

## Социологические науки

УДК 316.776.23

*Данилова К.М.,  
студентка 2 курса магистратуры факультета социологии  
Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет,  
Россия, Санкт-Петербург*

### **Политический контроль над массовыми коммуникациями в современных европейских демократиях**

### **Political control over mass communication in contemporary European democracies**

#### **Аннотация**

Данная статья посвящена теме усиления политического контроля в отношении средств массовой информации в Европе. Информационное поле наполнено вводящими в заблуждение новостями, поэтому даже при демократических режимах имеет место быть политическое вмешательство со стороны властей европейских государств. Последствия политического контроля, вмешательства и регуляции имеют различные сценарии. Для анализа политического контроля над средствами массовой коммуникации в Европе используется данные Глобального рейтинга права на информацию и Всемирный индекс свободы прессы.

**Ключевые слова:** политический контроль, массовая коммуникация, СМИ, европейские демократии

#### **Annotation**

This article is devoted to the topic of strengthening political control over the media in Europe. The information field is filled with misleading news, therefore, even under democratic regimes, there is a place for political interference by the authorities of European states. The consequences of political control, intervention and regulation have different scenarios. To analyze political control of the media in Europe, data from the Global Right to Information Rating and the World Press Freedom Index are used.

**Key words:** political control, mass communication, media, European democracies

This article is devoted to the topic of increasing political control by the state and political authorities to relate the mass media in Europe under a democratic regime. In the realities of our time, this topic is important, since the information field is filled with misleading information and political propaganda.

The social role of mass communications is multifaceted. If we talk about Europe, then the states are trying to provide the media with the opportunity to express their thoughts with minimal political control, which is legitimately confirmed by juristic documents as Article 11 of the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights: *“right to freedom of expression... include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers”* [12, 12]. Another example of a juristic document is the European Convention on Human Rights, which states *“Everyone has the right to freedom of expression”* [12, 12].

At the same time, the European Federation of Journalists is trying to contribute to the creation of independent media, citing various arguments for the existing political interference by the authorities, which negatively affects the quality of the information provided and discredits news agencies and journalists in particular. The existence of the project “Building Independent media to counter political interference” confirms the existence of political control [11].

The consequences of political control and state interference have different scenarios - on the one hand, society is splitting into parts, which is called polarization, and on the other hand, it is the acceleration of processes associated with the creation of independent media. If we rely on statistics based on the Worldwide Press Freedom Index (a set of assessments of qualitative and quantitative research by experts in this field) [17], Europe has good indicators of freedom in the information field with minimal control of the media. However, according to the Global Right to Information Rating Map, Europe has low rates of information rights [13].

It can be assumed that due to the political situation in the world, European states can strengthen political control, but it is unlikely that the degree of this strengthening will be extremely strong. Still, the information field is filled with fake information, so censorship and countermeasures of political propaganda are possible.

#### *The social role of mass communication*

Researchers of modern society must take into account the influence of mass communication. P. Lazarsfeld and R. Merton argued that the social role of mass media, which is attributed to them only due to the fact of existence, is often exaggerated [8]. In other words, the presence of mass media in society does not have such a strong impact on it, as is often assumed. Still, mass media perform a number of important social functions [8]:

1. *The status-conferral function.* Mass media assign status to social problems, individuals, organizations and social movements, that is, they confirm this social status as significant and important. The status assignment function enters into the structures of organized social action through the legitimization of certain policies, individuals and groups that receive support from the mass media;
2. *The enforcement of social norms and impact upon popular taste.* Mass media are characterized by the concept of power. They can show what is different from socially accepted norms. In the conditions of modern mass society, the function of public attention is institutionalized in the activities of the mass media. The media covers something that deviates from the norm and people either accept it or not. A person's attitude to an event can change due to media coverage, even if before that a person was neutral about it and knew about the existence of this series of social actions. The media use the mechanism of "white and black" and these different positions collide with each other.
3. *The narcotizing dysfunction.* An example of this function is the political isolation of a person and lacking manifestation of his/her social action. Through various channels of communication, a person receives information, immerses himself/herself in this topic, argues, but this is a replacement for his/her "real" social action. A person ceases to notice that he/she is cut off from reality, where he/she can directly influence events. The media raises the awareness of the population, but at the same time prevents them from the manifestation of social actions, transforming active actions into passive actions.
4. *The structure of ownership and operation and social conformism.* Some media may be state-owned. It will be easier for the state to broadcast its position through such media outlets. Mass communications can support the existing social, economic and political systems. The degree of influence of the media on society is characterized by the choice of news. Sometimes what is important is not what was written about, but what was not written about, i.e., silenced. In this way, the state can minimize the manifestation of critical sentiments in society through the media, preventing the development of critical thinking and/or grassroots protest.

