

A socio-demographic portrait of Central and Eastern European (CEE) journalists: A comparative analysis of the journalistic profession in eight CEE countries using the Worlds of Journalism Study



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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the journalistic profession in eight Central and Eastern European countries: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Moldova, Romania, and Russia, using the quantitative findings of the Worlds of Journalism Study. The comparison refers to age, gender, education, positions, work experience, religion, and political views of journalists from these states. The study was conducted in each country by a national team responsible for the collected data. The national studies were carried out between 2012 and 2017. Over 3,000 journalists participated as respondents. For comparative analysis, the study builds on the national databases and the country reports written within the project by each national team.

KEYWORDS: journalism, Central and Eastern Europe, age, gender, education, positions, work experience, religion, political preferences.



INTRODUCTION

Country classifications by region and then by their joint performance in political and economic developments and systems thinking is not a new idea. More and more nations connected by various geopolitical, economic, historical, social, and cultural ties seek to ally in different regions to cope with international changes. The Central and Eastern European region is no exception. This region consists of more than twenty countries, which are also known as post-Communist/Soviet nations. After democratization, most countries desired to form an elitist region framed in a global system and to get rid of the post-Communist countries' label. However, it was far from successful. Therefore, this region, linked to an undeniable past, knew an internal break. The regional differences were so significant that some countries

decided to follow different paths, dismembering this region into two and more distinct and very different subregions. The new alliances were formed between the closer neighbors with political and economic performances who decide in common to dissociate from other neighbors that underperform in politics, governance, economy, media, and other sectors, compared to the regional average.

Recent studies about media systems and journalism (Bajomi-Lázár, 2015; Balčytienė et al, 2014; Örnebring, 2012) show clearly this type of rift which reaffirms the huge regional differences which makes it almost impossible to conduct a joint analysis. As Dobek-Ostrowska (2015, p. 36) states, “all 21 countries are situated in the same region of the continent but they differ significantly in the context of their historical background, political standards, economic development, and in consequence, in the media systems, which are products of all those elements”. From this point of view, any comparison seems superfluous, especially at the conceptualization level, which nowadays has become a must in any research. A prerequisite for many comparative studies is to find common patterns that might form models and theories. More and more studies, which present two or three countries from the same region, claim to form a comparative model. Therefore, one of the most common mistakes in such research is that “many researchers compare other nations to their own countries by evaluating other cultures through the lens of their own cultural value-systems. If they then focus on differences between the units of analysis, they tend to understate heterogeneities within the examined cultures, ignoring the fact that, occasionally, variances within cultures may be greater than those across cultural boundaries” (Hanitzsch, 2009, p. 422). To overcome these traps of comparative studies, the only solution is contextualization, which better than any other theory, explain a phenomenon analyzed by comparison. However, contextualization is difficult to achieve especially in comparative studies where many countries are present (see Weaver & Willnat, 2012; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Hanitzsch, 2007; Hanitzsch et al., 2010).

Considering regional differences and research difficulties, there are few CEE studies that present media and journalism by comparison. I will present two of them which have served as an example in making the comparison in this article. The most recent is the regional focus analyses, created by Dobek-Ostrowska (2015), who analyzed extensively the media status quo in all Central and Eastern European countries. Perhaps, it is the only complete regional analysis on media which does not draw a parallel between Central and Eastern European and Western media that most studies are used to doing. Dobek-Ostrowska proposes four models of media in Central and Eastern Europe, relying on different criteria, indexes, and rankings of development of media, politics, economy, and other realms describing these countries. These four models of media are called the Hybrid Liberal, the Politicized Media, the Media in Transition, and the Authoritarian models. According to the author, the Hybrid Liberal model refers to West Slavonic and Baltic states, such as the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Their

media systems are based on the principles of profitability, which makes them politically untouchable, compared to the Politicized Media model countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, and Serbia) where “the media are politicized not only by political actors, but often by journalists and some media owners, who have clear political preferences” (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015, p. 29). The other two models included very weak democracies with hybrid media systems and very low journalistic professionalism (the Media in Transition model) or highly politicized and with a strong political media propaganda (the Authoritarian model). Moldova, Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are part of the Media in Transition model, while Belarus and Russia represent the Authoritarian models.

