

THE ROLE OF THE PRESS AND MEDIA IN DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES

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Abstract. This article examines the relationship between political regime type, press freedom, and institutional trust in post-Soviet countries. The study draws on normative media theory, Dahl's theory of polyarchy, and Timur Kuran's theory of preference falsification. The empirical analysis combines data from the seventh wave of the World Values Survey with the Democracy Index published by the Economist Intelligence Unit and the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders.

The findings reveal a strong positive correlation between democracy and press freedom at the global level, supporting the expectations of normative media theory. At the same time, several post-Soviet authoritarian regimes exhibit relatively high levels of declared trust in government institutions and elections. This pattern is consistent with Kuran's argument that publicly expressed political attitudes may differ from private preferences under conditions of limited political competition.

The study contributes to the comparative analysis of post-Soviet political regimes by demonstrating that while press freedom is closely associated with democratic development, institutional trust is also shaped by broader political contexts.

Keywords: press, media, democracy, political regime, electoral autocracy, normative media theory, institutional trust.

Introduction.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, all post-Soviet states formally declared their path to democratic development. However, decades later, these countries show different dynamics. Some countries (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia) have successfully consolidated democratic institutions, while others (Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine) are commonly classified as "gray zone" or hybrid regimes. A third group has established and consolidated authoritarian regimes (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024). This variation raises an important question: which factors are associated with successful democratic development?

Democratic development is associated with a wide range of factors, including competitive elections (Schumpeter, 1995), the strength of civil society (Habermas, 2016), and the presence of free media (Siebert et al., 2023; Hallin & Mancini, 2012), among others. Among these, the relationship between political regimes and the media has

Received: 30.04.2026; Revised: 06.08.2026; Approved: 28.09.2026; Available online: 30.09.2026

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attracted particular attention. Normative media theory argues that media systems largely reflect the characteristics of political regimes, whereas the theories of competitive authoritarianism and media capture suggest that formal media institutions may coexist with substantial political control (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2012).

Although numerous studies have examined the relationship between democracy and media freedom, less attention has been paid to how these institutional characteristics relate to citizens' declared institutional trust in post-Soviet countries. This article addresses this gap by combining cross-national democracy and press freedom indices with survey data from the World Values Survey.

Two main hypotheses guide the study. The first hypothesis is based on normative media theory, positing a positive relationship between democracy and press freedom, suggesting that free media are an institutional outcome of democratic development.

The second hypothesis is based on T. Kuran's idea that authoritarian contexts may report higher levels of declared institutional trust in government institutions and the press. This pattern may be the result of specific political and media discourse, as well as from limited opportunities for meaningful political participation.

The empirical sources of the study include the Democracy Index developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit, the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders, and data from the World Values Survey (Wave 7, 2017–2022). By combining these data sources, the study examines the relationship between political regime type, press freedom, and institutional trust in post-Soviet countries.

Literature Review

Classical theories of media and democracy.

The relationship between political regime and media has a long intellectual tradition, dating back to the Enlightenment. Libertarian (normative) media theory represents one of the earliest traditions in communication studies. Its foundations are rooted in the liberal philosophical ideas of the XVIIth–XIXth centuries, particularly in the works of John Locke and John Mill. In 1956, this tradition was systematized by F. Siebert, T. Peterson, and W. Schramm (Siebert et al, 2023).

The basic idea is that the type of political regime determines the structure and the functioning of media systems. In authoritarian countries, the government exercises control over all communication channels, whereas in democratic countries, media are expected to operate independently from government interference. The less the state controls the media, the more favorable the conditions for free expression, allowing individuals to express their views openly. Thus, according to normative media theory, political regimes shape the organization and functioning of media systems.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Joseph Schumpeter formulated the basic ideas of the theory of minimal democracy. Although his theory does not directly address the press, it is indirectly related. Schumpeter argued that democracy exists where the institutionalized electoral competition allows citizens to select and replace political leaders through elections. In this context, the connection to the media is indirect; the media serve as instruments of electoral competition and play an important role in facilitating political competition. (Schumpeter, 1995).