In the context of nowadays, it is important to mention digitalization. Modern processes of social communications are becoming increasingly important in the processes of globalization and integration of the media into a single virtual system [2]. The main factor of digitalization, which has a significant impact on journalism, is the Internet with its ability to quickly distribute content and consume content using various devices. Social networks and instant messengers speed up the receipt of information. As a result, some person or group of persons can influence the political and economic life of society, changing and transforming public opinion.

New media is a new format for the existence of mass media that is constantly available on digital devices and implies the active participation of users in the

creation and distribution of content [6]. The communicative function of new media is the main function. New media cannot be equated with traditional media, since they are independent products distinguished by multimedia, interactivity and receiving online feedback from the audience. New media are the main source of information about the reality around us. The speed of message transmission creates a single media space that broadcasts contemporary issues, general trends and ideas. It becomes more difficult for the state to control the media and their audience on the Internet. Government uses measures to counter some media: blocking of websites and public communities, political persecution by law, deprivation of a license and rights to engage in information activities and etc.

Media communications are involved circulation of symbols in social life. [10]. Society becomes dependent on the media. The process of mediatization is characterized as a process in which society is saturated with the media to such an extent that the media merge with other social institutions [4]. This process is so long. Social and cultural institutions and modes of communication are changing due to the increasing influence of the media.

#### *Trend of increasing political interference in the media*

One confirmation of political control in Europe in relation to the media is the fact of the creation of independent media in opposition to political interference. Journalists and media outlets are targeted in a kaleidoscopic array by political leaders, businesses and the general public [11]. According to the special project “Building Independent media to counter political interference” in the article on official resource of European Federation of Journalists, the report by the Index on Censorship reveals a trend towards increased political interference.

There are three forms of political interference into the performance of media by political authorities:

The first form of interference is direct intervention. Political figures influence the editors of publications or journalists who prepared specific material and pursue the goals of avoiding situations in which information would damage their social status, so that their image is accepted positively by the public. Intervention methods can be both quite subtle (behind-the-scenes phone calls to editors) and overt (preventing a journalist affiliated with particular outlets from attending a press conference) [11].

The second form of interference is discrediting mass media or a certain journalist [11]. The purpose of such actions is to influence the public. People will doubt about the veracity of reporting and thus will not be able to trust the news provided by corresponding mass media.

The third form of interference comes from legislative laws and acts aimed at counter-terrorism legislation and maintaining national security. This well-intentioned legislation is designed to protect state institutions and citizens. However, there is also space for negative-intentioned legislation designed to prevent the dissemination of certain information in society. In some cases, journalists have been

targeted for prosecution for publishing embarrassing information that, as governments asserted, was not meant for public discussion [11].

Mass media are able to set the agenda in relation not only to a set of events taking place at one time or another, but also to each specific event or character. At the same time, the mass media rank events according to the degree of significance [5]. Agenda-setting theory says that those who control the information field decide what should be communicated to the public. Accordingly, if the state controls the media, then the only and dominant point of view on events will remain - the discourse of the state.

In the process of implementing the agenda, a high level of correspondence is formed between the attention paid to the media problem and the importance attributed to this problem by the public receiving information about it from the news media.

#### *Media freedom and pluralism*

The commitment of the European Union is respect for the freedom and pluralism of mass media. It means supporting the freedom of expression, which includes the right to receive and impart information without interference from political authorities. Independence of mass media is enshrined in Article 11 of the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights, which mirrors Article 10 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms [15].

However, it should be noted that although "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression", but governmental control for the mass media is not prohibited: broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises need some license. This is an aspect of state control over the media. In the same article 11, it is written that "*The exercise of these freedoms ... may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society ...*" [12, 12]. In other words, the state can intervene in the activities of journalists and news agencies if the discourses threaten "*national security, territorial integrity or public safety*" [12, 12]. The reasons are: (1) to prevent disorder and crime, (2) to protect health, morals and reputation, and (3) to prevent the dissemination of confidential information. "The dark side of the moon" in this paragraph is expressed in the conclusion that we can call this paragraph as a way to justify government intervention. These reasons give flexibility in interpretations. If "the truth", provided by the media, would be in solidarity with government policy, this paragraph will be a justification for political interference.

It is appropriate to mention the right to information when the discussion turns to freedom of the media and pluralism. The global RTI Rating measures the strength of the legal framework for the right to access information held by public authorities, based on 61 discrete indicators [13]. Global Right to Information Rating consist of 7 main categories: Right of Access, Scope, Requesting Procedure, Exceptions and Refusals, Appeals, Sanctions and Protections, and Promotional Measures [13]. The scale includes five sections: burgundy (0-50 points), red (51-75 points), yellow (76-



100 points), light green (101-125 points) and green (126-150 points). Global RTI Rating Map shows that the leading European countries such as Germany, France, Spain and etc. have low scores (51-75 points). Averages (76-100) for the UK, Italy, Poland, the Netherlands, etc. High scores (101-125) are in Sweden and Finland. The data characterizes a particular feature of a strong legal regime for right to information: the availability of information, the openness of government data and the censorship. Freedom of information ends where freedom of the state begins.