The second study, that presents three models of media systems, was developed by Peruško, Vozab and Čuvalo (2013). Two categories of Central and Eastern European countries were included in a cluster analysis of media systems that described the similarities and differences of media structures and practices in different European countries. The authors placed Lithuania, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria in the same category as countries as Italy, Greece, and Spain and named them the South and East European model. Other Central and Eastern European nations as Poland, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Slovakia, along with Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Ireland, Great Britain, and Portugal formed the European mainstream model. The Eastern European and Western countries were compared in terms of the quality of public service television (role of the state), newspaper circulation per capita (media market), party influence (political and economic parallelism), owner influence (political and economic parallelism) and journalistic culture (professionalization of journalism) (Peruško, Vozab & Čuvalo, 2013, p. 148). The innovation of this approach comes from the fact that the analysis put the audience in the focus of comparisons, which has become a key factor in building new media structures in digital media systems. Although both studies are no longer relevant due to changing political, economic, and social and media contexts, their contribution to understanding this region is meaningful.

My article comes in support of this type of comparison, even though it may seem as a ‘study findings’ paper. I analyze the journalistic profession in eight Central and Eastern European countries, such as Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Moldova, Romania, and Russia using the quantitative results of the Worlds of Journalism Study.¹ The main lines of my comparison refer to age, gender, education, positions, work experience, religion, and political views of journalists from these states. The analysis refers to the recent changes that have occurred in the profession and in the working places of journalists from Central and Eastern Europe. I have not described the profession in each country nor each particular media or their political or economic systems. There are enough studies, including the ones mentioned above, which presented these types of data. Repeating existing

¹ The project website: <http://worldsofjournalism.org/>.

information is superfluous. In this sense, I would like to mention that the descriptive statistics findings of this analysis will be underrepresented, although there are plenty of passages that refer to the study results. It is rather an analysis than a review of some findings of the journalistic profession in this region. The analysis should be read with some reluctance, because it does not refer to all states in the region, given the reduced number of them in this study.

METHODOLOGY

The Worlds of Journalism Study (2012–2017) relied on a common methodology adopted by each of the 67 countries participating in this research project. An extensive questionnaire with over 30 questions generated responses from more than 27,500 selected journalists. The questionnaire was conducted face to face, by phone, and online. The original questionnaire written in English was translated into the national languages and was conducted with a representative number of journalists from national, regional, and local offline and online media, who had been selected proportionally to the total number of registered journalists in each country. However, the results of this study cannot be generalized to the entire population of journalists in the analyzed countries, because only certain (the most important) media were part of the media samples. It is very important to mention that the methodological demands imposed on this project have minimized any discussion of the lack of reliability of the samples. If there were serious sampling errors, the results would be excluded from this study. For this reason, I consider the results presented below to be representative of the selected media.

For this research project the term “journalist” was defined ‘classically’ as media professionals, who select, write, edit, present, schedule, negotiate journalistic content, and participate in editorial coordination and management. He/she earns most of his/her income (at least 50%) from journalism. Moreover, he/she works in newsrooms of national, regional, or local newspapers, radio stations, television channels, online media, and news agencies. In this project only legally registered media institutions with newsrooms and news programs have been considered.

Regarding the questionnaire, it could include additional questions to those originally imposed. Every country had the freedom to identify both the surveyed media and the number of respondents. However, the sample size was not random. It respected the proportion rules initially identified in a field manual accepted by all project members. It must be mentioned that the sample unrepresentativeness was one of the criteria for rejection of some national findings. This study relied heavily on competent investigators and their good faith in drafting the countries’ databases. Each of the 67 countries drafted a national database (in a required SPSS template) in which the respondents’ answers were individually coded. It should be noted that this article does not claim to review a field of study such as the professional culture of journalists, nor to use meta-analysis as a quantitative analysis technique for the obtained findings.