In the 1960s, Jurgen Habermas formulated the idea of the public sphere. While prior researchers had focused more on the political regime, Jurgen Habermas's theory emphasized the role of the media in shaping democracy in the Western world. The central idea is that democracy is impossible without free public communication. In Europe, printing began to develop during the 17th and 18th centuries, with the emergence of weekly and daily magazines and newspapers. Habermas argued that democracy depends on a free public sphere in which independent media provide a platform for public discussion and contribute to the development of civil society (Habermas, 2016). More recent empirical research has extended Habermas's theoretical arguments by examining the role of media in political participation. Building on this perspective, Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova (2015) demonstrate that access to independent media can significantly influence protest activity and political participation. (Enikolopov, Makarin, and Petrova, 2015).

In the mid-20th century, Dahl developed the theory of polyarchy ("multi-power," "rule of the many"). He argued that modern complex democracies cannot be achieved directly. Therefore, they are achieved where a combination of factors exists, particularly high electoral competition and the ability of the opposition to run for office and win elections. One key factor is freedom of speech – the presence of independent media (Dahl, 1971)

Contemporary approaches to media in authoritarian contexts.

In the 2000s, S. Levitsky and L. Way developed the concept of competitive authoritarianism. The core idea is that the presence of formal democratic institutions – such as elections and even nominally independent media – does not necessarily guarantee the emergence of a democratic political regime. Levitsky and Way argued that, unlike fully authoritarian systems, competitive authoritarian regimes may allow the operation of opposition media. However, these regimes maintain power by strategically manipulating democratic institutions, including elections and the media environment. In this context, media play an ambivalent role: they may both legitimize authoritarian rule and provide opportunities for political contestation. (Levitsky and Way, 2010).

The theory of media capture, closely related to the theory of regulatory capture, emerged in the 2000s - 2010s. Media capture theory argues that political and economic actors may influence media organizations through financial, regulatory, or coercive mechanisms. As a result, formally independent media may continue to reflect elite interests rather than operate autonomously (Stigler, 2021; Louis-Sidois et al, 2023).

Another relatively recent line of research focuses on democratic backsliding. This body of work examines how regimes with formally democratic features gradually move away from democratic governance and revert toward authoritarianism. In this context, the dismantling of democratic institutions is characterized by the erosion of independent media (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2012).

Another area of research examining institutional trust in authoritarian regimes is Timur Kuran's work "Private Truths, Public Lies" (Kuran, 1995). Kuran's theory of preference falsification explains why individuals may publicly express political attitudes that differ from their private beliefs. In politically restrictive environments, concerns about social or political consequences may encourage citizens to conform publicly to dominant opinions. Consequently, survey-based measures may capture higher levels of declared institutional trust than individuals privately hold.

Overall, the literature suggests two broad perspectives. Classical theories emphasize the role of free media as a fundamental institution of democratic governance. More recent approaches focus on authoritarian contexts, highlighting how political control over media and preference falsification may shape both media systems and citizens' publicly expressed institutional trust.

Materials and Methods

This study draws on data from the international survey program, the World Values Survey (WVS). WVS is an international database that studies political, economic, religious, and cultural values worldwide. The WVS database includes 120 countries (covering 94.5% of the world's population) and uses over 600 indicators to study values. The analysis used data from Wave 7, a series of surveys conducted worldwide from 2017 to 2022.

The study focuses on 12 post-Soviet countries, for which data are available. The analysis included questions on confidence in institutions: the press (question 66), government (question 71), and elections (question 77). Distributions of respondents' responses are presented as indices. The index was obtained using the formula.

$$TrustIndex = \frac{Trustpos - Trustneg}{Trustpos + Trustneg}$$

Trustpos denotes the proportion of respondents who answered "a great deal" and "quite a lot", whereas Trustneg denotes the proportion who answered "not very much" and "none at all". Responses such as "I don't know" and "No answer" were excluded from the data due to their relatively low frequencies. The resulting index ranges from -1 (complete distrust) to 1 (complete trust), with 0 indicating a neutral balance between positive and negative evaluations.

The analysis was conducted using unweighted WVS data, which should be considered a limitation of the study.

Hypothesis 2, based on Thomas Kuran's theory, is tested using the constructed trust indices. It suggests that higher levels of declared institutional trust are observed in authoritarian countries compared to democratic ones.

To analyze the relationship between political regime freedom and press freedom, scatterplots are constructed using two indices: The Democracy Index developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit and the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders.

