

# Media Systems in Unrecognized States: “People’s Media” in “People’s Republics”

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the media systems in the “Donetsk People’s Republic” and the “Luhansk People’s Republic,” both unrecognized states. After a conflict outbreak in 2014, the media landscape in the unrecognized republics acquired the features of an authoritarian media system. Employing qualitative methods (primary source analysis and in-depth interviews), the research explores a combination of instruments that pushed media into an authoritarian mode that entailed declarations of loyalty, severe vertical subordination, predominantly state ownership, and the designation of a military subdivision at the information frontline. Other decisive factors that allowed an authoritarian media system to be instated are the loyalty of the pre-existing media landscape to local authorities and oligarch media owners, the political isolation of the unrecognized republics, and the strong influence of the Russian information space.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, de facto states, media systems research.

## INTRODUCTION

**T**he Russian military campaign in the east of Ukraine in 2014 led to the establishment of two Russia-inspired self-proclaimed quasi-states: the “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DPR) and the Luhansk People’s republic” (LPR), or “Temporarily Occupied Territories of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions of Ukraine,” as they are referred to in official Ukrainian parlance.<sup>1</sup> The present research identifies the key traits of the media systems in the LPR and the DPR, building on the literature on media systems in authoritarian settings in general, and in de facto states in particular.

Media systems in authoritarian environments have many common features. Yet different shades of authoritarianism and various contexts give birth to complicated combinations of media environment characteristics that cannot be described within the existing media system typologies. Within

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter used without quotation marks to facilitate reading. This is not to be understood as a way of giving these entities any form of legitimacy. The same format is used for Abkhazia, Transnistria, and South Ossetia, and for the authorities of the entities mentioned. For more on the (in)voluntary legitimation of the LPR and the DPR, see Lennon and Adams.

a framework of four theories of the press, Siebert and others suggest two theories for authoritarian contexts (authoritarian and Soviet communist). While both theories define certain characteristics of media-authority relations, neither fully describes the media-related realities that arise in post-Soviet authoritarian de facto statelets. The media systems' typology framework (the polarized pluralist model, in particular) of Hallin and Mancini, and Mungiu-Pippidi's analysis of east European media systems, systems that are characterized by an orientation toward the political elite, will be used in this article. These authors describe the media system in pre-war Donbas, taking into account some regional peculiarities. Yet these models do not relate to the current media environment in the LPR or the DPR. Analysis of the media landscape in Russia (Becker; Maréchal; Oates) after the "failure of democracy" (Gill), and analysis of the media environment research in post-annexation Crimea (Zeveleva), explain some features of the media landscapes in Russia-inspired statelets—like the central control of key broadcasters, the self-censorship and decline in journalistic professionalism—but they do not give the full picture of the emerging media systems.

While the media systems in different authoritarian contexts are closely researched and described (see section 3 of this paper), the transition from a pre-existing media system to the establishment of new rules of operation has not been studied (Gerrits and Bader). Zeveleva describes the transition process in Crimea after the peninsula's annexation by Russia in 2014. The author suggests that a media environment transition goes through two stages: direct censorship and self-censorship (Zeveleva 48). The environments in the LPR and the DPR might not be settled enough to conclude that the region has reached the second stage, meaning that direct measures might still be needed to enforce the authoritarian media system, which, as we will see, displays characteristics that would bring it into not merely authoritarian, but rather totalitarian territory.

The uncertain status of the LPR and the DPR and the ongoing armed conflict provide a peculiar environment for media system change. The transitions of the LPR and the DPR from polarized, pluralist media models<sup>2</sup> to authoritarian models contributes to our understanding of such transition processes, of the media environment itself, and of the instruments that must be applied to force a polarized, pluralist media system into an authoritarian mould. This research tackles two questions: (1) How is a pluralist media model transformed to an authoritarian media system in a newly emerged (unrecognized) autocracy? (2) What are the distinguishing features of the media systems in the LPR and the DPR under authoritarian rule?

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<sup>2</sup> The polarized pluralist media model is characterized by an elite politically oriented press that operates in countries that became democratic nations relatively late.

The similarities in the media environments of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, the DPR, and the LPR (in particular, the Russian dominance in their information spaces) indicate that identifying the defining patterns of the DPR and the LPR media systems will contribute to our knowledge of how a media landscape can be suddenly transformed to an authoritarian regime (Zveagintsev; Munteanu). It will also facilitate an understanding of how media systems in the de facto statelets deviate from the common patterns in authoritarian regimes, and the consequences these deviations might bring.

Unrecognized by any other country except the similarly unrecognized South Ossetia, the LPR and the DPR are relatively isolated from the rest of the world. The possibilities for research in the occupied territories are virtually nil due to the ongoing armed conflict and to the denial of access by the local Russia-backed authorities (OHCHR, *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine from 16 May to 15 August 2019*). Still, the media system in the LPR and the DPR can be researched based on various available sources of information: official sources, reports by international organizations, media publications (where applicable), and interviews.

