![digital icons — Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media]

Reports and Commentaries

3.7.4. WORKSHOP ON RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE
POST-SOVIET MEDIA LANDSCAPE:
UKRAINE, BELARUS AND RUSSIA
by Galina Miazhevich

ON 23 June 2010, the Rothermere American Institute (RAI) at the University of Oxford held a workshop entitled *Recent Developments in the Post-Soviet Media Landscape: Ukraine, Belarus and Russia.* The event was sponsored by CEELBAS (Centre for East European Language Based Area Studies)[1]. Prominent media figures and academics from these respective countries and the UK gathered in Oxford to discuss the state of media in the former Soviet Union (FSU). While four out of ten speakers currently reside in the region (Russia, Ukraine and Belarus), the other six came from various UK institutions. All the presenters are experts on the countries in question, being either researchers based at leading universities, and/or specialists working at media-related institutions such as BBC Monitoring. The project leader and organiser of the workshop was Dr Galina Miazhevich, the Gorbachev Media Research Fellow at Christ Church, and the Rothermere American Institute, University of Oxford.

The workshop proved to be a timely event. It was organised at an important historical and societal juncture for the countries of the former communist bloc: the event took place between the celebrations of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2009 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 2011. Whilst the politico-economic aspect of the ensuing transformation has been extensively explored, the role of the media, which have become a leading force in the transformation process, has yet to receive a full assessment. Some re-

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[1] CEELBAS is a partnership of UCL, University of Oxford and University of Birmingham with a network of partners at the Universities of Bath, Cambridge, Kent, Manchester, Sheffield, Warwick and SOAS. The workshop touched on several of the CEELBAS research themes: Contemporary Cultural Processes (media, consumption, etc.); Knowledge-based Economies and Societies (e.g. e-Governance); Migration and Diaspora Citizenship (Russia-speaking diaspora media constitute part of its focus); Political and Economic Processes (aimed at fostering democratic debate and integration), Identities and Solidarities (to facilitate transnational ties between media practitioners from the target countries).

search has been done on Russian and Central and East European media. However, there is virtually no study of the media in Ukraine or Belarus; this academic neglect also extends to the media 'battle' over the Russian-speaking sections of these societies.

Some former Soviet countries like Ukraine have seen their media systems actively engaged in facilitating democratization and the fostering civil society. Others like Belarus have demonstrated that the same media instruments might be used to support and promote authoritarian political systems. This distinction raises questions about the transferability and applicability of western concepts of democracy and media freedom to the post-Soviet context. Furthermore, the extent to which the Russian-speaking media have come under Russian influence in non-Russian republics provides the grounds for a vital comparative study. The advent and growth of new media technologies adds another twist to the complex narrative of post-Soviet nation building, and to associated media-theoretical issues. Therefore, the aim of the workshop was three-fold: 1) to question the transferability of the concept of 'globalised democracy' to the post-Soviet media, 2) to explore the intersection of new and traditional media in post-Soviet space, and 3) to provide the grounds for a critical reflection on the interaction between media, politics and culture in the three selected states (questioning how developments in Ukrainian and Belarusian media systems reflect, resist, interact with, and differ from those in Russia).

The workshop was attended by members of the wider public, including media figures and postgraduate/doctorate students. In total the event attracted 25 participants from the UK and abroad facilitating a dialogue between media scholars and practitioners, between East and West. The event consisted of three country-specific sessions and a final discussion forum, which provided ground for an in-depth discussion of specific issues relating to media, politics and societal developments in the FSU. This format constituted a suitable environment for a fruitful discussion, casting light on developments in the post-Soviet media and synthesising the insights of both practitioners and academics.