This article presents in a comparative manner the quantitative results of the Worlds of Journalists study without generalizing or creating common patterns. It would not only be a difficult but also impossible task because of obvious contextual differences.

For this article, I chose to present the comparative findings of research conducted in Central and Eastern Europe with the participation of over 3,000 journalists from tens of national, regional, and local media. Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Moldova, Romania, and Russia were the eight countries analyzed in this paper. The questionnaires were conducted between 2012 and 2017. The oldest data are from Estonia (2012) and the most recent from Bulgaria, which completed the country research in January 2017. For comparative analysis, I have used the national databases and the country reports written within the project by each national team.² These data should be carefully analyzed and contextualized to the periods in which each team conducted the study.

This study started from some general research questions that attempted to assess and transform the existing notion of journalistic culture into a universal concept. The main question was whether journalistic cultures could be deconstructed in empirically measurable terms and if their functionality could be evaluated across cultural borders. The main goal of this research was “to map journalistic cultures onto a grid of common dimensions and explore their variation across nations, various types of news organizations and different professional milieus” (www.worldsofjournalism.org). From this general approach, I chose for this article only the general characteristics (age, gender, education, position in the newsroom, work experience, religious and political views) relating to this profession in Central and Eastern Europe. My assumption was that contextual differences are so significant that it is almost impossible to outline a common socio-demographic portrait of the journalists in this region.

AGE, GENDER AND EDUCATION

Although a significant number of the total respondents were elderly people, the average age did not exceed 35–40 years. In Moldova and Romania, the average age of all journalists was no more than 30 years old, in comparison with Estonia where their average age was 40. This means that the profession is quite young and, as Table 1 shows, dominated by women.

Only in the Czech Republic and Hungary the number of women journalists was surpassed by men journalists. In other countries, the percentage of women outnumbered the men and the numerical difference between the two sexes increases with age. In comparison, Latvia had the highest percentage (72.4%) of women in newsrooms and the Czech Republic had the lowest number (43.3%) of women journalists. As some country reports argue, the age and gender differences occurred in the late 1980s

² All country reports can be found under the following link: <http://worldsofjournalism.org/103/>.

and early 1990s, when “the generation gap caused by societal changes [the change of political regimes]” was recorded.³ Until then, the profession was strongly dominated by men in their mid-forties with dozen of years of professional experience.

These changes indicate a greater or a lesser (depending on the country) de-professionalization of journalists. The increasing numbers of young, inexperienced journalists led to a transformation of the profession into a trade. Usually, the process must be reversed, a profession arises when any trade or occupation transforms, but in this case skills have become more important than knowledge. This is even more visible with the main technological challenges that all Central and Eastern European media markets faced in recent decades, which favored the emergence of “desk journalism”, “google journalism” and “copy-paste journalism”. Ethics in the profession became an option and not a norm, and malpractice cases are more frequent. The growing number of women journalists seems to be a change that significantly boosted the profession’s development. However, their great number does not necessarily indicate their active participation in organizational leadership. Their presence in administrative staff has increased, but it seems more an exception than a rule. Only in Estonia and Latvia do women hold equal or more top executive positions. In other countries women occupied mostly the positions of reporter and news writer.

Table 1. Age and gender of journalists in selected CEE countries

Country	Age (years)		Female		Male	
	Youngest	Oldest	N	%	N	%
Bulgaria	21	66	170	64.6	93	35.4
The Czech Republic	20	71	126	43.3	165	56.7
Estonia	19	71	160	58.4	114	41.6
Hungary	20	65	181	47.5	200	52.5
Latvia	20	67	246	72.4	94	27.6
Moldova	20	65	134	60.6	87	39.4
Romania	19	77	213	62.5	128	37.5
Russia	18	75	248	64.6	136	35.4

Source: Data retrieved from the Worlds of Journalism Study.