## METHODOLOGY

To answer the outlined questions, the research follows a case-study design and presents “a focused exploration of a single case of a phenomenon” (Coffey and Hollifield). The case-study is particularly suitable to explore unique cases, for which the richness of detail is more important than a comparison to other cases. The research design in the paper follows suggestions outlined in Denzin and Lincoln’s study. The case-study is developed through the combination of two methods: the qualitative research of primary and secondary sources and interviews. To gain an understanding of the media systems in the region, the following subjects were investigated: LPR and the DPR government websites, media-related legislation, websites of media registered within the newly created “ministries of information” in the so-called republics, and relevant reports by the international organizations active in the area. The analysis made it possible to identify the power structures in the media systems and to describe the crucial characteristics of these systems.

To include a human perspective, seven in-depth interviews were conducted with journalists displaced from the occupied territories, following the methodology and suggestions of Qu and Dumay. This was done to acquire a more nuanced understanding of the transformation processes that occurred in the media outlets shortly after the outbreak of the conflict. The interviews were conducted between November 2019 and December 2020. The interviews were semi-structured based on the predefined themes

and the questions asked (Alvesson and Deetz); where appropriate, additional probing questions were asked to elicit more information. This approach ensures a consistent thematic coverage, and provides the freedom to discuss unique circumstances (Kvale and Brinkmann). I chose to not record these interviews because of the sensitive nature of the topics. Instead, detailed notes were taken. To safeguard the anonymity and the ethical concerns of the informants, no personal data were collected (Qu and Dumay). The notes were analysed to identify the events described by the interviewees and the patterns of events that were connected to the categories identified in the document analysis.

Primary sources in the LPR and the DPR, and the analysis of reports and relevant media messages, enabled me to describe the media system established in the territories and to define its core characteristics. The analysis of the interviews provided insights into the findings of the document analysis, adding specific examples and cases.

Inevitable limitations of the research included the following: (1) the restriction of physical access to the territories made field research impossible; (2) the atmosphere of fear and human rights violations made it unsafe to contact current residents of the LPR and the DPR, especially employees of the local media (Coffey and Hollifield); (3) the research design limited generalizability because it did not include comparisons with other cases beyond theoretical reflections (Gravetter and Forzano).

## MEDIA SYSTEMS IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

According to Hallin, a media system is a set of media institutions and practices that interact and shape one another and are embedded within wider social, political, economic, and cultural systems. Media freedom, free elections, a legitimate legislature and an independent judiciary, are elements that define the democracy of the state (Levitsky and Way). In authoritarian environments, state ownership, heavy censorship, and government control hamper the freedom of media systems (Levitsky and Way). Still, media systems can be organized differently under various authoritarian regimes. Research on the media in authoritarian contexts relies heavily on Siebert and others' seminal study *Four Theories of the Press*<sup>3</sup> and on Hallin and Mancini's typology of media systems. More recent attempts adapt media systems to the diversity and dynamics of different authoritarian polities. For instance, in defining the Belarusian media as authoritarian according to Siebert and others' framework, Manaev proposed using the metaphor "islands in the

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<sup>3</sup> For a review of the *Four Theories* and their critique, see Ostini and Ostini.

stream,” whereby a small independent media sector is allowed to exist in the shadow of the state-run media (3).

After the establishment of Vladimir Putin’s “managed democracy,” Becker defined the Russian media as neo-authoritarian (see also Lipman and McFaul). Among the key features that did not allow its classification as fully authoritarian are the limited autonomy of the state-owned media and the tolerance accorded to certain elements of the democratic mass political media (e.g., private ownership). Oates defines the Russian media model as neo-Soviet (referring to the Soviet model coined by Siebert and others); she adds the rejection of balance or objectivity to the factors outlined by Becker. Anti-government protests in Russia in 2011–12 strengthened state propaganda and media oppression (Denisova), while Russia’s role in the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity of 2013–14 exacerbated constraints on media freedom, putting pressure on non-government media (Lipman). In Maréchal’s view, Russia is characterized by networked authoritarianism, where media censorship is connected to misinformation campaigns abroad and is used to achieve geopolitical goals.

Before the Russian invasion, the territories controlled by the LPR and the DPR were fully integrated in Ukraine, and their media landscapes were developed by and large in accordance with trends at the national level. During the past decade, the Ukrainian media environment has resembled other central and eastern European countries where oligarchs and political elites are key players and media projects are vibrant but weak (Balčytienė et al.). This framework largely corresponds to the Polarized Pluralist model of Hallin and Mancini. In Mungiu-Pippidi’s words, this pattern represents a “vicious circle of media capture” whereby the media are apprehended by political and economic elites, then used as a tool for the pursuit of their political and business interests (39). In eastern Ukraine, especially in the Donetsk region, most of the media were “captured” by the coal-and-steel oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, who controlled the local media before 2014 and who still has a major influence on the media in the government-controlled territories (Krasovs’ka). Since the conflict in 2014, the environment in the occupied territories, including the political system, the culture, the media, and other areas of social life has moved toward authoritarianism, evoking consistent concerns on behalf of international organizations and human rights defenders (OHCHR, *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 16 November 2017 to 15 February 2018* and *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 16 May to 15 August 2019*; Council of Europe, *Legal Remedies* and *Zvit*).