The Democracy Index is compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit and covers 167 countries. It is based on five categories: elections and pluralism, civil liberties, government performance, political engagement, and political culture. Political regimes are ranked into four types: full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes (autocracies).

The World Press Freedom Index (RSF) is compiled by the international nongovernmental organization Reporters Without Borders (RSF). The index assesses the level of press freedom in approximately 180 countries. The index is composed of the following categories: journalistic freedom, media independence, journalistic safety, and institutional environment. Press freedom is rated from “Good” to “Very Serious.” Both the Democracy Index and the World Press Freedom Index rely partly on expert assessments, which should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Because Wave 7 of the World Values Survey does not include all post-Soviet states, the institutional trust analysis is based on the 12 countries for which WVS data are available. In contrast, the Democracy Index and the World Press Freedom Index provide data for all 15 post-Soviet countries and are therefore used in the comparative analysis of political regimes and press freedom.

Table 1 below shows the Democracy and Press Freedom Indexes for post-Soviet countries. The table shows that the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) have the best press freedom conditions. The democratic situation in these countries is also good, and these countries are classified as imperfect democracies. Moldova also falls into the imperfect democracy category. While the Baltic states have a good press freedom situation, Moldova is classified as satisfactory.

The next block consists of Armenia, Ukraine, and Georgia. The press situation in these countries is classified as problematic, and Armenia, Ukraine, and Georgia are defined as hybrid regimes.

Countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Russia, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan fall into the authoritarian regime category, with the press situation in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan classified as difficult, and in Azerbaijan, Russia, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, it is classified as very difficult.

Hypothesis 1 is tested by examining the relationship between two indices. It is based on normative media theory, which posits an independence between political regime type and the level of press freedom.

Scatterplots were constructed using R.

Table 1 presents the Democracy Index and the World Press Freedom Index in post-Soviet countries (2024)

Country	Regime Type	Democracy Index	Press Freedom Category	Press Freedom Score
Estonia	Full democracy	8,13	Good	86,44
Latvia	Flawed democracy	7,66	Good	82,9
Lithuania	Flawed democracy	7,59	Good	81,73
Moldova	Flawed democracy	6,04	Satisfactory	74,86
Armenia	Hybrid regime	5,35	Satisfactory	71,6
Ukraine	Hybrid regime	4,9	Problematic	65,0
Georgia	Hybrid regime	4,7	Problematic	53,05
Kyrgyzstan	Authoritarian regime	3,52	Difficult	49,11
Kazakhstan	Authoritarian regime	3,08	Difficult	41,11
Azerbaijan	Authoritarian regime	2,8	Very serious	27,99
Russia	Authoritarian regime	2,03	Very serious	29,86
Uzbekistan	Authoritarian regime	2,1	Very serious	37,27
Belorussia	Authoritarian regime	1,99	Very serious	26,8
Tajikistan	Authoritarian regime	1,83	Very serious	33,31
Turkmenistan	Authoritarian regime	1,66	Very serious	22,01

The Research Results

The first block of analysis is related to Hypothesis 2, which is grounded on Kuran's theory that people in more rigid political regimes tend to express higher levels of declared support for state institutions than in democratic ones. To test this hypothesis, data from the WVS database were used from post-Soviet countries that participated in the values survey. The analysis focuses on Question 71, which asks, "How much do you trust each institution – completely, somewhat, not very, or not at all? The government."

Figure 1 displays respondents' responses in index form. The graph shows that respondents from Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan express higher trust in their governments, while in Ukraine, Armenia, Latvia, Georgia, Lithuania, and Estonia, the proportion of negative assessments exceeds positive ones, resulting in a negative index.

This distribution is consistent with Kuran's argument that a more restrictive political environment is associated with higher levels of publicly expressed support. Respondents in countries classified as full democracies, flawed democracies, and hybrid regimes tend to report lower levels of trust in their governments, whereas the opposite pattern is observed in more authoritarian contexts. Despite the fairly clear division of countries by regime type, the observed distribution should be interpreted with caution and warrants further statistical testing.

This hypothesis was also tested using additional survey items: Question 66, "How much do you trust each institution – completely, somewhat, not very, or not at all? The Press" and Question 76, "How much do you trust each institution – completely, somewhat, not very, or not at all? Elections."

