

Media effects in a transitional society: Setting the political agenda in the Kosovo elections of 2007



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ABSTRACT: This study suggests that during the 2007 campaign in Kosovo, political parties and mass media set the election agenda while disregarding the priorities of the public. However, neither media nor parties were able to set the public agenda independently. The results presented here empirically confirm recent claims that media and politics have achieved some balance in Eastern Europe, though mass media in this region still fail to represent society as a whole, reflecting the agendas of political elites alone. The present study stresses the symbiotic interrelation between media and party agendas during elections and that their influence on public agenda is at the highest when operating interactively.

KEYWORDS: agenda-setting, Kosovo elections, East European media, media effects, political communication



INTRODUCTION

Media scholarship in Eastern and Central Europe has mainly been concerned with evaluating if and to what degree media systems in these transitional societies have evolved to emulate their neighbors in the West. After two decades of media change, scholars acknowledge that the media systems that evolved in the post-communist transitions are a sort of hybrid systems that encompasses elements of the Western media laws and old Communist attitudes towards the role of the media in society (Jakubowicz, 2008; Jakubowicz & Sukosd, 2008; Splichal, 2001). However, the effects of such media systems on political processes have been largely neglected. In fact, most of what we know about media effects on democratic processes comes from the “self-absorption and parochialism” of Western media theory derived from a handful of Western countries (Curran & Park, 2000, p. 3).

The aim of this study is two-fold: to investigate media effects in a transitional society of South-Eastern Europe and to test agenda-setting theory in new waters. This paper simultaneously compares political party, news media, and public agendas during the 2007 electoral campaign in Kosovo. While controlling for the po-

litical parties' agendas, it investigates the potential of media to have an independent effect on the audience agenda. The second part of this study explores more closely the direction of influence between the media and political parties' agendas.

Agenda-setting studies offer significant support to the claim that the mass media have the power to tell us "what to think about," and lately mounting evidence is supporting the notion that media can also tell us "how to think about it" (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). The role of the news media in shaping political agendas in young democracies is still unclear, however. The scarce agenda-setting evidence from developing countries has concentrated mainly on public agenda-setting, naively disregarding other factors that might shape media and public agendas. According to Lang and Lang (1983), the process of agenda-building is a "collective process, in which, media, government, and the citizenry reciprocally influence each other in at least some respect" (Lang & Lang, 1983, pp. 58–59). During the electoral campaigns, the relationship between candidates and the media resembles a chess game "in which each side vies for control" (Behr & Iyengar, 1993, p. 235).

MEDIA TRANSFORMATION IN EASTERN EUROPE

The scholarship on media development in Eastern and Central Europe (ECE) falls into two major categories that follow the pattern of two waves of media reform. The pessimistic literature of the first wave predicted the implementation of a media system that was nothing more than a modified continuation of media dependency inherited from the past legacies. According to Splichal (1994), post-socialist ECE countries establish paternalistic-commercial media systems based on a highly regulated broadcasting sector and an unregulated print, which favored the interests of the elites in power and enabled them to transmit their ideas to the people.

The early empirical studies of media transition in ECE offered strong evidence to support the theories emphasizing continuity of media control. The transformation of the post-communist media was hindered by two main factors: a volatile and often hostile political atmosphere and an unstable economic climate (Mills, 1999). Media in post-communist countries were not able to participate in the formation of the public sphere due to the inhibitions that came from the state, which aimed to maintain close media control for political benefits, and drew back from the market-driven media entrepreneurs whose objective was economic rather than civic (Chalaby, 1998). Since media in ECE countries continued to be in hands of the elite groups, they did not offer access and representation to the society as a whole, but rather only to the political class (Jakubowicz, 1994).

The scholarship on the second wave of media reform in ECE challenged pessimistic predictions of the early theories. Gross (2003) claims that the strong control of political elites over the mass media was cut due to the growth of the institutions with which the media interacted and that led to a nebulous media/state relationship.

Gulyas (2003) found that the print media in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland became largely pluralistic taking up democratic functions while operating in a market-led system. Gross (2002) suggested that in Romania pluralism and autonomization of the media created an atmosphere where “ordinary citizens are the beneficiaries of the new post-communist media not only the politicians” (p. 274). Mass media in Poland, claimed Jakubowicz (1996), “do satisfy the right to information, and to some extent, knowledge, and do serve as a forum or public debate” (p. 48).