Most of the research of the media in de facto states is based on the analysis of media messages; it explores the coverage of conflicts and topics related to local and foreign media. These works include an analysis of the DPR’s online information space (Baglin), coverage of the MH17 flight crash

(Toal and O'Loughlin), the role of the media in the Russo-Georgian conflict of 2008 (Akhvlediani), and others.

Research that concerns the transformation of media systems in de facto states remains scarce, with the media mostly being considered to be a component of the wider political and social infrastructure. The extant research provides grounds to conclude that there are similarities among media systems of the (authoritarian) de facto post-Soviet states: the most evident similarity is the Russian patronage of the information space, first and foremost the dominance of Russian media in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Gerrits and Bader) and the orientation toward Moscow in Transnistrian media (Zveagintsev; Munteanu). Meanwhile the DPR and the LPR remain under strong Russian influence, both politically and in terms of information space (Mitrokhin; D'Anieri).

## MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

### *Background*

Amidst arbitrary detentions, torture, severe violation of human rights, and the absence of freedom of expression, information, and assembly, the media environment in the LPR and the DPR had to adapt to a radically transformed reality (OHCHR, *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 16 November 2017 to 15 February 2018* and *Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 16 May to 15 August 2019*; Council of Europe, *Legal Remedies and Zvit*). The Institute of Mass Information (IMI) reports that about 28 offices of the local media were destroyed solely in the Donetsk Oblast shortly after the outbreak of the armed conflict (Instytut masovoi informatsii "Doslidzhennia media-sytuatsii na skhodi i pivdni Ukrainy: Donets'ka oblast"). The buildings and equipment of state TV were seized by the de facto authorities of the "people's republics" in July 2014. The latter mostly used frequencies that had formerly belonged to other media (Dan'kova).

**Figure 1. Map of Ukraine with non-government-controlled areas (NGC). Source: The Research Council of Norway, “Ukrainian Geopolitical Fault-line Cities.”**



The newly established media system is vertically controlled. Ministries that oversee the media were established in both territories: The Ministry of Communication and Mass Communications of the LPR and the Ministry of Information of the DPR.

Most local media are now considered to be “subordinate enterprises” of the corresponding ministries (Ministerstvo informatsii DNR, “Podvedomstvennyye predpriiatiia”). In the DPR, the main media are subordinated to the Ministry’s Respublikanskii Media Holding (RMH). In the LPR, the main media are directly subordinated to the Ministry. All media enterprises had to pass a registration procedure and obtain new licences after the establishment of the new republics. The licensing is regulated by the media laws of the LPR and the DPR, and the licensing procedures are similar in both republics (see LNR and DNR).

### Printed Press

Shortly after 2014, printed media in the LPR and the DPR were required to register with the newly established authorities. This mechanism quickly eliminated independent media: media that chose to not receive licences from the Ministry were forced to flee, media that adjusted their agendas to appear loyal to the local authorities remained (Cheremnykh). In practice, the registration system was a declaration of loyalty to the newly established authorities. Ievhen (assumed name), a journalist for a local newspaper in the Donetsk region, recounted that, after the war started, his team had been working in his private apartment for some time, but then he received a phone call from a “committee” and was informed that from now on the authorities will “clear the information before it is published.” “I quit the job and left town,” he said, “the newspaper has not been published during the occupation” (interview, December 2019).<sup>4</sup> An activist from another town in the Donetsk region said that editorial teams of local newspapers just kept working, having become loyal to the new authorities. Some of the journalists left town, but management mostly stayed (interview, January 2020).

In Donetsk, as of 2019, most printed editions (18) belong to the RMH structure. Some have limited online versions, but all are hosted on a website with a Russian domain (*gazeta-dnr.ru*). The DPR postal service offers two catalogues for subscription to printed editions: local media (identified as “republican”) and foreign media. The list of local media available for subscription includes ten weekly editions subordinated to the Ministry of Information (Pochta Donbassa, “Respublikanskii katalog”).

**Table 1. Printed press in the DPR (Pochta Donbassa, “Respublikanskii katalog”; Ministerstvo informatsii DNR, “Podvedomstvennyye predpriiatiia”).**

Media belonging to Respublikanskii Media Holding	Other
“All republican” /Donetsk	
<i>Golos Respubliki</i> <i>Donetskoe vremia</i> <i>Donetsk vechernii</i>	<i>Boevoe Znamia Donbassa</i> (Founded by the Ministry of Defence) <i>Novorossiiia</i> (Coordinated by Dmitrii Dezortsev, DPR deputy) <i>Komsomol'skaia pravda Donetsk</i> – branch edition belonging to <i>Komsomol'skaia pravda Rossiia</i>

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are my own.