A similar pattern is observed for confidence in the press, although the relationship is less consistent than for confidence in government. For instance, Tajikistan (0.202), Kazakhstan (0.148), and Azerbaijan (0.070) show positive trust in the press. However, Lithuania (0.122), defined as a flawed democracy, is also among these countries. At the same time, eight countries display a negative level of trust in the press. The lowest levels of trust are observed in Georgia (-0.286), Estonia (-0.273), and Russia (-0.248). These are followed by Latvia (-0.240), Ukraine (-0.201), and Belarus (-0.179). Armenia and Kyrgyzstan show the least negative values among countries with overall negative trust indices.

Overall, these findings provide partial support for Hypothesis 2, as countries classified as more authoritarian tend to show higher levels of positive evaluations, consistent with the pattern observed in the previous indicator.

The question on confidence in elections was asked in only four countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Russia. The results for confidence in elections generally follow the same pattern, although they are based on only four countries and should therefore be interpreted cautiously. The highest level of confidence in the elections is observed in Tajikistan (0.62), followed by Kazakhstan (0.16). In both countries, positive assessments exceed negative ones, resulting in positive index values. In contrast, negative evaluations outweigh positive ones in Russia and Kyrgyzstan. The lowest level of confidence is observed in Kyrgyzstan (-0.244), followed by Russia (-0.112).

Overall, the findings provide partial support for Hypothesis 2. Across the three indicators, respondents in more authoritarian contexts generally report higher levels of declared institutional trust. However, several exceptions and the limited country coverage suggest that these findings should be interpreted with caution.

Thus, Hypothesis 2 receives partial empirical support. However, given the limited number of countries included in this part of the analysis, the results should be interpreted with caution.

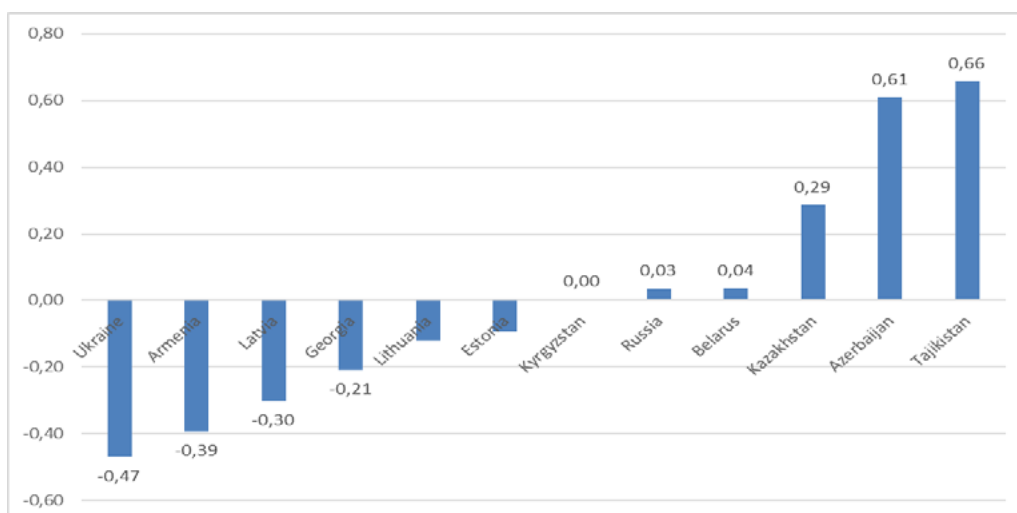


Figure 1. Government Confidence Index
Source: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>