Recent research on media change in ECE, however, indicates the persistence of some form of media control by the political elites. Sukosd and Bajomi-Lazar (2003) identify weak competition, persisting political pressure, weak professional performance of journalists, and problematic minority access to the media, among major problem areas that challenge media freedom in ECE. Several scholars acknowledge that the end result of the media development in ECE represent hybrid media systems which are a combination of mimetic and atavistic media orientation (Jakubowicz, 2008; Jakubowicz and Sukosd, 2008) or a combination of Western imitation of media laws and imitation of media practices from the previous regime (Splichal, 2001).

Taking a microlevel approach, this study investigates the relationship between the news media, political parties, and the public during the electoral process in Kosovo, a transitional society of South-Eastern Europe. In 2007 Kosovo held the general elections for its infant democratic institutions, the third in a row since 1999 when United Nations and NATO troops took over the administration of the country after a NATO bombing campaign halted a Serb-led campaign against Kosovo’s ethnic Albanian majority.

Encouraged and supported by Western donors, Kosovo has established a liberal media system that led to media pluralization. Nevertheless, similar to the rest of Eastern Europe, mass media transition in the Balkans has been characterized by political pressure, economic problems, and chaotic media laws (Lani & Cupi, 2002). The media transformation process in this region resulted in a press controlled by the political elites which is “an extension of politics, rather than a representative of public opinion” claim Lani and Cupi (2002, p. 81). The present study aims to test this claim by engaging the agenda-setting theory.

SETTING THE POLITICAL AGENDA DURING AN ELECTORAL PROCESS

Coined in the seminal study of Chapel Hill, N.C., by McCombs and Shaw (1972), classical agenda-setting theory emphasizes the ability of the media to influence the salience of issues on the public agenda by communicating a host of cues about the relative salience of the topics on their daily agenda (McCombs, 2004). In words of Dearing and Rogers (1996), first and second level agenda-setting “offers an explanation of why information about certain issues, and not other issues, is available to the

public in a democracy; how public opinion is shaped; and why certain issues are addressed through policy action while others are not” (p. 2). According to them the agenda-setting process is an “ongoing competition among the proponents of a set of issues to gain the attention of mass media professionals, the public, and policy elites” (p. 6).

Research in the agenda-setting tradition falls into three distinctive categories: media agenda, public opinion agenda, and policy agenda. While media agenda-setting studies regard mass media as dependent variable and explain the influences that shape the media agenda, public opinion and policy agenda-setting studies treat mass media as an independent variable while investigating the influence of the media on public opinion and policy making decision (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, pp. 5–6).

PUBLIC AGENDA-SETTING

Public agenda-setting studies on the whole tend “to support a positive correlation and often a causal relationship between media agendas and public agendas at the aggregate level, especially for unobtrusive issues” (Weaver, McCombs & Shaw, 2004, p. 259). The evidence from agenda-setting studies conducted primarily in the U.S. and Western democracies demonstrates a cause-and-effect relationship between media agenda and public agenda and that “journalists do significantly influence their audience’s picture of the world” (McCombs, 2004, p. 19). Several studies conducted in developing countries have also found considerable support for the agenda-setting theory (Lennon, 1998; Palmaru, 2005; Valenzuela & McCombs, 2007), thus suggesting that theories developed and highly tested in Western world can be applicable to young democracies as well. However, the majority of these studies have investigated the relationship between media and public opinion agendas, ignoring potential influences upon news media agendas. The electoral campaigns have been characterized as transactional exchanges between the political elites, the media, and the citizens about the future of the country (Perloff, 1998). In an electoral atmosphere and beyond, this process can also be understood as an exchange of influences among various agendas-setters which aim to impose their agendas into each-other.

The few agenda-setting studies that have investigated the relationship between media, party, and public agendas simultaneously offer contradicting results. In an electoral setting in Sweden, mass media were more powerful agenda setters than the political parties (Asp, 1983). However, another study conducted in the U.S. found strong correlations between candidates’ platforms with both the media and public agendas (Dalton, Beck & Huckfeldt, 1998). Similar results were found in a study of the European Parliamentary elections campaign in Greece, where the correlations between public and media agendas were very low, while significant correlations emerged between party and public agendas (Harris & Kolovos, 2001).

Nevertheless, the above studies have measured the relationship between these three agendas with zero-order correlations. In fact, when McCombs analyzed the data from Dalton *et al.* (1998) study with partial correlations, he found that the correlations between media and public agendas remained while the correlations between candidates' platforms and public diminished (McCombs, 2004, pp. 106–107).