Local	
<i>Rodnoe Priazov'e</i> (Novoazovs'kyi rayon)	<i>Vecherniaia Makeevka</i>
<i>Novyi luch'</i> (Amvrosivs'kyi rayon)	<i>Gorlovka segodnia</i> (founded in 2015)
<i>Novaia niva</i> (Tel'manivs'kyi rayon)	12 entertainment/tabloid editions (offer recipes, crossword puzzles, etc.)
<i>Znamia pobedy</i> (Shakhtarsk)	
<i>Iasinovatskii vestnik DNR</i> (Iasynuvata)	
<i>Rodina</i> (Khartsyzk)	
<i>Novaia zhizn'</i> (Starobishevs'kyi rayon)	
<i>Nashe vremia</i> (Dokuchaivsk)	
<i>Kochegarka DNR</i> (Horlivka)	
<i>Makeevskii rabochii DNR</i> (Makiivka)	
<i>Torezskii gorniak</i> (Torez)	
<i>Debal'tsevskie vesti</i> (Debaltseve)	
<i>Novye gorizonty</i> (Kirovske – now Khrestivka, <sup>5</sup> Zhdanovka)	
<i>Snezhnianskie novosti</i> (Snizhne)	
<i>Ienakievskii rabochiy</i> (Ienakiieve)	

According to the postal service's self-reported statistics, 39,810 subscriptions were registered in 2018 in the DPR: 75% are subscriptions to the three all-republican editions, 24% are local editions, and only 1% are "foreign" (i.e., Russian) editions (*Golos respubliki*). Yet there are no data available for actual sales of periodical editions in the LPR and the DPR. The most recent survey of media consumption in the LPR and the DPR shows that only 7.4% of respondents rely on printed editions as their main source of information about political life (Mostova et al.).

In the LPR, printed editions are divided into republican and local, but there is no media holding that would control all the "state" media in the region. Instead, the media are listed as directly subordinated to the Ministry. Advertisement business is centralized under the "state" enterprise Gosreklama (Ministerstvo svyazi i massovykh kommunikatsii LNR).

<sup>5</sup> Many villages and towns were officially renamed as part of the decommunization process (for more on decommunization in Ukraine, see the page of Ukrainian Institute of National Memory: <https://uinp.gov.ua/dekomunizaciya-ta-reabilitaciya/dekomunizaciya>). These new names are not used in the LPR and the DPR.

**Table 2. Printed press in the LPR (Instytut masovoi informatsii [IMI], “Doslidzhennia media-sytuatsii na skhodi i pivdni Ukrainy: Luhans'ka oblast’”; Ministerstvo sviazi i massovykh komunikatsii LNR).**

Media subordinated to the “ministry”	Other
All-republican/Luhansk	
<i>Zhizn' Luganska</i>	<p><i>Kazachii vestnik</i> (“Kazach'ia media gruppa,” founded in summer 2014, founder Pavel Dremov, LPR military commander killed in 2015 in an explosion in the car given to him as a gift for his own wedding) (ARTV)</p> <p><i>Informatsionnoe agentstvo Istok</i> (founded in 2014)</p> <p><i>Ekspress-klub</i> (15 tabloid/entertainment and advertisement editions)</p> <p><i>XXI vek</i> (founder and editor-in-chief Iurii Iurov, “LPR’s People’s Council” deputy since 2014) (Narodnyi Sovet LNR). Previously Iurov was the spokesman of the oblast organization of the Party of Regions. According to IMI, he is under the influence of the ex-head of the Party of Regions in Donetsk oblast’ Oleksandr Iefremov (Instytut masovoi informatsii [IMI], “Doslidzhennia media-sytuatsii na skhodi i pivdni Ukrainy: Donets'ka oblast’”), who has been under criminal investigation in Ukraine since 2014.</p> <p><i>Iedinstvo</i> (published by the Federation of Professional Associations of Luhansk)</p>
Local	
<p><i>Slavianoserbskie Vesti</i> (Slavianoserbsk)</p> <p><i>Slava Krasnodona</i> (Krasnodon – now Sorokyne)</p> <p><i>Nash Pervomaisk</i> (Pervomaisk – now Travneve)</p> <p><i>Ogni</i> (Alchevsk – ASKET media group)</p> <p><i>Stakhanovskoe znamia</i> (Stakhanov – now Kadiivka)</p> <p><i>Krasnyi luch'</i> (Krasnyi Luch – now Khrustalnyi)</p> <p><i>Trudovaia slava</i> (Lutuhyne)</p> <p><i>Anratsitovskii vestnik</i> (Anratsyt)</p>	<i>Rovenkovskie vesti</i> (“Roven'ki-Media”)

<i>Vostochnyi Donbass</i> (Sverdlovsk – now Dovzhansk) <i>Informatsionnyi vestnik</i> (Kirovsk – now Holubivka) <i>Vpered</i> (Rovenky) <i>Trud gorniaka</i> (Brianka) <i>Narodnaia tribuna</i> (Perevalsk)	
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Compared to the printed-media in the DPR, printed-media in the LPR are more diverse, with fewer editions directly subordinated to the Ministry (Table 2). Yet, most printed-media are controlled by people related to the de facto authorities. The exception is *Rovenkovskie vesti*, but according to the Institute of Mass Information (IMI), the “Roven'ki-Media” holding avoids political topics and has morphed into an entertainment media (Instytut masovoi informatsii, “Doslidzhennia media-sytuatsii na skhodi i pivdni Ukrainy: Luhans'ka oblast”). The news archive of “Roven'ki-Media” for January-March 2020 confirms this observation: local news are centred around weather, water supply, retirement payments, safety advice, and announcements on behalf of local authorities (*Rovenki Media*).