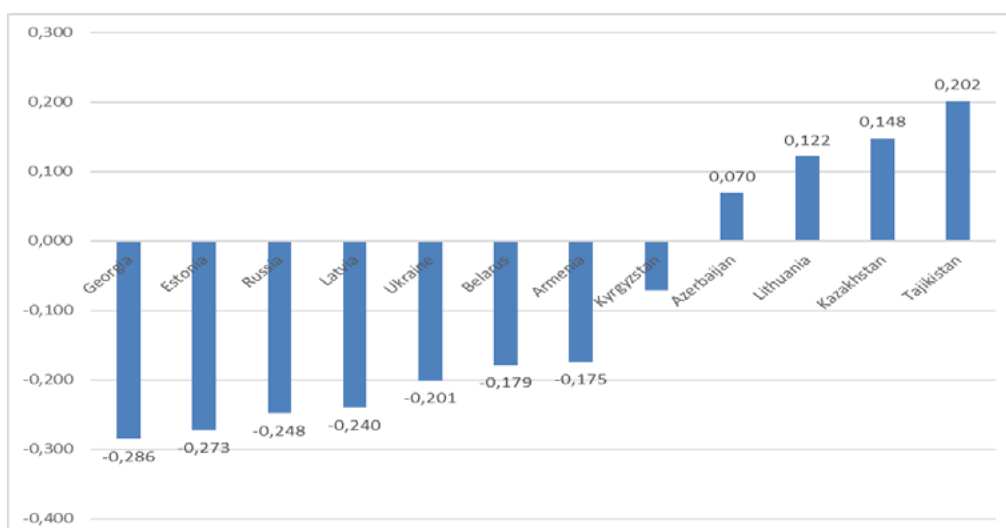


Figure 2. Press Confidence Index
Source: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>

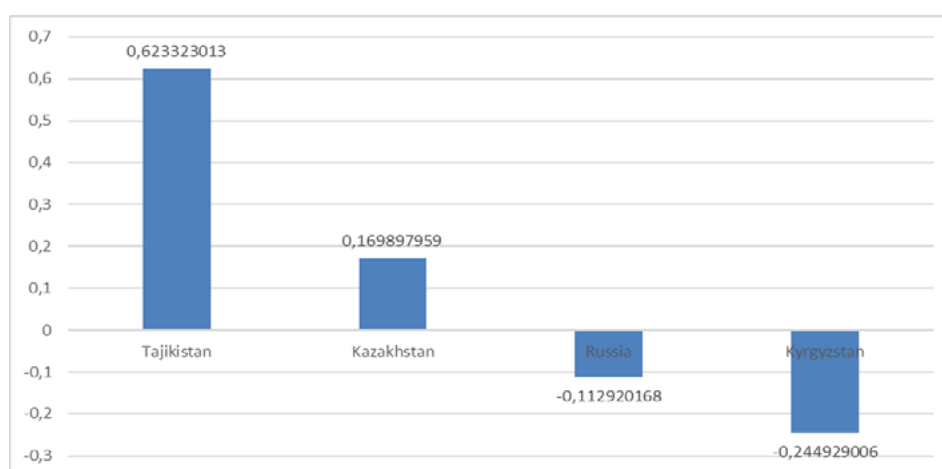


Figure 3. Election Confidence Index
Source: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>

The second stage of the analysis tests Hypothesis 1, which is grounded on normative media theory and posits that each type of political regime is associated with a corresponding type of media system. To test this hypothesis, two scatterplots were constructed based on the Democracy Index developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit and the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders, and a correlation analysis was conducted.

The first scatterplot, based on a global sample of more than 150 countries, shows a strong linear relationship between the variables. The distribution of points forms a clear upward trend, indicating that a higher level of democratization is associated with a higher level of press freedom.

The correlation analysis reveals a strong positive linear relationship between the variables ($r = 0.80$, $p < .001$, $N = 156$). This finding suggests a close association between the level of media freedom and the degree of democratic development, in line with the expectations of normative media theory. However, it is important to note that correlation does not imply causation, and no conclusions can be drawn about a cause-and-effect relationship between the variables.

The second scatterplot reflects the relationship in post-Soviet countries. Similar to the global sample, it reveals a strong linear relationship: more democratic regimes tend to be associated with a higher level of press freedom ($r = 0.970$, $p < .001$, $N = 14$). However, given the limited number of observations, the correlation results for post-Soviet countries should be interpreted with caution. However, the regression line suggests that the observed data points closely follow the overall trend, indicating a relatively consistent relationship between the variables.

Taken together, both analyses support Hypothesis 1. Across both the global and post-Soviet samples, higher levels of democracy are consistently associated with greater press freedom.

