The collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991 created hopes for many, both within the crumbling empire’s borders and in the West, that newly independent ex-republics would make a rapid transition to democratic governance and respect for human rights, including a free press and freedom of expression. Although almost a quarter-century has passed, those expectations have largely failed to materialise in twelve of the fifteen former SSRs, including all those in Central Asia and the Caucasus. We consider these countries to be “repressitarian”—both repressive in human rights practices and authoritarian in governance (Freedman et al., 2010). The three exceptions are the Baltic countries of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

Geographic proximity to countries with relative press freedom and other press traditions helps explain why the Baltics moved in one direction after 1991 while Central Asia and the Caucasus stayed close to the Soviet attitude toward the mass media and constraints on free expression. Although bordered to the east by Russia and Belarus, residents of the Baltics—especially those who are not of Russian ethnicity—are much more likely to turn toward the Nordic countries, Germany and further westward for news, information, and entertainment. During Soviet times, the Baltics were more apt to host anti-communist dissidents and outlawed underground publications known as samizdat, as well as citizens who clandestinely listened to news transmissions from the West and had access to smuggled Western publications.

The longtime operative premise in Western society is that press freedom and press independence are critical components of democratic, transparent governance and essential to the success of other institutions of civil society. Whether those expectations were ever realistic, even in the heady early years following independence, or mere...
daydreams, cannot be addressed in a single article. Rather we provide a comparative examination of the current actual mass media environment in these eleven countries. We have previously explored these three region’s press systems in separate studies (see for example, Freedman and Shafer, 2014, 2012, 2011; Shafer and Freedman, 2012). This is the first time we have done so comparatively, synthesising previous work to parse out factors that may account for their current post-independent divergence on commitment and support for democratic national media systems.

During the Soviet era (about 1920 to 1991), research into its monolithic mass media system was limited. Most was by scholars working outside of the USSR because the Soviet government generally prohibited such research and saw critique of its press system as anti-social and seditious. Since the press system was owned and controlled by the state, it was not subject to open and critical analysis by Soviet academics or citizens. After the breakup of the USSR, however, there has been a growing but still limited body of scholarship about the press systems of individual ex-republics, as well as regional press studies.

Following a statement of the research problem, this article presents key characteristics of the Soviet press system, followed by an overview of the media freedom environment in these eleven countries. It then discusses possible explanations for the failure of most of these countries to develop and sustain independent, economically and politically viable systems that value, encourage and support freedom of the press. Lastly, it speculates on the future of freedom of expression in the three regions.

Statement of the Research Problem

Almost twenty-five years have passed since the end of the Soviet era and the arrival of independence. According to Richter, in the beginning in a number of former Soviet republics, the definition of press freedom and “its practical implementation have in large measure moved towards a Western model” in the Baltics states, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (2008: 319). However, that movement slowed to a crawl or stopped in all the Baltics. Some countries elsewhere have successfully transitioned from authoritarian control over the press to independent press and from suppression of press rights to recognition and safeguarding of press rights. Among them are Poland and the Czech Republic. Others, such as South Korea and Mongolia, have press systems that are close to “free” status.

Among the three regions covered by this article, a clear transition toward press freedom has occurred only in the Baltics. Thus the question is: What factors or variables may account for the achievement of press freedom in the Baltics and the dismissal failure to achieve that transition in Central Asia and the Caucasus? Since all of the new national press systems emerged from the monolithic Soviet press system, and because most journalists in the new nations in the early 1990s were former Soviet journalists and often Communist Party members, we first look at the nature the Soviet press system to suggest what aspects might have been retained by governments interested in maintaining similarly tight press controls.
The Soviet Press System as an Appendage of the Communist Party

Soviet control of Central Asia and the Caucasus lasted about seven decades. By comparison, the Baltics were under Moscow’s subjugation for a shorter period, briefly before Nazi Germany’s invasion in 1941 and then from 1944-1945 until 1991. Despite that difference, newspapers, magazines, radio, and television in all three regions shared lengthy tenures as tightly controlled appendages of the overall Soviet press system.