Most of the local editions were established by local councils, many of them in Soviet times, and they remain loyal to the authorities they belong to: first the Soviet, then the regional Ukrainian, and now the “republican” authorities (Vialkova). The same pattern is observed in Transnistria (Zveagintsev), where the loyalty of local press inherited from Soviet times to any authority is derived from the Soviet communist model described by Siebert and others.

### *Diversity of the Printed Media*

According to Vialkova, by 2012, a gradual increase in texts in the Ukrainian language was observed in the Donetsk region. Since 2014, no editions in Ukrainian remain in the occupied territories, even though the occupied territories have determined that both Ukrainian and Russian languages are official.<sup>6</sup> The editorial office of the Ukrainian-language, *Donechchyna*, established in 1936, was repeatedly searched by armed groups, then abandoned (interview with anonymous media employee, October 2019). The Ukrainian-language *Munitsypal'na hazeta* no longer exists, and its former website (donetsk.org.ua) now advertises erotic massage services. Ukrainian-language media appear to have been “banned” in the occupied territories (Zots). The situation is similar for publications in ethnic minority

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<sup>6</sup> However, in December 2019, DPR leader Denis Pushilin announced his intention to instate Russian as the only state language in the DPR.

languages: Greek, Jewish, and Polish editions also ceased publishing in 2014 (*Kambana*; Asia-Israel; Evreiskaia obshchina Dnepra).

The catalogue of foreign media available for subscription in the DPR lists 62 pages of Russian printed editions (Pochta Donbassa) and is basically a reduced version of the Russian catalogue of printed editions (Pochta Rossii). It includes even highly specialized editions such as *Vestnik Voronezhskogo Instituta MVD Rossii* (*The Herald of the Voronezh Institute of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia*). Instead of defining other editions as “foreign press,” the Luhansk postal office directly offers the list of Russian periodical editions for subscription (Pochta LNR).

Vialkova observes that between 2013 and 2016, irreversible processes took place in the printed press sector, including a decrease in newspaper circulation rates and a loss of the archives of unique editions. Some cases with printed editions confirm this observation; for instance, *Gorlovka segodnia* (founded in 2015) is now located in the office of the *Gorlovka vecherniaia*, a municipal edition that ceased publishing in 2014. Vladyslav Leoshko, the editor-in-chief of *Gorlovka vecherniaia* who was forced to flee, claims that after the outbreak of war, “media workers appeared to be the most vulnerable, unprotected and persecuted category in the Donbas” (*Gorlovka.Today*). Ivanna (assumed name) said in an interview that local media felt the pressure to immediately prove their loyalty by publishing materials that praised the new authorities. Quitting the job also did not feel safe: “we had the choice either to work for them or flee. Those who were critical of Russian intervention in the Crimea had to flee immediately.” In her research on IDP (internally displaced) journalists from the annexed Crimea and the LPR and the DPR, Voronova states that losing their familiar audiences was perceived to be a tragedy by both journalists and readers. According to one of Voronova’s informants, covering the LPR and the DPR might be dangerous for journalists, the people they write for, and the people they write about (13).

*Kochegarka*, one of the oldest printed editions in the region, founded in 1919, had to stop publishing on 11 July 2014, after receiving a credible threat. Eduard Kashtanov's'kyi recounts that “the DPR guys repeatedly came to our office and told me what and how to write . . . We declined their offers to register as a mass media in the DPR” (qtd. in Cheremnykh). According to Kashtanov's'kyi, in March 2015 he received a call from Oleh Korenev (in charge of organizing the Horlivka Media Holding), who claimed that the privatization conducted in 1995 was illegal and that the local “authorities” would renationalize the edition. He also invited Kashtanov's'kyi to return to work and to ask his employees to do the same. Kashtanov's'kyi declined the offer and refused to communicate it to his ex-employees. Soon after that, *Kochegarka* started publishing again with the same name and the same logo, but with a different concept and with different people (Cheremnykh).

*Komsomol'skaia pravda (KP)*, a daily tabloid and the largest newspaper printed in Russia, has established a branch in Donetsk. The *KP* website lists Donetsk among Russian cities. *KP* also played a role after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war: Chania reveals that in Abkhazia, immediately following the war, *KP* was provided free of charge and “distributed all over the country<sup>7</sup>—in shops, stalls, organizations—everywhere apart from been dropped from the airplanes. As a result, those few Abkhazian media . . . lost about 80% of their audience. The circulation numbers decreased fivefold.”