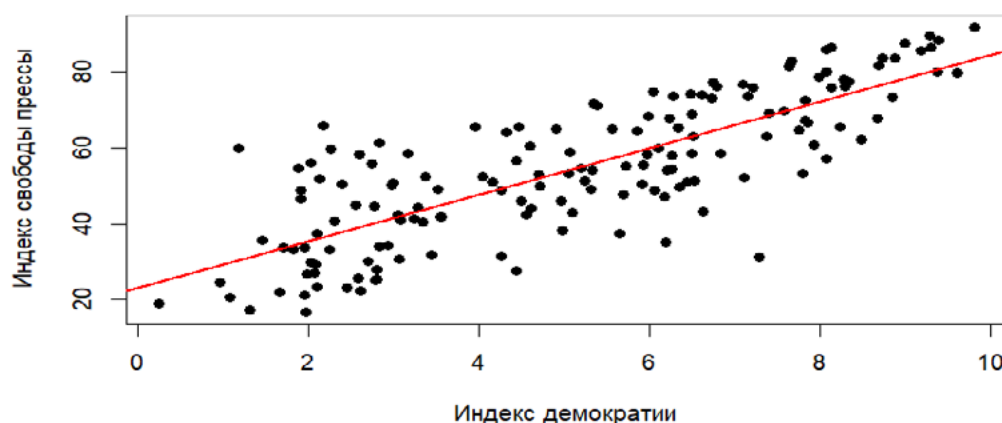


Figure 4. Correlation between Democracy Index and World Press Freedom Index. Global sample

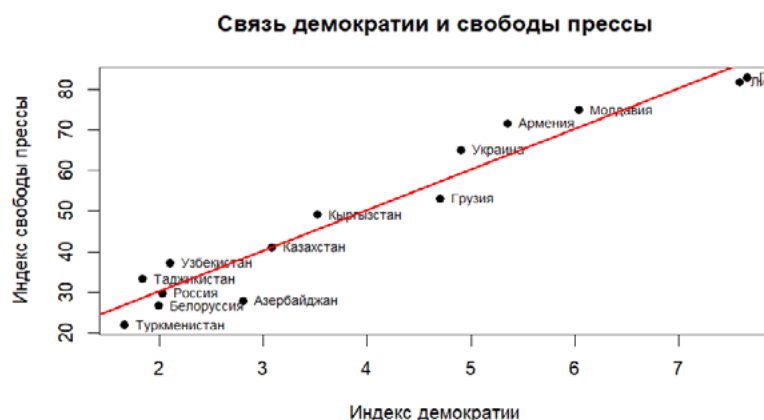


Figure 5. Correlation between Democracy Index and World Press Freedom Index. Post-Soviet countries sample

Conclusions

This article examined the relationships between political regime type, institutional trust, and the level of press freedom. The empirical analysis was based on the Democracy Index developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit and the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders, and data from the World Values Survey.

First, a strong positive correlation was found at the global level between political regime type and the level of press freedom. The results indicate a strong association between democratic development and media freedom. This relationship is explained within the framework of normative media theory, which posits that media systems reflect the nature of the political regime. However, correlation does not equal causation, so the findings require careful interpretation.

Second, the analysis of post-Soviet countries reveals that citizens' subjective assessments are not always fully explained by formal regime typologies. Several post-Soviet countries classified as electoral autocracies display relatively high levels of declared trust in government institutions and elections. The findings are partially consistent with Kuran's theory, which suggests that in more restrictive political regimes, individuals may demonstrate a higher level of publicly expressed loyalty.

Overall, the findings provide support for the first hypothesis by demonstrating a strong association between democracy and press freedom. The results also provide partial support for the second hypothesis, as several post-Soviet authoritarian regimes exhibit relatively high levels of declared institutional trust.

However, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the international indices used in the analysis are partially based on expert assessments. Second, the correlation analysis does not allow for strong causation inferences. Third, a relatively small number of observations for post-Soviet countries requires cautious interpretation of results. In addition, the analysis was conducted using unweighted WVS data, which should be considered a limitation of the study.

Another important limitation concerns the interpretation category "press". In different political contexts, respondents may associate press with different types of media institutions. In more restrictive media environments, respondents may primarily interpret the press as state-affiliated or government-aligned media rather than independent journalism. Consequently, higher levels of declared trust in the press do not necessarily indicate support for independent media institutions.