#### *Worldwide Press Freedom Index: modern realities and polarizations*

Worldwide Press Freedom is a classification of 180 countries based on press freedom scores. This index is published by the international non-governmental organization “Reporters Without Borders”. Each country score is evaluated using five indicators that reflect the press freedom situation in all of its complexity: political context, legal framework, economic context, sociocultural context and safety [17]. The indicators are based on a quantitative study of abuses against journalists and the media. “Reporters Without Borders” also conduct a qualitative study that contains the answers of many experts on freedom of the press (for example, journalists, academics and human rights activists).

In 2022, this index is especially on the agenda, because the information space is characterized by false information and political propaganda. Information chaos in democratic societies is expressed by false channels of information and increased tension. Polarity at the international level is expressed in despotic and democratic regimes [17]. On the one hand, there are states that have tight control over the media and their information platforms, on which the state position is broadcast, and on the other hand, there are states with more liberal approaches to the mass media. However, despotic regimes influence the work of the media in democratic regimes. “Predisposition to polarization” means that people need to develop public policy, technical systems, and norms that channel human conversation [7].

According to statistics, the Worldwide Press Freedom Index identified the leading countries in which journalists feel most free: Norway, Denmark and Sweden. In general, all European countries receive evaluations between “good” (85-100 points) and “satisfactory” (70-85 points). The category “problematic” (55-70 points) includes some countries of Eastern Europe - Poland, Romania and Slovakia, and the country of the Southern Europe - Italy. No European countries are not included in the categories “difficult” (40-55 points) and “very serious” (0-40 points). Thus, the index shows that in Europe the mass media and journalists are mostly free to express their position and have the right to disseminate information with a low level of political control and interference from the state.

#### *Consequences of political control and governmental interference*

Independent media promote freedom of speech and civil liberty. In this matter, when we speak about Europe, attention should be paid to the countries of Eastern

Europe, such as Austria, Estonia, Macedonia, etc., the South of Europe – Italy and Spain, North of Europe - United Kingdom [11].

The consequences of political intervention can have different scenarios. Primally, this is the polarization of European societies. An example of the polarization of societies is the migration crisis, which was covered by the European media [11]. During that period, the highest concentration of fake news was noticeable, which misinformed the Europeans. Political manipulation affected the quality of information.

However, pressure breeds opposition. In the conditions of political manipulations, independent mass media, whose position often diverges from the state point of view, appeared and are appearing. A large number of independent media as a united community can help to make this side more visible and valuable. In the context of globalization, independent media are already a community, that is free of influence by government position. Most often, independent media are news media, and different discourses allow the audience to receive information from different points of view.

Political control can be expressed in the fact that the state does not fund independent journalists and media, choosing to fund media outlets that advance the government's agenda and the interests of its allies and supporters, whether political groups or businesses [1]. The government directly and indirectly uses funding to take over the media.

#### *Media in Sweden*

Political parallelism is a characteristic of the media system of the state, reflecting the propensity for a certain political position [3]. Depending on the proximity of the mass media to the political spectrum, three models are distinguished: the liberal model, the democratic-corporate model, and the polarized pluralistic model [3].

Before the development of social networks in the Scandinavian countries, including Sweden, there were trends towards a liberal model [9]. This means less "political parallelism" of the press, which reduces the development of the media market. The liberal model gives freedom to the media. Media pluralism and the possibility of open information to the people are essential to Swedish democracy.

The national dailies were influence of political parties. However, the situation has changed and political parties practically do not influence newspapers in Northern Europe [9]. According to the Worldwide Press Freedom Index, Sweden ranks third on the list (category "good") [17]. This shows that journalists feel free and the media are allowed to speak what they want without government pressure and interference. On Global Right to Information Rating Map, Sweden has a high score (101 points, light green section) [13]. This shows the openness and accessibility of government information to citizens and the media.

At the same time, the indicator Political control over the media outlets scores low risk in Sweden [16]. Media systems can be self-regulating, so political

intervention will not be required. Journalists and their professional associations have been more involved in building effective self-regulation [14]. Swedish mass media are self-regulatory. That is why there is media pluralism and minimal state control in Sweden.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, I would like to say that if we talk about strengthening control over the media in Europe, control will increase, because in general there is a tendency to weaken regulation of the media, but nevertheless, in my opinion, there will not be a strong degree of strengthening. In European countries, journalists and news agencies have the opportunity to express their position in more liberal form than in countries of other regions. Through some measures such as projects of creating and developing independent media, press freedom research based on the Worldwide Press Freedom Index, the rule of law and legislative support, expressed in the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the European media will not be bound by strong and even excessive political control. However, increasing of political control over mass communication in contemporary European democracies is still possible, because there are prerequisites in the information field, which is mired in chaos and disinformation.

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