The media environments in the LPR and the DPR have become homogenous in terms of language and sources of information. This homogenization trend is also observed in other Russia backed statelets, but there are some distinctive features. In South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the state languages are very different from Russian. For this reason, there are still media published in local languages, although they attract smaller audiences than the Russian publications (Gerrits and Bader). In Transnistria, most of media follow the same narrative line and are dependent on the local authorities, but at the same time there are efforts to establish independent media projects (Zveagintsev).

### Television

Television remains the main source of information in the LPR and the DPR: 84.3% of respondents to a survey in the LPR/DPR cited television as their primary source of political news (Mostova et al.). Most television channels in the DPR are also subordinated to the Ministry's Respublikanskii Media Holding (RMH), which co-ordinates the work of six TV channels. Other channels use the frequencies of the captured pre-war channels: Oplot-TV—*Pershyi Munitsypal'nyi*,<sup>8</sup> *Novorossia TV* airs on the 1+1<sup>9</sup> and on *UNION* frequencies and is co-ordinated by Pavel Gubarev, one of the leaders of the Russia-backed forces in 2014 (Instytut masovoi informatsii [IMI], “Doslidzhennia sytuatsii v media pivdnia ta skhodu Ukrainy za sichen'-serpen' 2019 roku—Analychnyi zvit”). *Pervyi Respublikanskii* uses the frequencies of *27 Kanal* (no longer available) (Instytut masovoi informatsii [IMI], “Doslidzhennia media-sytuatsii na skhodi i pivdni Ukrainy: Luhans'ka oblast”). Inna (assumed name), a former employee of the Donetsk Regional State TV and Radio Company, recalls the 27th of April, 2014, when “Oplot guys entered the building and put their soldiers by each door. At first people inside tried to hide, locked in their offices. Soldiers found some of the

<sup>7</sup> Chania refers to Abkhazia as a country. According to international law, Abkhazia remains a part of Georgia.

<sup>8</sup> No longer a working city channel in Donetsk.

<sup>9</sup> An all-Ukrainian TV channel.

employees and promised not to hurt anyone. They entered the production control room and installed a satellite. Rossiia-24 started airing” (interview, December 2019).

In the LPR, Russian proxy forces captured the Luhansk TV centre on 1 May 2014, and started airing Russian channels instead of Ukrainian ones. By June 2014, no Ukrainian channels were on air in the LPR or in the DPR. Local channels either moved to government-controlled regions or shut down. LOT frequency is used by Lugansk 24. Former employees of the channels claim that Lugansk 24 uses the equipment that belonged to LOT and Irta (Instytut masovoi informatsii [IMI], “Doslidzhennia media-sytuatsii na skhodi i pivdni Ukrainy: Donets'ka oblast”). One of the interviewees commented: “They just renamed the channels, using same rooms, same equipment, and to some extent same people” (interview, December 2019). Russian television is widely available with no subscription fees in LPR and DPR territories (DNRTV; GTRK LNR). Depending on the type of the transmission, the share of Ukrainian channels is estimated to be 12% at most (an IPTV online streaming service, with only marginal, 3.47%, consumption of cable TV), and even then, most of the content involves entertaining TV programs (Biloskurs'kyi). Thus, the media space is utterly dominated by the Russian media product.

### *Media-Authorities-Audience Relations*

The existing media environment in the LPR and the DPR make local citizens vulnerable to disinformation; media in general is seen as a source of constant stress to the viewers/listeners/readers: recent media monitoring reports observe a high level of hate speech targeted to Ukraine, the fomenting of inter-ethnic discord, fake news reports, a glorification of the de facto authorities, and the potential of integrating into the Russian Federation (Iastrebova et al.). Even coronavirus-related news stories are covered in manipulative DPR and LPR headlines: “Donbass may become a trial field for infections produced in American biolabs in Ukraine” (Volochevskii) or “Ukraine was sold amidst coronavirus” (Steshin).

The media are seen by the de facto authorities as a “military subdivision” that should follow military principles: “The relationship between media, intelligence agencies, and state institutions can be seen as a relationship between army subdivisions, because we are at war” (Iastrebova et al.). Journalists are seen as “soldiers who fight at war and therefore they have to obey the commanders, there is no room for criticism,” Denys, a former journalist in Luhansk, said in one of the interviews. This attitude is in line with the Russian rhetoric regarding the role of media at the dawn of the Putin era, when his spokesperson, Sergei Iastrzhembskii, said: “The media should take into account the challenges the nation is facing now. When the

nation mobilizes its strength to achieve a goal, this imposes obligations on everybody, including the media” (qtd. in Becker 11). Manipulations of the national security concept and media control are also used in other authoritarian environments, for instance in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan (Allison; Anceschi).

The mass media sectors in the LPR and the DPR are regulated by the laws regarding mass media. These laws are similar to each other and to the laws that control mass media in the Transnistrian and Abkhazian republics (Verkhovnyi Sovet PMR; Respublika Abkhazii). The laws follow the structure of the Russian laws on mass media (Gosudarstvennaia Duma); they all stem from the same document, and each law is adjusted with minor revisions that correspond to the republic to which it is addressed.