The present study explores the relationship between the mass media, public and the political parties' agendas guided by the following questions:

1. Who is the more powerful public agenda-setter in Kosovo, news media or political parties?
2. Can the news media in Kosovo set the public agenda independently of the political parties?

MEDIA AGENDA-SETTING

The literature on agenda-setting theory during last few decades has opened new frontiers shifting the research question from “Who sets the public agenda – and under what conditions?” into “Who sets the media agenda?” (McCombs & Shaw, 1993, p. 60).

In the context of the United States, studies exploring media agenda-setting offer contradicting results even though they suggest a pattern according to which local media are more susceptible to pressures from political and other factors than are national media. Several studies found no significant correlation between media and candidates' agendas during the U.S. presidential campaigns (Miller *et al.*, 1998; Semetko *et al.*, 1991). However, evidence from state level electoral campaigns found a moderately high correlation between political advertising and television news agendas (Roberts & McCombs, 1994); while a similar study found reverse results (Evatt & Bell, 2001).

Similar studies conducted outside the United States do not offer congruent results either, thus suggesting that the social norms and journalistic traditions influence media reporting to a great degree during electoral campaigns (McCombs, 2004). While the U.S. journalists were able to shape campaign agendas, the British journalists mostly reflected political candidates' agendas during campaign (Semetko *et al.*, 1991). In a local election context in Spain, Lopez-Escobar *et al.* (1998) found that political advertising influenced television and newspapers news agendas for substantive attributes of the candidates. However, data from studies done in South Korea show that the party agenda as a whole had little impact on the formation of the news agenda during 2000 Congressional elections (Min, 2004).

The present study explores the relationship between media and the political party agenda guided by the following question:

3. Did media and political parties have a substantial influence on each-other's agenda during the electoral campaign in Kosovo?

mately merged into 6 major issues. In total, 42 hours of newscast containing 1100 news stories were coded from the television content. The content of the daily *Koha Ditore* was selected from the main section and the election supplement. Totally 1191 news stories were coded from the newspaper content.

A native Albanian speaker, a graduate student in mass communications, was trained to code 15% of the news content for the inter-coder reliability test. Scott's pi inter-coder reliability coefficients between the two coders ranged from .85 to .97.

Party agenda

In order to assess the party agenda, this study conducted a content analysis of the political parties' campaign material. Kosovo has a multiparty parliamentary political system with more than 20 political entities participating in the 2007 general elections. However, this study included only the four major political parties that won 10 seats or more in the 120 seat Parliament: Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), which won 34.3% of the votes; Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) – 22.6% votes; Alliance for New Kosovo (ARK)– 12.3% votes; and Democratic League of Dardania (LDD) – Albanian Christian Democratic Party of Kosovo coalition that won 10.1% of the votes.

In order to measure the overall agenda of the most important political parties in 2007 election in Kosovo, this study analyzed the content of party political platforms which were downloaded from each party web page. The party priorities were identified by looking at the rank order of the issues as they were ranked in the party platform. The press releases of the two major political parties in the country, PDK and LDK, were analyzed to track down the changes in party agenda during the campaign. This analysis was limited to these two parties since only their campaign press releases were accessible. All press releases issued during the electoral campaign by PDK ($n = 51$) and LDK ($n = 71$) were downloaded from their web pages and coded into 17 categories which were collapsed into 6 major issues. Since, some press releases emphasized more than one issue; all the relevant issues mentioned in press releases were coded.

RESULTS

Public agenda-setting

The percentages and rank orders of the issues emphasized by political parties, media outlets, and the public are presented in Table 1. They show that Kosovo's political status, economy, and rule of law were the issues that dominated the overall agenda of the 2007 general elections in Kosovo. First, this study ran a correlation test between media agendas. Similar to previous studies, it was found that the agendas of Kosovo's media were highly correlated with each other (.94 between RTK with KTV

and KD; and 1.00 between KTV and KD). For this reason, an aggregate agenda for all three media outlets was composed and used in the following analysis.