According to this study, most journalists held a bachelor’s and master’s degree. The most highly-educated journalists were from Bulgaria, Russia, and Estonia. Compared to other countries, over 50% of them (in the case of Bulgaria — 71%) completed a master’s degree and a significant number had doctoral studies (Table 2). For example, 9% of the total of 390 Russian respondents finished a Ph.D. The

³ Němcová Tejkalová and Láb (2016). *Journalists in the Czech Republic*. Report retrieved January 31, 2017 from https://epub.ub.uni-muenchen.de/29704/1/Country_report_Czech_Republic.pdf.

number of those who studied journalism and communication is also very high. The percentage varies (from 80% in Romania to 53% in Croatia), but most of them had a solid educational background in these fields.

Table 2. Education level of journalists in selected CEE countries

Country	Not completed high school		Completed high school		College/B.A. degree		M.A. degree		Doctorate		Some university studies; no degree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Bulgaria	0	0.0	2	0.8	54	20.5	187	71.1	13	4.9	7	2.7
The Czech Republic	0	0.0	69	24.0	66	22.9	119	41.3	10	3.5	24	8.3
Estonia	1	0.4	21	7.7	74	27.1	148	54.2	1	0.4	28	10.3
Hungary	3	0.9	60	17.5	181	52.8	67	19.5	8	2.3	24	7.0
Latvia	3	0.9	14	4.2	138	41.2	127	37.9	4	1.2	49	14.6
Moldova	5	2.3	20	9.0	121	54.8	58	26.2	1	0.5	16	7.2
Romania	2	0.6	64	18.8	142	41.6	91	26.7	8	2.3	34	10.0
Russia	3	0.8	4	1.0	62	15.9	223	57.2	36	9.2	62	15.9

Source: Data retrieved from the Worlds of Journalism Study.

The high number of university degrees in journalism is spectacular when compared to the first years these countries began their transition toward a process of democratization. The social realm changes had major effects on journalism education that had managed to promote Western ways of practicing journalism. The impact of these changes are currently visible throughout almost all the countries. In the last five years, a large majority of journalists still considered Western rules of practicing journalism as reference points that affected their work.

WORK POSITION AND EXPERIENCE

The democratization processes led to changes in the media market and to a significant restructuring of newsrooms in each investigated country. The old editorial management systems no longer worked for national media organizations. However, it should be noted that the transformation of old newsrooms into new more dynamic, adaptable, influenced by media market demands management structures was not exclusively conditioned by socio-political changes in these countries, but

also by opportunities offered by the online environment. For some CEE countries, the transition to online went more slowly than in others. This fact was visible in the pilot study of the Worlds of Journalism project developed between 2007 and 2011 in comparison with current research. For example, in 2007, most Romanian newsrooms were organized classically (with hierarchies, different level of responsibilities, specialized departments, etc.) and, at that moment, to find five journalists (the study's required standard) from each sampled newsroom posed no difficulty. In the current study, I keep referring to the situation of the Romanian sample, as there were quite a few situations (especially in some regional and local media) in which there were very few journalists with work contracts. Many newsrooms preferred trainees or contributors (who in some cases cannot be categorized as journalists) because they are cheaper. In addition, some specializations, very popular in the past, disappeared from the editorial organization chart. Referring to the results of this study, Table 3 shows a distribution of journalistic positions in newsrooms of eight CEE investigated countries. Thus, it can be noticed that in Hungarian and Romanian newsrooms were found many trainees, which far exceeded the average of other countries. At the opposite end is Latvia, where their number was zero. Moreover, the desk head position has become increasingly unpopular. Its coordinating activities have been transhipped to other positions, such as senior editors/editors and — in some cases — even to reporters.

