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Mediatization Cartography: Two Questions about Mediatization of Religion in Central and Eastern Europe

Abstract. The mediatization of religion which has developed in the Central and Eastern European area is based on Scandinavian social assumptions that cannot be transferred directly to other geographical areas. Starting from this fact, in this study I focus on the question of the ontology that constitutes the mediatization of religion in Central and Eastern Europe. I call this search for the criteria of mediatization's functioning in the studied area mediatization cartography, i.e. the process of creating assumptions in mapping the research of the phenomenon. In the course of this process, the author reflects on two components of the undertaken ontology, in the form of specifically understood secularization and democratic backsliding. As a result, I explain how to approach the mediatization of religion in the studied area of Central and Eastern European countries. In doing so, I provide solutions for the fusion of religion and state, as well as for the incomplete differentiation of media.

Keywords: mediatization; religion; cartography; Central and Eastern Europe

1. Introduction

The dynamics of research on the mediatization of religion have clearly increased in recent years in the context of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. This dynamics leads to a strengthening of the visibility of religion (Stępniak, 2020), and proceeds independently of the changing number of believers of the respective religions (Tudor, Filimon Benea, & Bratosin, 2021). Research located in the CEE area addresses both the institutional and the constructive level (Guzek, 2019; Kopecka-Piech, 2019; Stähle, 2022). At its core, the research combines the widely shared belief that mediatization is about changes in society, conditioned by changes in the media themselves. Mediatization thus serves to "critically analyze the interrelation between changes in

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media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other" (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 197).

In the field of substantive and functional religion, the understanding of what the phenomenon of mediatization consists of has clearly evolved. The initial emphasis on the role of religious institutions and their logic (Hjarvard, 2008) established the spheres in which the phenomenon occurs (Lövheim, 2012; Lövheim & Axner, 2015). From another perspective, mediatization of religion has put value on the new social conditions in which religious institutions and believers function. The idea is that the mediatization of religion touches upon the problems in people's everyday lives and upon religious institutions embedded in the context of digitization and algorithmization (Campbell, 2021; Campbell & Garner, 2016).

The situation we are now in, explicitly described by Amanda Lagerkvist (2017, p. 96) as the "thrownness of digital human existence", makes it clear that in the existing scholarship on religion and mediatization in CEE, problematic issues remain that need to be addressed and critically reflected upon at the dawn of this algorithmic shift. This article discusses two problems growing out of research on mediatization in CEE. By addressing them, we can reflect on the following research question: What belongs to the ontology of mediatization of religion in the CEE area? I discuss the question based on the existing research in the field.

I begin the article with an introduction to the specificity of CEE and the Western root of mediatization of religion. With this in mind, I present the concept of cartography, in connection with which I address two problems related to the context of the research and its ontological status. The first is secularization in CEE. The second is the problem of the decline of democracy and press freedom.

2. Central and East Europe and Its Specificity

Understanding Central and Eastern Europe in the sense offered by communication and media (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Dobek-Ostrowska & Głowacki, 2011; Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018; Surowiec & Štětka, 2017), we can see that it is a constellation of dichotomies on four levels. Being in one group at a given level does not imply the same position at another level. (1) Some of the CEE countries are culturally in between the East and the West, while others are typically the East. (2) CEE is based on systems with backsliding democracies and soft authoritarian regimes. (3) CEE partly uses Western Europe and the United States as its political and economic reference points, and partly orientates itself towards the East with Russian solutions. (4) Finally, CEE is an area of religiosity that has broken communist regimes or has risen from the ruins after a period of state atheism.

According to Miklós Sükösd and Karol Jakubowicz (2011), CEE is a multicolored space for the development of a public sphere. Paweł Surowiec and Václav Štětka (2017)

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see it as remarkably fertile in the context of research on the relationship between social media and politics. Such intuitions point to the communicative peculiarity of CEE, which leads us to assume that also in the area of mediatization of religion, the specificity of CEE matters.

Historically, mediatization and mediatization of religion originate from the contexts of Scandinavia and Germany (Livingstone, 2009). As Jérôme Bourdon and Gabriele Balbi (2021) rightly point out, the concept is based entirely on a Western ontology that cannot be generalized to all cultures. In fact, "different ontologies generate different criteria for evaluating presence mediated by technologies" (Bourdon & Balbi, 2021, p. 2808). In designing mediatization studies, we are therefore confronted with a number of issues that may function differently in the *imaginarium* of CEE societies than in the West.

2.1. Mediatization Cartography in CEE

I have decided to refer to the search for criteria on how the mediatization of religion functions in CEE as *mediatization cartography*. By the term "cartography" itself, I mean the delineation of a certain map, i.e. an area of research, on the basis of rules according to science. Mapping the study of the mediatization of religion in CEE is thus a kind of cartography that occurs within a spatial and temporal framework. The cartography is about CEE in the sense outlined earlier. Furthermore, the cartography is based on a temporal perspective. It delineates the characteristics of the mediatization of religion based on the current state, which is the result of a long-term temporal process. In the case of CEE, periodization began with the political transformation of the respective states in 1989.