#### KEY TRAITS OF MEDIA SYSTEMS IN UNRECOGNIZED STATES

##### *Declaration of Loyalty*

Media players who were either loyal to the Ukrainian authorities before the creation of the LPR and the DPR or who did not directly support the so-called “rebels,” felt directly endangered by the requirement to apply for new licences. Such a procedure automatically declared that media that did not express loyalty to the new authorities was illegal. This led to the forceful relocation of many media representatives—even those who had not supported the 2013–14 Euromaidan protests in Kyiv.

Based on media ownership and management information, loyalty to the local authorities is a key criterion for anyone involved in the media sector. At the same time, there is no direct evidence of pre-censorship of the materials issued. Content-based media analysis reveals the absence of opinion pluralism regarding political issues. For instance, according to U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded monitoring conducted by the IMI in 2017, 87% of the mentions of Ukraine within a sample of news websites in the occupied territories were clearly negative or used hate speech. At the same time, 82% of the materials that referred to the self-proclaimed authorities were positive, with 18 being neutral. Critical mentions of local officials were absent (Instytut masovoi informatsii [IMI], “Doslidzhennia IMI”).

There is abundant evidence of journalist persecution, especially in the first year of the conflict (see the OHCHR reports). Freedom of speech is non-existent. Arbitrary detentions, repeated searches in the media offices, and seizures of media property, combined with weak institutions and an absence of the rule of law, enabled the regime to achieve its main goal for the media sector: journalists who did not wish to become loyal to the new “authorities”

fled, whereas journalists who remained, started self-censoring and produced content that took into account the threat of the newly established authorities.

### *Subordination*

Of the local printed media, 78% in the DPR and 70% in the LPR are directly subordinated to the local authorities. Most (67%) of the TV channels in Donetsk are subordinated to the media holding established by the ministry.<sup>10</sup> In Luhansk, the ministry directly controls the only all-republican TV-channel, whereas local TV was “given” to district authorities. Such subordination brings a vertical agenda-setting. Martial law, introduced in the LPR and in the DPR in 2014, allows the suppression of the freedom of speech; this suppression is based on state interests, on the images of the republics’ leaders, on national security, and on war needs.

The media are seen as a subdivision of the military, according to the authorities’ rhetoric (Ministerstvo Informatsii DNR, “Igor’ Antipov” and “Soiuz zhurnalistov”). The press is seen as a servant of the state, rather than as a “partner in the search for truth” (Siebert et al. 3). The evidence suggests that local journalists resorted to self-censorship as an act of historical patience. Zeveleva introduces this concept in her research on the Crimea post-2014: her informants refrain from any critical commentary that would criticize the authorities “due to their belief that the current historical moment is not the right time for this” (55).

### *Media Ownership*

Media that are not directly subordinated to the “ministries” are controlled by military officials or are related to military officials or other individuals with links to the de facto authorities. The only exceptions are the “yellow press,” i.e., tabloids that avoid political issues. The yellow press was not tolerated under the communist model and appeared only in the post-totalitarian environment. In addition, some of the media outlets are privately

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<sup>10</sup> Before 2014, the Donetsk oblast hosted 1,450 registered printed editions with only 42 in state property (so-called *komunal'ni* or municipal media, founded by local town councils) (Vialkova). Basically, in the DPR and the LPR these state media, as opposed to privately owned media, continued functioning, leading to a strong ownership imbalance. Meanwhile, in the rest of Ukraine, 92% (594 out of 760) of the state/municipal media were de-nationalized as part of the media reform that took place between 2016 and 2019 (Detektor Media). Interestingly, long before the conflict, the privately owned media enjoyed greater trust among the local population (Sadekov and Bradov).



owned and must generate some income from advertisements. However, private enterprise is tolerated only inasmuch as it remains loyal to the self-proclaimed authorities. The liberal “islands” in the Belarusian model, or the vibrant print media that are relatively autonomous and critical of the regime within Becker’s neo-authoritarian model, are unthinkable in the LPR and the DPR (Manaev).

Since most of the media are owned by the “government,” they are directly funded by the local authorities. The funding sources and tax schemes of media outlets not owned by the government are unknown. Some of them (e.g., Novorossia TV) use crowdfunding (to an unknown extent) and show in detail all the advertisement options, including the production of commercial ads. If state ownership in some contexts might not be considered to be a problem, in post-totalitarian environments there is “neither a tradition of public service broadcasting nor a mechanism to ensure the relative autonomy of broadcast media from the state” (Becker). The current efforts of Ukraine to establish public service broadcasting demonstrate how challenging this task is in the post-Soviet context (Rozkladai).