Table 3. Work position of journalists in selected CEE countries (% of respondents)

Country	Editor-in-chief	Managing editor	Desk head /assignment editor	Department head	Senior editor	Producer	Reporter	News writer	Trainee	Other
Bulgaria	15.2	4.9	6.8	5.3	23.6	2.7	26.2	4.2	0.8	10.3
The Czech Republic	12.0	7.2	7.2	9.6	5.5	0.7	38.8	12.7	1.0	5.2
Estonia	14.6	7.3	0.0	4.0	10.2	2.9	22.3	35.4	0.4	2.9
Hungary	9.0	3.9	6.2	3.4	5.2	11.9	13.7	20.1	18.6	8.2
Latvia	11.2	8.8	1.8	12.9	4.4	3.5	8.5	36.8	0.0	12.1
Moldova	4.1	11.8	3.2	4.1	5.0	1.4	41.6	7.7	5.0	16.3
Romania	9.7	12.6	3.8	1.2	11.7	5.3	41.1	2.1	11.7	0.9
Russia	11.8	12.1	3.8	10.3	6.9	6.4	34.4	9.0	2.3	3.1

Source: Data retrieved from the Worlds of Journalism Study.

The professional experience of interviewed journalists shows that they did not plan their careers around a prospective retirement age, spending only a limited period of time in this profession and alternating this activity with other additional short-term opportunities. In Romania, Moldova, and Hungary an average career length did not exceed 10 years, only in Bulgaria was the average 19 years (Table 4). However, there were a limited number of people (only a few dozen in the sample of 3,000 respondents from this study) who entered retirement from this job. They represented the old generation of journalists who have managed to reform themselves at the same time with the media system and to adapt to new working practices. Many of them hold administrative positions in newsrooms. In contrast, after graduation, some young journalists do not like to pursue a career in this field. They use their short-term practice in journalism to reconvert to other activities, usually tangential to this profession, which are more conducive to later retirement. Among their preferences are PR, advertising, communication activities in various public and private companies or even politics. There are many cases when top-level journalists have become politicians.

Table 4. Years of professional experience in journalism in selected CEE countries

Country	Mean (years)
Bulgaria	19
The Czech Republic	11
Estonia	14
Hungary	9
Latvia	16
Moldova	8
Romania	8
Russia	11

Source: Data retrieved from the Worlds of Journalism Study.

RELIGION AND POLITICAL VIEWS

The political and religious preferences are a sensitive subject for this profession. In theory, journalistic objectivity should not be affected by preferences of any kind, but in practice everything is country-oriented. As I argued in an article about religious influences in journalism “in the secular countries the journalists’ discourse is more oriented towards the non-religious overview rather than in theocratic countries where journalists have promoted a very morality-centered speech” (Vasilendiuc, 2012, p. 183). In our case, all nine countries are Christian nations with moderate religious positions and values. The religious representations of their journalists

depend on the social role of the Church and their religious leaders in each country. Certainly, these representations change over time and could also change the media image and the public trust in this institution. At least in recent years, during this study, the journalists showed a moderate interest towards this subject. A significant number of respondents, mainly from Russia and Moldova considered religion ‘extremely’ and ‘very important’ for them (Table 5). In contrast, Latvia and the Czech Republic were on the opposite side with a large percentage of irreligious, nonreligious, a-religious or even anti-religious journalists. This data can be correlated with the journalists’ answers to the question about their trust in various social and political institutions and organizations.⁴ Summarizing, the religious leaders occupied the lowest positions of trust throughout countries. However, Czech journalists showed the greatest degree of mistrust of religious leaders, compared to Moldova, for example, where the degree of confidence is higher.

Table 5. Importance of religion as seen by journalists in selected CEE countries

Country	Extremely important		Very important		Somewhat important		Little important		Unimportant	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Bulgaria	20	7.6	31	11.8	91	34.6	60	22.8	61	23.2
The Czech Republic	11	4.1	21	7.7	49	18.1	83	30.6	107	39.5
Estonia ⁵	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hungary	34	10.9	17	5.5	89	28.6	108	34.7	63	20.3
Latvia	18	6.0	25	8.3	49	16.2	91	30.1	119	39.4
Moldova	26	11.8	40	18.2	56	25.5	52	23.6	46	20.9
Romania	23	6.8	45	13.3	97	28.6	78	23.0	96	28.3
Russia	45	11.5	71	18.2	101	25.9	81	20.8	92	23.6

Source: Data retrieved from the Worlds of Journalism Study.