As agents rather than independent actors, journalists and news organisation furthered collectivisation of agriculture and industry, rallied citizen backing for “five-year” plans and other centralised economic agendas, and promoted public support against Nazi Germany’s aggression and later the Cold War with the West (Antonova et al., 2011).

Moscow entrusted its journalists with advancing unification of the country’s widely varied cultures and to dispelling ethnic and cultural conflicts, especially possible religion-based and separatist terrorism. As a result of these strategies and the pervasive nature of state media, the country generally was successful in imbuing its diverse citizenry with a sense of national identity and patriotism.

As for journalistic principles, Altschull wrote:

> No doubt existed in any mind that newspapers, magazines, and broadcasting outlets were required to operate within the boundaries fixed by the Party. Journalism students in the Soviet orbit were instructed to present information “objectively” and work for the benefit of society. To present contrary information was thus unacceptable….not surprisingly, Marxist schools of journalism failed to examine the financing of the Soviet press but taught that capitalist journalists served the interests of the paymaster (the Party). They dismissed Western notions of fairness and balance as mere pretenses and held that objectivity was possible only under the banner of Marxism-Leninism (1994: 377).

That philosophy clashed with an international professional ethic—or at least with a Western professional ethic—for journalists to be independent observers of events, recorders of news, and analysts who actively attempt to avoid personal ideologies and political biases. Within that model, society expects journalists to engage in fair, balanced, ethical, accurate, and fact-based reporting, regardless of medium.

The paths that the newly independent countries took toward establishing and directing new national press systems were divergent, and were, of course, closely related to individual nationalistic, social, historical, economic, geo-political, linguistic, ethnic, geographical, religious, and other circumstances. Since this study is limited and exploratory, we attempt to cast some light on a few of these variables and to stimulate an interest in exploring others.
Three Regional Media Environments

This section provides an overview of the environment for press freedom in each country, divided into the three regions as background and context for analysis of factors that obstruct or encourage press freedom. As this section shows, none of these countries—or, for that matter, any other country—allows absolute freedom of expression. Even the most liberal press law at times puts free expression behind personal privacy, damage to reputation, national security, intellectual property rights, religious and ethnic tolerance, gender equity, conceptions of “public” information, dignity of officials and governmental institutions, and other concerns that are also highly valued in democratic societies. We are interested here in how each government addresses values related to press freedom and adjudicates conflicts between those values and competing ones.

The existence of verifiable press constraints in recent years has drawn criticism directed at virtually all these countries. Some are reflected quantitatively by international NGOs such as Reporters sans Frontières, Freedom House, and International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) that use different criteria and variables in reaching their assessments (for example, Becker and Vlad, 2011).

The following country press freedom summaries are based on reports and analyses by a) human and press rights groups such as Freedom House (www.freedomhouse.org); Reporters Sans Frontières (www.rwb.org); Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) (www.cpj.org); IREX (www.irex.org); Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org); Article 19 (www.article19.org), and Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org); b) government agencies such as the U.S. State Department (http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper); c) multinational organisations such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Representative on Freedom of the Media (OSCE) (http://www.osce.org/fom); and d) news media in and outside these regions.

The primary time frame of these country overviews is 2013, although some include data from 2012 and developments in 2014. “Positive” (pro-press rights) and “negative” (anti-press rights) events have occurred since 1 January 2014. For example in May 2014, the president of Kyrgyzstan signed a controversial “false accusation law” that essentially recriminalises libel, over objections from OSCE, press rights defenders in the country and abroad, OSCE, and the U.S. Embassy.

Baltics

Since independence, these countries accomplished a metamorphosis from communism to democratic governance unequalled among other Soviet republics. This transformation could not happen without a pluralistic press system. Despite occasional setbacks, politically inspired attempts to legislate constraints,
infotainment trends, doubts about economic sustainability, and other concerns, the press here fares quite well compared to most of the world—not only Central Asia but also nearby Russia and Belarus.