The workshop pursued a number of complementary and overlapping strands in order to investigate the future directions of post-Soviet media transformations. Overall, the presentations could be divided into two categories: one focusing on traditional media, and the other exploring new media. Within the 'traditional media' category the speakers discussed the following: television as an enduring, yet increasingly complex and contradictory instrument of political influence on the viewing public (as reflected in the papers of Stephen Hutchings on Russia and of Ostap Kryvdyk on Ukraine); the role of journalists in post-Soviet society (Natasha Rulyova); the Russian state's recent initiatives in controlling the media (the case of anti-extremist legislation outlined by Alexander Verkhovsky); and the potential of traditional media for the subversion of official agendas, and for civil society building (as presented by Lara Ryazanova-Clarke using the case of the satire 'Mul't lichnosti' [Cartoon personalities], an on/off the Web project sanctioned by the Russian authorities). One of the issues raised was the domination of the Russian language in the traditional Ukrainian and Belarusian media. Many key positions in Ukrainian media outlets are occupied by expatriates from Russia; top FM stations and newspapers are the property of Moscow-based companies and the overall ownership structure of traditional media is non-transparent (Ostap Kryvdyk).

The second strand focused on new media and their role in generating a counter-public sphere in the post-communist region. It consisted of two sub-topics: (i) the political potential

of new media in the fSU and (ii) socio-cultural changes in the hyperlinked post-communist society. Discussions about the role of the new media in undercutting existing political structures were particularly charged. The themes included cyber-protest and media activism (e.g. the case of political campaigning in local elections in Belarus was explored by Dzmitry Karenka) and the potential of the new media for public sphere and civil society building (the 're-emergence' of an Internet-led glasnost in Medvedev's Russia as explicated by Natalya Rulyova). The emergence of digital democracy in the fSU (as in the 'colour' revolutions, and the Russia-Georgia conflict, etc.) was debated following a presentation by Justin Sparks, who drew parallels and comparison between the state's management of the Internet in China with the situation in Ukraine and Russia. He argued that the growth of the Internet, strongly encouraged by western governments as an agent of democratic reform, has been transformed into a potent instrument of state control, allowing the successful monitoring of both the Internet as well as print media content that would otherwise be unmanageable.

The participants learned much about the range of 'new media' actors in the fSU (Ostap Kryvdyk and Nikolai Gorshkov spoke about Ukraine and Dzmitry Karenka about Belarus), where the state still retains powerful influence over the local population. The relationship between new media and audiences was outlined in Yuri Misnikov's paper about the politicisation of new media as reflected in the Belarusian news portal *tut.by*. Some of the presentations broached the theoretical challenges posed by blogging, video-posting websites and online communities in post-communist space. Almira Ousmanova, for example, dealt with the role of the visual (visual images disseminated online and on TV) as a tool for political struggle and ideological domination.

Overall, the workshop stimulated critical reflection on the interaction between media, politics and culture in Belarus, Ukraine and Russia. On one hand, the three-way comparison demonstrated that in some aspects Ukrainian and Belarusian new media systems differ from those in Russia (especially in terms of the level of internet penetration; access, the demographic characteristics of the users; the media system; the degree of state control, etc.). On the other hand, the talks pointed to similarities between these countries with regard to new media's interaction with traditional media and institutional modes of managing these trends. As Hutchings concluded, the issues that new media actors face in the fSU derive from the state's attempts to take into account the role of the 'participatory audience,' typical of new forms of mass mediation (whether such attempts are crude and straightforward, or subtle and consciously subversive).

The workshop was resolutely interdisciplinary in nature. It was also extremely topical as it looked at the *intersection* of new and old media and fostered critical insights about the following issues: 1) limitations imposed on the democratic function of new media in the region (for example, via the appropriation of new media techniques by the authorities in light of the semi-professional activities of civic journalists and other oppositional activists), and 2) the often overlooked phenomenon of hybridisation and cross-linkage between traditional and new media, i.e. convergence. By bringing together media figures (journalists, bloggers, media monitoring figures, etc.) and academics from both the former Soviet Union and the UK the workshop strove to bridge theory and practice and to take forward the research agenda through a commitment to comparative studies.

Podcasts of the workshop are available to a wider audience via RAI and the Reuters Institute website <http://www.rai.ox.ac.uk/index.php/academic-programme/acprog-resources/media-workshop>. Finally, a publication of the papers presented at the workshop is envisaged in the form of a special issue of a peer-reviewed journal. This will maximise the international reach of the workshop's outputs.

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