

# Virtual Theme Collection: Representation of Eastern Europe in Media Studies

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In the decades since the transition(s) of the early 1990s, many efforts have been made to establish and strengthen the disciplinary stability of communication and media studies in the countries of Eastern Europe. Universities, institutes, research groups, and scientific journals have been launched, and international cooperation networks have been established, but the contribution gap between developing countries and the West has not narrowed at all. As Harro-Loit (2015) points out, the West was not open to autonomous Eastern studies from Eastern European (EE) scholars. Instead, the West's interest was limited to the East as a subject for Western analyses. Comparative studies of post-communist institutional transitions, press regulation, or press rights have been published, but mostly from Western scholars.

As far as the current state of the discipline is concerned, the countries of the EE region are still considered to be consolidating countries in terms of both their academic embeddedness and their training and research programs, while the region's scientific contributions are still lagging behind. Contemporary research (Perusko, 2015; Stetka, 2015) shows that there are huge differences in the scientific output of Western and Eastern Europe. Most communication journals in the region are published in local languages and are not indexed in major databases. EE communication journals are generally less focused than their American counterparts, as the differentiation between disciplines as political science, sociology, and communication studies is not as clear as in the United States. The authors came from very different disciplines and only a few of them have an educational background in communication. Maybe because of the still developing professional status of the media in general, and of public media in particular, communication research in most EE countries prefers to analyze the relation of media and politics, thus the thematic diversity of EE journals is generally narrower than their Western counterparts. According to the estimate of Demeter (2018), there are at least 150 communication journals in Eastern Europe which are published mostly in local languages, hence at least 95% of the scientific output of the region remains completely invisible to the international scientific community. To gain international visibility, EE scholars need to publish in Journal Citation Report-ranked international journals. Although the editors of these journals are open to articles from the region, they still put priority in maintaining the highest standards of quality (Ang et al., 2019).

In this virtual thematic collection, we show that research on Eastern Europe by EE authors can appear in prestigious international journals such as *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*. Among the authors of the five articles presented

here, only one studied in the EE region and continues to work there. The author, Márton Bene, is a Hungarian researcher of the new generation of communication scholars. His work shows an excellent grasp of international standards and academic English. Bene (2018) investigates how candidates' Facebook performance affects the personal vote they gained during the Hungarian general election campaign of 2014. The contribution of his research is internationally significant as he found that it is the average number of shares on candidates' Facebook pages, and not the number of likes and comments, that positively associated with electoral outcome, and we can assume that this phenomenon could be related to social media campaigns beyond the Hungarian context.

Camaj (2016) analyzes the relationship between the press and government in three young EE democracies: Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro, using a mixed-method analysis combining in-depth interviews of journalists and document analysis. She earned her PhD in the United States and is a faculty at the University of Houston. Prior to her academic career, she worked in Eastern Europe as a journalist. Her article's main contribution is that it clearly shows that, in contrast to our normative expectations, different mechanisms make the freedom of information laws ineffective in improving journalists' access to information and render them into ammunition for political control.

Dimitrova and Kostadinova (2013) analyze campaign news in Bulgarian newspapers. Both authors originally were from Bulgaria and educated in the United States. In their longitudinal analysis, the authors investigated the use of the strategic game frame and the relationship between that frame and system-level and organizational-level factors. Their findings indicate that the Bulgarian public was exposed to media coverage that focused on winners versus losers rather than substantive discussion of political issues. Their contribution has international implications as they discuss the findings in relation to framing research in Western Europe and the United States.

Ivanka Pjesivac (2017), who received her BA degree in Serbia, and has both her MS and PhD degrees from U.S. universities, analyzes the influences of cultural and performance factors on trust in news media in Serbia by a survey on a stratified random sample of the Serbian population. The paper focuses on a current topic of international interest, and the author is highly knowledgeable of the relevant literature of cultural and performance theories. Besides quantitative measures on the sample, the author conducted 20 in-depth interviews with a separate sample of the Serbian population to explore the meaning of the main variables of the quantitative analysis. Results show a high level of distrust toward Serbian news media, and Serbians also think that Western standards, necessary for trust in news media and other people to occur, such as fair selectivity of news, objectivity, neutrality, accuracy in reporting, or sincerity in helping other people, were not met in their country.

In the same way as Dimitrova and Kostadinova's (2013) paper, Slavtcheva-Petkova's (2015) article deals with Bulgaria, more specifically, the impact of online communication on the country's democratic potential. Receiving graduate degrees in

the United Kingdom, Slavtcheva-Petkova obtained her BA from the American University of Bulgaria and had journalist experience in Bulgaria. Her article analyzes quantitatively and qualitatively 1,583 comments by national newspapers' online readers in Bulgaria under the media war context between the biggest press groups.

The selection presented here shows that it is possible for authors with an EE background to publish in prestigious journals. It is the provision of solid qualitative or quantitative evidence with statistical support on a good topic of interest to global scholarly community that makes the accepted papers meeting the academic standards. However, our selection also highlights the semi-peripheral nature of the region. The authors, by presenting Western (usually American) literature and methodological rigor, embed themselves in an international context and an international discourse. The fact that most of them (with the exception of Márton Bene) were educated in the United States or the United Kingdom and socialized into the Anglo-American academic culture clearly demonstrates that the EE region is semi-peripheral in the world system of international knowledge production. It is hoped that the new waves of internationalization in the EE region will help those communication scholars who have trained and currently work in their home countries to excel in a competitive international field, to publish in elite journals. The example of Márton Bene, who, although he studied in his home country and is still working in Hungary, could publish in *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* proves that, while not easy, it is not impossible.

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**Articles in This Theme Collection (Full Access at the JMCQ Website With Subscription)**

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