

Prague Media Point
Populism, Authoritarianism, and Media: Age of Mediocracy and Mediocracy
Prague, November 12-14, 2015

CONFERENCE SUMMARY

Throughout the second instalment of the Prague Media Point conference, a number of distinguished speakers discussed a wide array of topics under the general theme "Populism, Authoritarianism and Media: Age of Mediocracy and Mediocracy."

The conference began on Thursday, November 12, with the opening panel "*Winning People's Minds: A Modern-day Toolkit for Effective Propaganda*," held at the Embassy of Germany in Prague. In his opening remarks, German Ambassador **Arndt Freiherr Freytag von Loringhoven** explored the premise that Europe is currently facing the largest number of security threats, in both quantity and severity, since World War II. These security threats are old (nationalism and terrorism) and new (hybrid warfare, cybercrime, and media propaganda). If, according to Ambassador Freytag, Europe does not work together to combat these threats, we may see the end of the political achievements, embodied in the European Union, for which we have struggled so hard.

Kateřina Šafařiková, a *Newsweek* journalist and chair of the panel, noted how the Internet is being used for modern forms of manipulation. It is especially effective because there are no boundaries in its accessibility and it is free of charge. **Péter Krekó**, Director of the Political Capital Institute in Hungary, discussed the current state of Russian propaganda. The year 2015 is the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II and a large part of the Russian regime's political identity is based on anti-fascism. Yet the Kremlin is happy to support far right, neo-fascist, fringe groups within the European Union (as well as far left or communist groups). According to Krekó, Russia's objective is mainly to destabilize the EU, regardless of ideology. **Jakub Kalenský**, a member of the East StratCom Task Force in the European External Action Service, an EU unit tasked to counter Russian propaganda, stated that the knowledge surrounding the Russian disinformation campaign is very high amongst researchers in Europe. However, this knowledge is not shared with the general public and hasn't found its way into the mainstream media. **Nenad Pejic**, RFE's Editor-in-Chief, spoke about the importance of defending Western values and about stating the truth clearly. He also stressed the importance of presenting "a good story" to the audience – a key tool for every successful media organization.

On November 13, the program began with the panel, "*Defining Populism and Populist Media, Authoritarianism and Authoritarian Media*", chaired by **Tony Curzon Price**, Technical Director and Contributing Editor of openDemocracy. **Christopher Walker**, Executive Director of the International Forum for Democratic Studies, reminded the audience that authoritarianism has a strong influence on all spheres of public discourse, not only the media. He delved into the historical development of the public view of media in the U.S. as well as in Europe. The view of media before the Internet was traditionally positive and optimistic. The rise of the Internet democratized the media but also made them extremely hard to monetize, thus forcing a search for alternative forms of funding. According to **Yulia Savchenko**, a journalist from the Russian service of the Voice of America, populism, despite

its negative connotations, is not necessarily bad if interpreted as trying to provide the reader with what he or she wants (as opposed to some other malicious intent). This thought was a reoccurring motif throughout a number of panels. **Peter Pomerantsev**, writer and TV producer, expressed the opinion that it is perhaps the abundance of freedom and information sources that leads people to be confused and then distrustful of any and all media. According to Pomerantsev, authoritarian regimes benefit from creating an air of conspiracy with the help of the media.

The evening panel at the RFE Prague headquarters, titled "*Countering Disinformation: Real Challenges and Best Practices*," explored the topic of reporting from hostile areas. The panel was moderated by **Christopher Walker** and attended by **Nenad Pejic**, **Kenan Aliyev**, Executive Editor of Current Time, **Godana Knezevic**, Director of the Balkan service of RFE/RL, **Irina Lagunina**, Director of the Russian service of RFE/RL, and an RFE/RL journalist from Ukraine, **Natalia Churikova**. The speakers shared their firsthand experiences of dealing with propaganda and spoke out about the tools of oppression used against independent journalists.

Saturday began with the panel, "*Far Right and Populist Media Manipulation in Europe: A Serious Threat?*", moderated by **Jana Ciglerová**, a journalist from the *Mladá Fronta DNES* daily. **Anna Matušková**, a political marketing expert, delved deeper into the problem of defining the nature of populism and its various forms. All the speakers discussed in brief the tragic events in Paris and agreed that the role of media and public figures at this moment is to provide support and objective information and avoid jumping to conclusions. **Jiří Pehe**, Director of the New York University in Prague, focused on the role of the Czech president, who should help distinguish between Muslim fundamentalists and everyday Muslims, rather than incite hatred. **Benjamin De Cleen**, of the Department of Communication Studies of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, aimed to offer a neutral definition of populism. He concluded that populism is not a synonym for undemocratic or authoritarian discourse, even though it could potentially be harmful to democratic pluralism. The speakers raised the point of a certain fragmentation of society, which has in turn transferred into the media sphere. This leads to the danger of constant reaffirming of lived in ideas.

The overall conference program consisted of 15 panels on topics ranging from the concentration of media ownership and the role of oligarchs in the media, through public opinion and media literacy, to varying degrees of censorship that are slowly expanding – even in nominally free and democratic countries, such as Hungary.

Prague Media Point is an annual international conference, dedicated to discussing the changing media landscape in a professional, political, economic, and social context. It gathers leading academics, journalists, media executives, and experts from around the world to exchange experiences, establish new contacts, and debate challenges facing both traditional and new media. Prague Media Point is a joint project of Transitions and KEYNOTE.