Estonia

Ranked eleventh by Reporters sans Frontières among 180 countries in press freedom, Estonia encountered no major problems in its media environment in 2013. As the U.S. State Department reported, “The constitution provides for freedom of speech and press, and the government generally respected these rights. An independent press, an effective judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to promote freedom of speech and press.” The State Department also reported no restrictions by the government on Internet access and no inappropriate monitoring of online chat rooms or email.

However, in October 2013 the European Court of Human Rights upheld earlier Estonian judicial decisions that news portal Delfi A.S. could be held liable for third-party offensive comments about a shipping company owner that were posted on its website. The court said Delfi should have prevented the abusive comments from appearing on its site, even though it removed the when it received a complaint. The case is on further appeal.

Latvia

Overall, according to the State Department, “The independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views with few restrictions. Despite generally high marks for press freedom, however, the press freedom environment in Latvia was marred on both the judicial and the legislative fronts. In January 2013, journalist Leonids Jakobsons faced criminal prosecution for violating the right to private correspondence because he had leaked to the public allegedly “private” e-mails between a foreign diplomat and the mayor of Riga.

On the legislative front, parliament in June 2013 widened the existing ban on use of Nazi and Soviet symbols, such as anthems, flags, and coats of arms, during public events. National law already limited speech that incites racial or ethnic hatred or spreads misinformation about the country’s financial system.

Lithuania

The government took disturbing actions against several press organisations. An October 2013 court decision upheld a three-month suspension imposed by the Radio and Television Commission on rebroadcasting some programming on the Russian-produced First Baltics Channel. The suspension applied to programs produced in non-European Union countries. The government’s move was motivated by the channel’s airing of a film earlier that month denying that “Soviet aggression against Lithuania” had occurred in 1991. As the U.S. State Department reported, “While
the independent media were active and expressed a wide variety of views, they were subject to the same laws that prohibit ‘hate speech’ and criminalise speech that grossly trivialises international and war crimes.”

**Caucasus**

None of these three countries has developed a sustainable, free, and independent press system that recognises the rights of journalists and individual citizens to free expression. Activities by governments and by individuals and institutions outside the governments routinely suppress journalistic professionalism and impede the open flow of information and news. Such conduct conflicts with nominal—only on paper—guarantees of press freedom written into national constitutions but ignored in practice. Even as they look westward to Europe in many economic and political matters, these countries eschew a commitment to protect press rights.

**Armenia**

Critiques of the Armenian press suggest that the press system is relatively free in comparison to other former Soviet republics. There were no recent reported incidents of harassment of journalists, except for incidents during the February 2013 presidential election. However, press rights advocates did report that media outlets, particularly broadcasters, feared reprisals for critical reporting about the government. There were no reports of government restrictions on access to the Internet last year.

Newspaper circulation remains limited, and private interests own most newspapers. Not surprisingly, the newspapers tend to lean toward the political interests of their owners. Only a few newspapers operate in an economically sound and self-sustaining manner.

**Azerbaijan**

The government’s pledged commitment to press freedom was questioned again in May 2014 when a court sentenced Parviz Hashimli, the editor of the independent news website *Moderator* and a reporter for the independent newspaper *Bizim Yol*, to eight years in prison on disputed firearms charges. Also this year, two French journalists had their equipment and video footage confiscated at the Baku Airport after working on a documentary on human rights in the country. CPJ observed that rather than bringing press freedom and human rights in line with the standards of the Council of Europe, Azerbaijan continues sinking to new lows in media repression.

**Georgia**

Freedom House has praised Georgia as a protector of press freedom, saying it has some of the most progressive media legislation in the Caucasus. Even so, government influence over private media, especially broadcast, persisted. Both the government and the political opposition exercise their power to keep the broadcast
media within their own sphere of interest, although in 2013 parliament amended the Law on Broadcast to further “public-value” content. However, concerns remain about political influence over the Georgian Public Broadcaster. There were few reports of verbal or physical harassment of journalists, and media watchdog groups concurred that press freedom is generally strong, with the exception of the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which are occupied by Russian forces and de facto leadership. Lawsuits against journalists are rare.