The number of specialized journalists decreases with each year because of the development of new media technology and practices. Under the new circumstances, multitasking became a must-have that contributed to the blurring of the boundaries of specialized journalism. Journalists move from one platform to another and from one field to another without the necessary expertise and education. Consequently, throughout their career journalists arrive to address almost all topics, and politics is no exception. In this study, the sampled journalists were more generalists rather than specialized (see the previous section) and politics was among their usual subjects to address. Their political preferences (as shown in Table 6) were closer to

⁴ See the chapter “Journalistic Trust” from the country reports.

⁵ Missing data.

the center than leans to the right or the left of the political spectrum. This kind of unclarity in political options came over time because of the confusion of political parties in defining their ideology. However, in some cases (of deeply instrumentalized media systems, such as Moldova) journalists are involved in political polarization of society and often represent the bullhorn of various outside actors. Despite the ethical rules that force them to be balanced (most countries have at least one journalist code of ethics), these journalists support or oppose some political ideas imposed on them by their personal and working environments.

Table 6. Political preferences of journalists in selected CEE countries

Country	Left (%)				Center (%)	Right (%)				
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Bulgaria	8.3	1.2	2.4	10.6	24.0	9.4	13.8	14.2	5.1	11.0
The Czech Republic	2.4	1.2	2.0	11.4	29.4	14.9	19.6	11.0	3.9	4.3
Estonia	0.0	3.0	7.9	16.8	18.8	14.4	20.8	10.4	5.9	2.0
Hungary	4.3	4.3	9.4	14.4	30.9	8.6	10.8	8.6	2.2	6.5
Latvia	2.6	0.0	3.6	11.8	39.7	11.5	14.8	10.8	3.3	2.0
Moldova	1.7	1.1	2.8	5.1	36.0	8.4	15.7	14.6	5.1	9.6
Romania	0.9	0.6	6.9	6.6	31.3	15.9	13.1	14.4	5.3	5.0
Russia	1.5	2.8	15.2	12.1	46.1	9.0	8.5	2.1	1.3	1.3

Question: In political matters, people talk of “the left”, “the right”, and the “center”. On a scale where 0 is left, 10 is right, and 5 is center, where would you place yourself? Source: Data retrieved from the Worlds of Journalism Study.

However, the religious and political preferences of journalists in some countries should be analyzed contextually. Supporting ideas of unbiased, objective, and apolitical thinking is untenable in some countries, especially where considerable political abuses occur. Writing objectively about certain events is almost impossible, given the number of cases in which certain societal systems do not work.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on these quite limited data, describing the profession of journalist in terms of black and white (important-unimportant, left-right, trust-mistrust etc.), one can still identify certain common peculiarities which can form a region overview. This study was based on the principles of the Western journalism model, which, although adopted in theory by all these countries, is basically more or less practiced. Even though most investigated countries accepted, at least at a discursive level, in this model a few outliers can be find among them, like Moldova or Russia. Their professional model is different from the post-communist sampled EU

member states; although in theory it seems fairly suitable. Most likely, the difference between them is caused by an imbalanced relationship between media and politics, far different from what happens in EU states. In both countries, although so different in many ways, political polarization became an openly practiced editorial policy. Political instrumentalization is a common practice also in other states (such as Romania or Hungary), but their influence is to some extent limited by EU media policies, in consequence any direct form of instrumentalization is viewed as an attack on the rule of law. In the case of Moldova and Russia, the political actors form the rule of law by themselves. Thus, having almost the same start time in developing democracy, these eight investigated nations have journeyed differently. The media and journalism development in these countries depended exclusively on their social-political route. Considering these contextual differences about two different categories of countries in the same region, I would propose studying the journalistic profession at the international/global level exclusively through qualitative methods to avoid inappropriate generalizations.

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