Further research could focus on a more detailed analysis of the mechanism underlying institutional trust in post-Soviet authoritarian and hybrid regimes.

Funding. The research in the article was carried out with grant funding from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan within the framework of the AP26104035 "The influence of new digital media on the political behavior of Kazakhstanis in the context of the development of artificial intelligence".

Conflicts of Interest

The author declare no conflicts of interest.

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БАСПА МЕН МЕДИАНЫҢ ДЕМОКРАТИЯЛЫҚ ДАМУДАҒЫ РӨЛІ: ПОСТКЕҢЕСТІК ЕЛДЕР МЫСАЛЫНДА

Аңдатпа. Мақалада посткеңестік елдердегі саяси режим түрі, баспасөз бостандығы және институционалдық сенім арасындағы өзара байланыс зерттеледі. Зерттеудің теориялық негізін БАҚ-тың нормативтік теориясы, Р. Дальдың полиархия теориясы және Т. Куранның артықшылықтарды бұрмалау (preference falsification) теориясы құрайды. Эмпирикалық талдау Дүниежүзілік құндылықтарды зерттеудің (World Values Survey) жетінші толқынының деректеріне, Economist Intelligence Unit жариялайтын Демократия индексіне және «Шекарасыз тілшілер» ұйымы жариялайтын Дүниежүзілік баспасөз бостандығы индексіне негізделген.

Зерттеу нәтижелері жаһандық деңгейде демократия мен баспасөз бостандығы арасында күшті оң корреляция бар екенін көрсетеді, бұл БАҚ-тың нормативтік теориясының негізгі тұжырымдарын растайды. Сонымен қатар бірқатар посткеңестік авторитарлық мемлекеттерде мемлекеттік институттар мен сайлауға деген жария түрде білдірілетін сенім деңгейінің салыстырмалы түрде жоғары екені байқалады. Бұл үрдіс Т. Куранның артықшылықтарды бұрмалау теориясымен сәйкес келеді, оған сәйкес саяси бәсекелестік шектеулі жағдайда азаматтардың жария түрде білдіретін саяси көзқарастары олардың шынайы жеке ұстанымдарынан өзгеше болуы мүмкін.

Зерттеу посткеңестік елдердің саяси режимдерін салыстырмалы талдауға үлес қосады және баспасөз бостандығы демократиялық дамумен тығыз байланысты болғанымен, институционалдық сенім деңгейі кеңірек саяси контекстің ықпалымен де қалыптасатынын көрсетеді.

Негізгі ұғымдар: бұқаралық ақпарат құралдары (БАҚ), баспасөз, демократия, саяси режим, электоралдық автократия, БАҚ-тың нормативтік теориясы, институционалдық сенім.

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РОЛЬ ПРЕССЫ И МЕДИА В ДЕМОКРАТИЧЕСКОМ РАЗВИТИИ: АНАЛИЗ ПОСТСОВЕТСКИХ СТРАН

Аннотация. В статье исследуется взаимосвязь между типом политического режима, уровнем свободы прессы и институциональным доверием в постсоветских странах. Теоретическую основу исследования составляют нормативная теория СМИ, теория полиархии Р. Даля и теория фальсификации предпочтений Т. Курана. Эмпирический анализ основан на данных седьмой волны Всемирного исследования ценностей (World Values Survey), а также на Индексе демократии от Economist Intelligence Unit и Всемирном индексе свободы прессы организации «Репортеры без границ».

Результаты исследования демонстрируют наличие сильной положительной корреляции между уровнем демократии и свободой прессы на глобальном уровне, что подтверждает положения нормативной теории СМИ. Вместе с тем в ряде постсоветских авторитарных государств наблюдаются относительно высокие уровни декларируемого доверия к государственным институтам и выборам. Данная закономерность согласуется с теорией фальсификации предпочтений Т. Курана, согласно которой в условиях ограниченной политической конкуренции публично выражаемые политические установки могут отличаться от частных предпочтений граждан.

Исследование вносит вклад в сравнительный анализ политических режимов постсоветских стран, демонстрируя, что, уровень институционального доверия, наряду со свободой прессы, определяется более широким политическим контекстом.

Ключевые слова: пресса, СМИ, демократия, политический режим, электоральная автократия, нормативная теория СМИ, институциональное доверие.

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