

**Natalya Ryabinska. *Ukraine's Post-Communist Mass Media: Between Capture and Commercialization*.** Foreword by Marta Dyczok, *ibidem*-Verlag, 2017. Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society 162, edited by Andreas Umland. 186 pp. Tables. Bibliography. Name Index. Subject Index. €29.90, paper.

**T**he book *Ukraine's Post-Communist Mass Media: Between Capture and Commercialization* by Natalya Ryabinska is a valuable and long-awaited contribution to the study of contemporary Ukrainian media within the broader context of Ukraine's post-Communist transformations. While the significance of mass media in present-day societies is commonly acknowledged and studies of media and journalism are abundant across the world, Ukrainian media have largely been overlooked by academic research, with a few notable exceptions.<sup>1</sup>

Ryabinska's interest in the transformations of Ukrainian media is evidenced by the articles that she has published on related issues. And her interest has also resulted in this book, which systematically examines the trajectory of Ukrainian media development and suggests a productive theoretical framework for explaining how the Ukrainian media system became what it is today and why it underwent transformation.

The book has two major strengths. First, it provides a comprehensive overview of developments in the Ukrainian media landscape following the declaration of Ukraine's independence in 1991; particular emphasis is placed on the period from 1994 to 2013. The overview relies heavily on the analytic reports of both international and local media NGOs, but it has a crucial advantage over those reports. It is skilfully placed within the discussion of the broader context of the socio-political and economic transformations that shaped media development in Ukraine. Second, it presents an analysis of the Ukrainian media system and its pathway of transformations within a comparative theoretical context. The comparative perspective is largely missed in studies of the Ukrainian media; thus, this volume is a valuable

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Volodymyr Kulyk's work *Dyskurs ukrains'kykh medii: Identychnosti, ideolohii, vladni stosunky* (*The Ukrainian Media Discourse: Identities, Ideologies, Power Relations*); Marta Dyczok's articles "Was Kuchma's Censorship Effective? Mass Media in Ukraine before 2004" and "Do the Media Matter? Focus on Ukraine"; Joanna Szostek's articles "The Media Battles of Ukraine's EuroMaidan" and "Russia and the News Media in Ukraine: A Case of 'Soft Power'?" and Ryabinska's articles "The Media Market and Media Ownership in Post-Communist Ukraine: Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism" and "Media Capture in Post-Communist Ukraine: Actors, Methods, and Conditions."

contribution for researchers seeking a theoretical lens for the exploration of developments within the Ukrainian media landscape.

Ryabinska starts her own exploration of the Ukrainian media by drawing on concepts and theoretical instruments developed in comparative-politics and regime-change studies. She focuses on structural and institutional dimensions, arguing that an analysis of Ukrainian media system development requires a thorough examination of media-related structures and institutions rather than of cultural heritage, which is often used to explain failures in democratic transformations. The theoretical framework used in this study is explained in chapter 1 (23-54); there, the author places special emphasis on concepts such as *state capture*, which entails media capture, and *informal institutions*, which are typical in hybrid political regimes and include clientelism, patronage, rent-seeking, and so on. In the second part of this chapter, Ryabinska meticulously shows how in the case of Ukraine, these structures and institutions represent a subversive force that impedes the process of effective democratization. An institutional void, flawed and entangled legal regulations, and the supremacy of information institutions are critical factors that have been hindering Ukraine's post-Communist transformation, she concludes. Chapter 2 of the book (55-94) focuses on an analysis of the relationships between politics and media in Ukraine and the frameworks and institutions designed to regulate such relationships. Ryabinska draws a complex map of major media owners, actors, and networks and the relations between them. She also pays special attention to media content and the actual practices of newsrooms that reveal media capture in action. For example, she refers to the concept of *partisan polyvalence* (74-75), which describes the pattern of shifting loyalties among different political actors depending on economic support and general power shifts within a system. Chapter 3 (95-126) is dedicated to economic issues related to mass media. Ryabinska examines Ukraine's media market and argues that contrary to the popular belief that private ownership promotes media independence, the appropriation of media assets by large financial-industrial groups in Ukraine "was accompanied by a reduction of their autonomy and freedom" (111). She also discusses the market-driven tabloidization of content and formats that could be observed in Ukraine during the analyzed period. She notes that although tabloidization trends are global, developed democracies have already instituted certain instruments that restrain the effects of excessive commercialization while Ukraine dramatically lacks such institutions and tools. In the concluding chapter (127-36), Ryabinska summarizes her major arguments and highlights crucial obstacles to democratic transformations of the Ukrainian media system. Here, she argues that the post-Euromaidan media environment, despite having undergone certain positive changes, remains highly vulnerable to

existing hazards of neopatrimonialism and state capture, which can only be changed through effective institutional redesign.

The significance of the institutional dimension of the media system is hardly disputable, which is why this exploration of the Ukrainian case is a highly valuable contribution to the field of media studies. The book is an excellent starting point for the study of contemporary Ukrainian media. While the author is clear about her conceptual preferences and she acknowledges certain limitations inherent in them (with this, she defines both the scope and the angle of the book), some of those limitations and related gaps deserve to be noted. The theoretical framework that she employs concentrates on the relationships between media, politics, and the market, and this is well elaborated in the book. However, such a framework leaves the public, or the audience, largely out of the picture. How is the public engaged in the complex relationships examined by the author in transition countries like Ukraine, and what are the implications of such engagement? Addressing this question could enhance an analysis that focuses on the structural dimension. Some parts of the book could also benefit from insights into the cultural facet of informal practices. Although Ryabinska makes it clear that cultural legacies are mostly beyond the scope of the study, these legacies do offer a critical contextual layer for understanding practices that reveal deficient democratic transformations, like the discussed “*dzhyntsa*” (or “hidden advertising” [for the term, see, e.g., 80-81, 134]). Finally, the volume revolves around oligarch-driven media since they constitute the core of Ukraine’s media landscape and manifest a number of the structural flaws that are addressed in the book. While a handful of non-oligarchic media in Ukraine serve as exceptions that prove the rule, an analysis of their role in an oligarch-dominated environment could be informative for a comprehensive exploration of the relationships between politics, media, and the public in contemporary Ukraine. That said, the book offers an insightful analysis of Ukrainian media within a broader context of political transformations, and it will definitely become a crucial reference work for future studies of Ukraine’s media.

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