### *Homogeneity and Russian Influence*

The vertical media system has led to homogeneity in the linguistic and ethnic media environments. While residents of the occupied territories still have access to liberal online media produced elsewhere, the diversity of printed press and TV products is very limited. The local postal service offers a variety of Russian tabloids and some editions that are loyal to the Russian government (e.g., *Trud* or *Rossiiskaia gazeta*), but editions in the style of Becker’s vibrant print media (e.g., *Novaia gazeta*) are not on offer (Pochta Donbassa, “Katalog zarubezhnykh periodicheskikh izdaniï”; Pochta LNR).

Russian media, especially Russian TV, is a defining feature of the LPR and the DPR media environment. TV channels available from local providers do not include channels that are not offered by Russian TV. Information on TV and in the printed press is offered only in the Russian language. Online media remain accessible to the local population, but local digital content is restricted.

### CONCLUSIONS

The first research question was: “How is a pluralist media model transformed to an authoritarian media system in a newly emerged (unrecognized) autocracy?” The transition of the LPR and the DPR media from the polarized pluralist model of Ukraine to the authoritarian media system demonstrated an ability of the media landscape to rapidly change its

operating mechanisms after the sudden establishment of authoritarianism. The media systems of the unrecognized territories under authoritarian rule demonstrate how easily a previously pluralist system, with all its flaws (i.e., a strong influence of the local political and economic elite), can slip into an extreme version of the authoritarian model, and contribute to the establishment of totalitarian attitudes to the media and their role in society.

Shortly after the conflict broke out in 2014, and with the proclamation of the Russia-inspired quasi-states, the LPR and the DPR, local media were forced to be loyal to the newly established authorities. Strict vertical subordination, (il)legal directives from the newly established ministries to re-license all the existing media, an atmosphere of fear, human rights violations, and the absence of a properly functioning judicial system quickly cleared the environment from any vestiges of independent journalism. This is unlike the situation in other authoritarian media systems, such as those of Belarus or Russia, where some independent media projects survive in the cold shadow of the government's informational behemoth (Becker; Oates; Manaev). Meanwhile, strong Russian influence means that TV and print media consumers have no other sources of information apart from those loyal to the Russian government. The information space is therefore de facto held hostage by the foreign state with its propagandist television and influential print editions like *Komsomol'skaia pravda*.

Insights derived from the interviews conducted during the research agree with the findings from a larger sample of interviews with IDP journalists conducted by Voronova. Journalists, who previously openly opposed the pro-Russian movements or maintained neutrality in the period of unrest in 2013–14, became the most vulnerable quarry and, facing professional and social challenges, were forced to flee. The transition process was abrupt, leading to traumatic experiences for many employees in the media sector. The current field (both in the political and the media sense) is unsettled. Direct censorship and the complete elimination of media freedom has promulgated an atmosphere of violence and uncertainty.

Manipulations of the national security concept aimed at curtailing media freedom, typical in authoritarian contexts such as those of post-Soviet Central Asia, were also observed in the LPR and the DPR (Allison; Anceschi). This study shows how the uncertainty of the political/legal status of the unrecognized territories (republics), under conditions of ongoing armed conflict, strengthens the effectiveness of such manipulations. Unlike in other authoritarian polities, where these manipulations are usually more sophisticated, the elimination of media freedom in the LPR and the DPR is openly explained by reference to state needs and martial law. Media-authority relationships in conflict-affected communities under the authoritarian rule follow the servant-state framework. Within this framework, the media must willingly or unwillingly serve the regime in the

name of future military victories, by supporting the new authorities and by suppressing or ignoring critical voices and opinions. Conflict-affected environments are particularly responsive to the demonization of alternative viewpoints, and this favours the elimination of media freedom (Hutchison).

Zeveleva's research on how direct censorship transitioned into self-censorship in the Crimea, which was annexed in 2014 by Russia, partially explains the transition process of the media sector in the DPR and the LPR in the first years after 2014. However, the interplay between direct censorship and self-censorship in the DPR and the LPR appears to differ from the censorial interplay in the Crimea, because the DPR and the LPR did not reach stability due to the ongoing conflict with Ukrainian forces, their unrecognized political status, and inner-state conflicts. Therefore, in the DPR and the LPR, self-censorship is combined with direct censorship of the media.

The second research question was: "What are the distinguishing features of the media systems in the LPR and the DPR under authoritarian rule?" In response to it, the following distinguishing features of the media systems of the LPR and the DPR were identified: a forced declaration of loyalty through re-licensing, a vertical subordination of the media to the authorities, a linguistic (Russian) homogeneity of the media environment, and an absence of sources of information other than local (or) Russian ones.

The media system of *de facto* statelets does not fit the established theories or models describing authoritarian media landscapes beyond the Western world. In the Russian-controlled *de facto* statelets, the media assume a *de facto* status of sorts: they exist, but they do not fulfil the key functions that the media perform in free societies. In the Russian-controlled *de facto* statelets, the media is an instrument of political influence within the broader Russian information space.

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<sup>11</sup> Every effort was made to find an up-to-date link, but some sites are no longer functional. These links are followed by "last accessed," rather than "accessed" date.

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<sup>12</sup> Not all DNR/LNR websites work due to restrictions imposed in different countries that block them as extremist. To access these sources, one might need a Russian VPN.

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