

## What Has Been The Role So Far Of The Media In The Transition To Democracy

Friday, November 21, 2014, 9.15–10.45, New York University Prague

**Moderator:** Václav Štětka

**Panel Discussion:** Jeffrey Gedmin, Grzegorz Piechota, Jiří Pehe

Moderator **Václav Štětka**, Senior Researcher at Charles University, introduced the panel as an opportunity to reflect upon and discuss the building of media systems in the 25 years since the fall of communism. He then presented an overview of the current conditions of the media in the region concluding that: *“The news media ... particularly the print media sector [is] being plagued by the effect of the economic downturn and the extension of digital technologies and platforms.”*

Mr. Štětka pointed out that the financial situation at the media markets in the region lead to *“a complete redrawing of the map of media ownership, with many international investors withdrawing from the region and being replaced by local media moguls and oligarchs, posing risks to media freedom.”*

Panelist **Jeffrey Gedmin**, Senior Fellow at Georgetown University, and former President of Radio Free Europe noted the mixed progress of media in the former-communist bloc countries. He acknowledged the toppling of communism and its concurrent power structures as an enduring victory, but noted that increased media pluralism has been accompanied by decreasing journalistic standards. *“When it comes to the quality and integrity of what media and journalism does, I think we have a problem,”* he said.

Mr. Gedmin identified the existence in the region of *“a new clash of culture and ideology”* which pits Western ideals of pluralism and democracy against their opposites. He mentioned in particular Russia’s regional interests and the ways in which cyber-technology, media and information can be used as weapons. He noted that he nevertheless remained an optimist *“for principally the reason that I believe that most people most places still want a life based on sovereignty, integrity, independence and dignity, and most people believe that the free flow of information and ideas...are important to their lives.”*

Director of New York University in Prague, **Jiří Pehe**, examined media conditions in Czechoslovakia immediately following the fall of the communist regime. Whereas in countries like Poland and Hungary some form of independent media and civil society had existed under communism, Czechoslovakia was *“starting from scratch.”* The media underwent a simultaneous transition with politics, and thus failed to play a politically educative role.

Mr. Pehe categorized media development over the last ten years as taking place on three levels. The first was the initial period of media transformation; the second, the emergence of private television stations *“which to some extent distorted the political discourse,”* and the third was the emergence of Internet media. While he estimated that the media scene in the region is now developed and pluralistic, he noted two detrimental trends: democratic backsliding in certain countries and the rise of oligarchs as dominant players in local media.

**Grzegorz Piechota**, Head of Editorial Development and Social Campaigns at Poland’s Gazeta Wyborcza, observed that post-communist countries should look beyond the western media model. He argued that media in the region should *“take a greater role in informing democratic institutions and creating platforms for civic cooperation.”* To illustrate this potential role, Mr. Piechota outlined a number of projects undertaken by Gazet Wyborcza to innovate the Polish educational system. *“What is the role of media in transformation? What can it be?”* he asked. *“I’m not saying we are experts in education, but we can set an agenda.”*

Following their initial statements, the panelists debated the utility of discussing “post-communist” media systems and transformation 25 years after the fall of Iron Curtain. *“We are still post-communist. We are still in transformation,”* said Mr. Piechota. *“When is the transformation to democracy over?”* Mr. Gedmin asked. *“The answer is never. Have you looked at the United States recently? Have you looked at Great Britain recently? Have you looked at Germany recently?”*

The panelists were asked whether there had been a fundamental overestimation of the power of media to facilitate democratic transition and to provide democratic education. They agreed on the difficulty of lasting transformation. *"It is far easier in a nation to change institutions,"* said Mr. Gedmin. *"But it is much more difficult and takes far longer to change culture."* Mr. Piechota conferred: *"You cannot wait for institutions to start working. Someone in society needs to gather people to make a change. And media can play this role."*