Table 1. Issues in rank order (and percentages) emphasized by parties, public and media during three time periods

Issues	Public	PDK	LDK	ARK	LDD	Media T1		Media T2		Media T3		
	%	Rank					%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank
Kosovo status	40.3	2	1	1	1	1	25.8	1	35.2	1	3.3	1
Economy	51.6	1	2	3	3	3.5	10.5	3	23.5	2	24.2	2
Rule of law	26.8	3	5	2	2	2	20.6	2	22.4	3	23.5	3
Energy policy	15.9	5	6	6	4	6	2.8	6	4.6	5	4.5	6
Education	7.5	6	3	4	5	3.5	6.5	4	8.5	4	9.5	4
Health care	23.2	4	4	5	6	5	3.6	5	3.6	6	6.4	5

Source: author's elaboration.

The relationship between media and public agendas was measured with Spearman's rho rank order correlations. These data suggest that the relationship between public agenda and media agenda at Time 1 was moderately strong (.60), a relationship that slightly weakened during Time 2 and 3 (.54) as the campaign progressed. However, when partial correlations between media and public agendas were computed, controlling for the effect of political party agenda, this relationship became much weaker for all three times (Figure 1). Moderate partial coefficients (.21, -.21, and -.21) suggested that the correlation between media and public agendas could not stay strong independently.

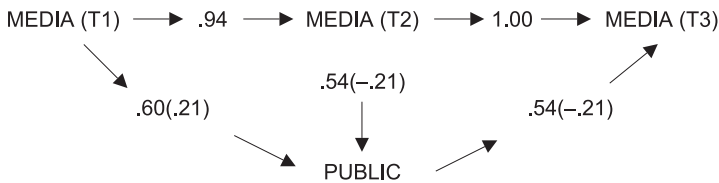


Figure 1. Results of zero-order correlations for the media and public agenda during 2007 general elections in Kosovo

Note: Figures in the parenthesis show partial correlations between media agenda at three different times with the public agenda controlling for the influence of the overall party agenda.

Source: author's elaboration.

Next, the relationship between media and political party agenda was measured with Spearman's rho rank order correlations. Given high correlations between party agendas (that ranged from .98 to .37), an overall party agenda was composed for

further analysis. Correlations were calculated between media and overall party agenda, and then with individual four parties. Figure 2 shows that the relationship between media and overall political parties was very strong for all three time periods. The same was true for the relationship between media and individual political parties. Partial correlations between media and party agenda, controlling for public agenda, did not diminish significantly the relationship between media and party. In fact, it still remained very strong for the overall party agenda and for individual party agendas (see numbers in the parenthesis in Figure 2). These findings suggest that the relationship between media and political party agendas was strong independently of the public agenda.

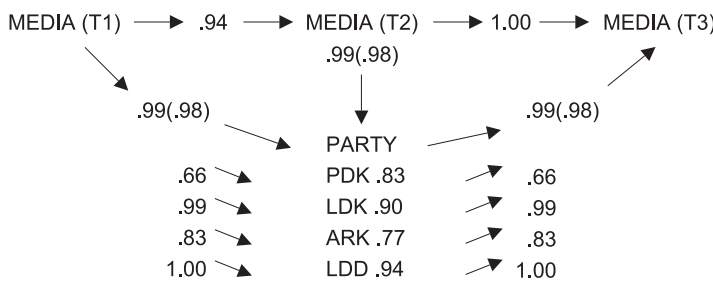


Figure 2. Zero-order correlations for the media and party agenda

Note: Figures in the parenthesis show partial correlations between media agenda at three different times with the overall party agenda controlling for the influence of public.

Source: author's elaboration.

However, the correlations between party agendas and the public agenda were much lower than the ones between media and party agendas. Table 2 illustrates the Spearman's rho coefficients between public and party agendas that ranged from low correlations between public and PDK (.03) and LDK (.49) towards moderately high correlations between public and ARK (.77), LDD (.60) and overall party agenda (.58). When partial correlations were computed between public and party agendas, controlling for media agenda at Time 1 and Time 2, these correlations became insignificant or negative except for the ARK party (see figures in the parenthesis in Table 2).

Table 2. Correlations between party agenda and public agenda

Party	PDK	LDK	ARK	LDD	Party Total
Public	.03 (-.97)	.49 (-.92)	.77 (.61)	.60 (.00)	.58 (.00)

Note: Figures in the parenthesis show second-order partial correlations between overall party agenda and public agenda controlling for media agenda at Time 1 and Time 2.

Source: author's elaboration.

lish the direction of influence between media and PDK. The zero-order correlations suggested that PDK had a little influence on the media (.49, which exceeded the R-Z baseline .33) despite the fact that the media agenda did not change much from Time 1 to Time 2. These data infer that it was unlikely that PDK agenda influenced the media's agenda.