The cartography, in the sense I present here, is also based on the strong embedding of the issues addressed in the CEE space. It is conditioned by the ontology of CEE. On the one hand, it is about not overlooking local, social, and cultural realities. On the other hand, it is about preventing the material under investigation from being violated by the simple application of ontologies alien to this context.

2.2. Resistance to "Conceptual Bandwagon"

The allegation that mediatization plays a conceptual bandwagon role in communication and media studies (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014) has been met with a counterargument by leading representatives of this stream of research (Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2015). These representatives argue that the conceptual bandwagon idea optimistically assumes that it is part of the discipline's academic standards to distinguish between *media mediation* and *media mediatization*. However, this is a flawed assumption due to two sets of cases. Firstly, there is a lack of separation functions in the discourse of selected Western scholars (Chouliaraki, 2013; Couldry, 2008; Silverstone, 2007). In

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addition, the lack of separation appears widely in academic discourse in the national languages of some CEE countries. Its extreme form is observed in Poland, where *media mediation* and *media mediatization* are often treated synonymously (cf. Oniszczuk, 2011). The root of this confusion lies in a dictionary entry developed by a doyen of Polish media studies:

> the process of media mediation in learning about the world; the influence of the media on human perception of reality inaccessible to direct experience, together with the consequences of such mediation; the formation of the image of the whole social reality and even complex social experiences under the influence of media constructions. (Pisarek, 2006, p. 118)

Media mediation and the category of media influence, which is difficult to grasp research-wise, and finally the shaping of human experience, are, according to Walery Pisarek, the essence of mediatization. Nothing could be further from the truth. At the time the dictionary entry cited above was written, there was already a significant tradition in Scandinavia, Germany, and the United Kingdom of looking at social change as conditioned by change in the media, specifically, changes in media technologies and media use culture (Hepp, 2009; Hjarvard, 2004; Imhof, 2006).

The cartography of mediatization, in the sense I outlined earlier, presupposes a clear distinction between the study of what belongs to the realm of the phenomenon of *media mediation* and the distinctly peculiar processes of *media mediatization*. Research diligence urges us to object to the placement of an equal sign between the two, for mediatization itself exceeds *media mediation*, with consequences for the understanding of the studied phenomena.

3. Questions to Address

The cartography of mediatization as a study in the proper framework of time and space and the clear separation of *media mediation* from *media mediatization* allow us to address two questions, the consideration of which organizes the assumptions of the study of mediatization of religion within the ontology of CEE. These are, respectively, questions about secularization and the fusion of religion and state and the *illiberal turn* in politics.

3.1. How to Approach Secularization in CEE

The mediatization of religion has effects on two areas: "the decline of institutionalized religious authorities (and the rise of media as authorities)" and "the continued presence, transformation, and significance of religious imaginations in secular societies" (Hjarvard, 2014, p. 24). These two of three stages representing secularization

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refer to the transformation of institutions and people's approaches. In some way, it is limited and narrowed down to the individual agency.

By secular societies, Stig Hjarvard primarily means his native Nordic context. Secularization is one of the chief characteristics of this geographical region. It even covers religious peculiarities such as the Swedish concept of *vicarious religion*, which "is performed by the few on behalf of the many" (Lundby, 2011, p. 1230). According to Hjarvard (2011), the process of secularization is intensified by mediatization on three levels: societal, organizational, and individual. This view, borrowed directly from secularization in the Scandinavian model (Dobbelaere, 2002), does not correspond to the CEE context (Borowik, 2010; Gorski, 2018).

In the CEE countries, church–state relations are in fact various forms of fusion, which are expressed by more or less involvement and autonomy by both parties (Grzymała-Busse, 2015). This fusion grew out of a form of compensating the Church for the wrongs of the regime (Guzek, 2019) or building a new ideological order based on the resurgent authority of religion (Stähle, 2022). Thus, while individuals, especially the younger generation, are losing interest in religion, which can be seen significantly in countries such as Poland (Pew Research Centre, 2018), CEE societies also generally link their religiosity to their nationality. This results in the strong presence of schemas like "truly Russian" indicating being Orthodox and "truly Polish" meaning being Roman Catholic (Pew Research Centre, 2017). In effect, the fusion of the dominant religious institution with political power means that it is impossible to translate secularization into an engaging relationship of religion and state. One can only see in the current CEE fusion the potential to shift the scales. This potential is dual in nature. In some countries, such as Poland, Slovakia, or Romania, it is about the possibility of moving from a religious to a non-religious society in which religious institutions lose real influence over political representatives. In the case of Russia, it is about a highly hypothetical shift in which political power ceases to use orthodoxy in building the Pan-Slavism project.

