2 Independent Communications in Central Europe

‘Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds regardless of borders, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.’ – International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 19

Charter 77, in document no. 20 (1 December 1984), cited the above article of the covenant and observed that in Czechoslovakia ‘all sources of information are controlled by a single political party and its apparatus since 1948 and have become the instrument of ideological propaganda’. As a result, not only is the citizen denied access to ‘basic, truthful and complete information’ on current events, domestic and foreign, but is subjected to a massive wave of disinformation in all fields of communication. This includes not only the distortion of news, but the suppression of major events or situations, such as the existence of famine in Ethiopia, or serious ecological problems in Czechoslovakia, and direct interference in the arts. For instance, in reporting the Nobel Prize in literature awarded to Jaroslav Seifert, the media within the country did so tersely, not mentioning the fact that Seifert’s recent works remained on the publication index for a long time and appeared first in samizdat editions and abroad. All of this resulted from ‘the government’s exclusive power to decide the nature of information given. The party dictates what can be published and what cannot.’

Although the Charter 77 document related only to Czechoslovakia and dealt mainly with information in its narrower aspect of news and public affairs, its critique of official media and their content clearly applied to other countries of Eastern Europe and to the entire realm of communication, including publication of ideas in books, journals, and other forms. In all these fields freedom of expression was restricted not merely by censorship, although this was a powerful instrument of constraint, but even more by the monopoly of control.
possessed by party and state, enabling all forms of publication to be moulded in the shape desired through direct management of the media and of publishing, the constant purge of personnel, manipulation of the ideology, and enforced conformity with officially determined criteria.  

As a result it is not surprising that those who dissented from established policies and attitudes sought alternative forms of communication. György Konrád, Hungarian author, has written of ‘the craving for communication’ which was ‘haunting Europe’.  

Vilém Prečan, Czech historian, now in exile, referred to ‘a parallel information system’ in his homeland, a ‘free journalism’, ‘born of the will for free expression’ and publishing what ‘the official information monopoly of a totalitarian regime conceals and keeps secret’.  

In similar vein, a Polish journalist, Tomasz Mianowicz, also in exile, referred to ‘the breaking of the Communist state monopoly of information’ as ‘one of the chief causes of the Polish workers’ success in August 1980’ and described the uncensored press and publications as ‘an essential element of life in Poland,’ even under military rule.

These East Europeans were referring to the remarkable phenomenon of ‘independent communications’, well known in its Soviet form under the Russian acronym, samizdat. Although there was no equivalent term in the languages of Eastern Europe, the same phenomenon, which manifested itself in varying forms and degrees in the countries of the area, was, faute de mieux, called by this term.  

High points of development occurred in Poland, not only in the four years preceding the rise of Solidarity and during the years of ‘renewal’ in 1980 and 1981, but even later, under martial law and its successor, the highly repressive authoritarian system of ‘normalised’ Poland. In Czechoslovakia, Charter 77 served as a catalyst for the substantial expansion of independent communications which already existed on a small scale before 1977. More recently, Hungarians, spurred on at first by Charter 77, and then by events in Poland, developed more restricted forms of free expression. Elsewhere in Eastern Europe the independent dissemination of information and ideas was limited largely to actions by individuals and did not assume the more institutionalised form of the other three countries.

This chapter will discuss independent communications in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary and three main types of their content and transmission. The first, ‘independent information’, may be roughly equated with an independent press, and includes a great variety of publications, such as regular ‘newspapers’ or news bulletins.