In order to explain these inconsistent results, partial cross-lagged correlations were computed between an agenda at Time 1 and the agenda at Time 2, controlling the influence of the other agenda at Time 1. When controlling for the auto-correlation of the media agenda from Time 1 to Time 2, the influence of the PDK on media agenda became insignificant. The same was true for the media's influence on PDK's agenda (see results in the parenthesis in the first part of Figure 3). This suggested that the initial cross-lagged correlations were spurious, suggesting no influence of one on the other.

The results of the cross-sectional and cross-lagged correlations between media agenda with LDK agenda did not give any clearer results either. The cross-sectional correlations between these two agendas show no significant change from Time 1 to Time 2 (from .81 to .84). However, cross-lagged zero-order correlations indicated that both media and LDK had a significant influence on each other since both coefficients exceeded the R-Z baseline coefficient (.78). However, the partial correlations controlling for the other agenda at Time 1 indicate that this influence decreased to insignificant coefficients (see numbers in parenthesis in Figure 3).

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

This paper compared political party, news media, and public agendas during the 2007 electoral campaign in Kosovo in order to elucidate the relationship of these three agendas in an electoral setting in a transitional society. The results of the first part of the study suggest that during the 2007 electoral campaign in Kosovo, political parties and the media together set the agenda for these elections while pretty much disregarding the priorities of the public. However, this study implies that neither the mass media nor political parties were able to set the public agenda independently. It seems that the strength of the relationship between mass media and political party with the public depended largely on the each other. These results suggest that in Kosovar transitional society, the media and political parties have an interdependent relationship in setting the electoral agendas.

However, when the relationship between media and political parties was examined more closely, the results were not as conclusive. Cross-lagged correlations between media and the two major parties in Kosovo produced mixed results. While the zero-order cross-lagged correlations suggested that the influence between media and PDK or LDK each had significant influence on the other, the partial cross-lagged correlations indicated that neither media nor any of the two parties influenced the other substantially.

The results of this study confirm recent claims that mass media and politics have achieved some balance in ECE societies (Gross, 2003) while these countries try to build pluralist media systems that operate in a market-led system rather than in a politically driven environment. However, media in this region still fail to offer representation to the society as a whole, but rather represent mainly the political class (Jakubowicz, 1994). Even if great progress on the way to democracy has been made, the civil society still lacks full representation given that “their leaders have gone into governmental position and had taken with them their organizations and media” says Jakubowicz (1995, pp. 40–41). Therefore, it is not surprising to see low level of political participation in Eastern Europe where the battle continues to be fought between elites, where media are included as well. This might account for the low electoral turnout in the 2007 general elections in Kosovo that was only 45% compared with 64% turnout in the first parliamentary elections in the country after the regime change at the beginning of 2000s.

However, the phenomenon of the media’s closer ties to political institutions than to the public is not an exclusive occurrence of the transitional societies of Eastern Europe. Agenda-setting studies conducted in the United States have found similar results (Dalton *et al.*, 1998; Tan & Weaver, 2007). Moreover, the contradictory results regarding the influence of the media on party agenda and *vice versa* are compatible with similar studies done in developed countries, which suggests that the media role perceptions and the political context in which elections are held has a great impact on the directions of influence between the media and political parties during electoral campaigns.

The present study reveals the potential of the agenda-setting model to explain the dynamics of campaign processes in a post-communist transitional society. It also demonstrates the validity of this media theory to explain the formation of the campaign agendas in an international context, focusing on the developing world. The study suggests that agenda formation in this context is a competitive process in which media and political parties struggle to shape the electoral agendas and influence the public opinion. Given the fact that the potential of the political parties to shape the media agenda is not evident, this study suggests that the role of the parties to shape electoral agendas in ECE countries is limited as the media are gaining their independence from political institutions and becoming more economic driven enterprises.

The limitations in this study are obvious. While this study considered the public agenda at the aggregate level, future studies might consider the influence of media and party agenda at the individual level. Those results might illuminate in more detail the way electoral agendas are formed in this region. Moreover, future studies might want to test agenda-setting effects by paying particular attention to the party press. In Kosovo, like in the rest of the Balkans, most political parties have influence upon one or more medium. Additionally, further studies should aim to test second-level agenda-setting theory in developing countries in order to assess whether this theory applies to settings outside of the Western world. Such studies remain rare.

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