, who died last year. Karol Jakubowicz was Chairman of the Intergovernmental Council of the UNESCO Information for All Programmes and Chairman of the Steering Committee on the Media and New Communication Services at the Council of Europe.

Not only media scholars and media researchers took part in the discussions. The CEECOM conference in Wrocław also attracted many media practitioners – media managers, journalists, and media workers. This was one of the biggest advantages of the conference. Media theoreticians were able to meet media practitioners. Both of these groups took advantage of the possibility of looking at crucial media problems from a new and different perspective. Together, they discussed the main media problems and even if they could not find a solution, they at least discovered new ways of thinking about these problems and understanding them.

The conference was accompanied by a book fair and an exhibition devoted to the activities of the Polish Communication Association. During one of the sessions, the CEE media and communication Journals Database was launched and the journals were displayed. Other sessions were devoted to the launch of a new volume of the *Central European Journal of Communication*, the official journal of the Polish Communication Association, and the launch of books in the *Studies in Communication and Politics* series, published by Peter Lang.

The participants could also take part in the informal part of the conference. The local organising committee had prepared some special attractions. Moreover, the Mayor of Wrocław, Rafał Dutkiewicz, organised a reception for participants of the conference at the Old Stock Exchange on Solny Square, one of Wrocław’s many great monuments. They could also experience the city through a guided tour of the old building of the University of Wrocław, and Wrocław by night. During this part of the conference, participants took a trip on a historical old tramway dating back to 1925 and later attended the special Multimedia Fountain Performance given near the Centennial Hall in Wrocław.

The organisers of the conference in Wrocław and Zrinjka Perusko, a professor of media studies at the University of Zagreb, invited all of the participants to take part in the 8th CEECOM conference, which will take place on June 12-14 2015 in Zagreb (Croatia).

As there was a live broadcast during CEECOM 2014, anyone interested in the proceedings of the conference could follow the discussions online. Some of the sessions can still be seen on the conference's YouTube channel. The conference programme is available on the website of CEECOM 2014 (ceecom2014wroclaw.pl).