Mediatization as based on the fusion of religion and state is so pervasive that institutional religions, political power, and the relationship between them are also subject to a process of change that is driven by the media logic of both contexts (Guzek, 2019; Leśniczak, 2016; Staehle, 2018). When thinking about the mediatization of religion in CEE, it is therefore impossible to assume that it will lead to a weakening of the religious *imaginarium* of a given society. Reflecting on this problem, we see that rather two scenarios are possible. In the situation in the East, it is a question of strengthening the church–state relationship. In the Center, on the other hand, it is about expanding the public demand for weakening the church-state relationship. As a result, the solution to the question of how to approach secularization in CEE comes down to considering the mechanism by which the mediatization of religion leads to an increase or weakening of media audiences' belief in the need to loosen the relationship between religion and power. An intriguing example of this loss of religious audience and power over people is shown in the pandemic (Hall & Kołodziejska, 2021).

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3.2. How to Approach Democratic Backsliding

The mediatization of religion occurs in a media environment characterized by a significant degree of structural differentiation. Given that authors of media systems models (Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, & Castro, 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2004) include the Scandinavian countries among those with high differentiation, and this differentiation is grown out of respect for media freedom and the separation of the political world from news makers, the CEE situation creates another problem. We must understand that the CEE's ontology requires a proper approach to the incomplete differentiation of media, which is additionally combined with an increase of foreign capital in media and so-called democratic backsliding. Although the number of titles is diverse, the level of media outlets is limited and openly or closely connected to the views of internal and external parties from the field of politics. Public media driven by state or public support collide with private entities fostering public diplomacy of corporation players from the US and Germany.

Differentiation in CEE is not only much lower than in Western Europe, it also has a much shorter tradition (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015; Peruško, Vozab, & Čuvalo, 2020). Unlike the Scandinavian countries, which built their model of media freedom in the course of generations of shaping the environment of liberal democracies, in the case of CEE, we can talk about a leap in the norms of separation of the media world from the political world. This separation was introduced in CEE starting from 1989. Separation was implemented and maintained to varying degrees. At the beginning of the new millennium, rollback of separation occurred in Russia (Vartanova, 2012). After 2015, there was also a fundamental political turn in Hungary and Poland, described by some authors as an *illiberal turn* (Dostal, Győri, Meseznikov, & Przybylski, 2018; Pogany, 2018; Surowiec & Štětka, 2020). Low trust in political institutions, including politically engaged media outlets, coincided with a general social malaise, which Jan Zielonka (2018) identifies as anger towards the incumbent elites:

> citizens [felt they] were to be educated rather than listened to; the notion that [the] public interest needs to reflect public wishes has begun to be questioned; the public interest is said to be best identified by experts: generals, bankers, traders, lawyers, and of course, leaders of the ruling party. (p. 5)

Representatives of illiberal proposals, taking power in turn, violated the level of media differentiation they had found, to varying degrees, making them dependent on political power (Guzek & Grzesiok-Horosz, 2021; Surowiec, Kania-Lundholm, & Winiarska-Brodowska, 2020). The results of these strategies can be clearly seen in the decline in the rankings of press freedom levels of the countries in question (Reporters Without Borders, 2015, 2016, 2021).

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How, then, should democratic backsliding be approached in the context of the mediatization of religion? The awareness that the lack of full media freedom can lead to phenomena opposing the mediatization of religion is an essential answer. This is primarily about the public media's actions against the logic of the media and its formats. In public media messages, religion not only does not disappear or become subjected to banality, but is portrayed taking into account deep inner motivations. This counter to *banal religion* (Hjarvard, 2012) and something I define as "pan-Catholicization" i.e. overexposure of Roman Catholic themes in public discourse, is especially true in Poland (Guzek, 2019). The issue of whether phenomena of this type are able to persist will be known in time.

4. Conclusion

The different secularization and the difference in political culture in terms of media-politics relations, two spheres that clearly distinguish CEE from Scandinavia when it comes to the application of mediatization of religion, in no way hinder the research on the phenomenon in this geographic region. CEE, in terms of church-state relations, is most similar to Southern Europe, imbued with mediator-broker religious actors (Itçaina, 2020). With regard to the results of applying the specific ontology of CEE, the mediatization of religion turns out to be even more focused on mediating change in the key institutions, as well as from the perspective of re-figuring the actions of the individual (Hepp, 2019). By re-figuration, I mean a fundamental change in social configurations resulting from activity in media spaces. Therefore, taking the CEE ontology into account allows us to properly embed the context of action of local mediatization actors, whose causality should, in principle, be the core of research on the mediatization of religion (Lövheim, 2011).

What does the implementation of the CEE ontology mean? First of all, it improves the proper interpretation of the research material, which takes into account the four communicative features of CEE outlined at the beginning. Finally, it corresponds with Grzegorz Ekiert's (1996, p. 330) broad postulate that in CEE "we need a more specific and historically grounded understanding of structural factors shaping processes of regime change". Thus, we need a theory that grows out of local conditions.

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