**Central Asia**

As in the Caucasus, the pattern of press controls in Central Asia remains disturbing. At no time since independence has any of these countries seriously pursued comprehensive liberalisation of constraints or de facto recognition of the importance of free expression. Although several countries—most notably Kyrgyzstan—have undergone periods of liberalisation, there has been no sustained improvement.

**Kazakhstan**

Journalists continued to face physical and legal threats. For example, the press rights defender NGO Adil Soz tallied fourteen charges against reporters for insult and libel and seventy-one lawsuits and claims for damage to “honour, dignity and business reputation” in the first ten months of 2013. Government pressure led to the closure of Stan.kz, an independent Internet-based broadcaster that frequently criticised public officials and had vigorously covered the government’s violent suppression of an oil workers’ strike. The newspaper Molodezhnaya Gazeta was closed in 2013 after reporting about union activism and protests against a mining company. Also, a new statute requires mass media to “assist” state bodies involved in counterterrorism.

On the positive side in July 2013, a court sentenced four defendants to lengthy prison terms for the 2012 shooting and stabbing of journalist Lukpan Akhmedyarov, although the “masterminds behind the attack” have not been charged, according to CPJ.

**Kyrgyzstan**

As Freedom House observed, “The Kyrgyz media landscape experienced some openings in 2013, with a reduced number of legal cases brought against the press, the unblocking of the Ferghana news website, and fewer attacks against journalists.” Other positives included parliament’s failure to pass legislation that would have redefined treason to cover some activities that journalists engage in. Another positive is the continued operation of a bilingual Uzbek-Kyrgyz broadcaster based in Osh.
There were setbacks, however. Among them: In July 2013, a court shut a news website in the minority Uzbek language for allegedly promoting hatred. Journalists were threatened for covering of interethnic relations and other sensitive issues. Some journalists covering political trials and demonstrations were assaulted, and in February 2013 a legislator physically attacked a journalist in retaliation for an online posting. Somebody left grenades and detonators in the office of the independent newspaper *Tribuna*. In addition, journalists acknowledge engaging in self-censorship—“soft censorship”—and in “envelope journalism”—the practice of accepting payments either to report or not to report certain stories. On a government level, the media registration process was often protracted.

**Kazakhstan**

In April 2014, the *Assandi Times*, the last independent newspaper in Kazakhstan, was shuttered after a court in Almaty declared it to be an extension of the already banned *Respublika*. Meanwhile, libel accusations were made against a journalist related to a story she has denied writing. Other recent events include a shutdown order against the independent newspaper *Pravdivaya Gazeta*. Both CPJ and Freedom House consider the country’s oppressive media freedom environment to be declining amid legal restrictions, self-censorship, and risk of retribution against journalists—despite the constitution’s press freedom guarantees. In reality, those guarantees are trumped by its protections for the president and his image.

**Tajikistan**

The government continued to pressure the country’s media. Half of print publications are distributed on an irregular basis, while the broadcast sector is dominated by state-controlled national television that is subservient to the president and fails to cover oppositionist perspectives. The government routinely denies licenses to independent media outlets and otherwise thwarts licensing applications. Freedom House says investigative journalism is rare because of obstructions such as being blocked from official events and being barred from taking photographs. However, The U.S. State Department reported that independent media were active despite government pressures.

Journalists described some subjects as off-limits, although investigatory material was published critical of the regime. Journalists still faced harassment and intimidation by government authorities despite decriminalisation of libel in 2012. Self-censorship to avoid government retribution continued. Despite new and continuing government restrictions on access to websites, individuals could engage in self-expression via the Internet. For example, authorities blocked access to YouTube twice in the first 2014 in reprisal for a posted video of the wedding of the president’s son.
Turkmenistan

In 2013, Turkmenistan passed its first law on press freedom. The statute appears from its language to significantly abolish press controls, according to CPJ, and nominally bans censorship, prohibits the government from monopolising news outlets, and ensures public access to all forms of information, including that from independent and foreign sources. In reality, CPJ observed that the law is a mere charade to burnish the government’s image.

The government dominates the official Internet provider service and restricts access to critical sites, including opposition websites hosted abroad. State-run media disseminate pro-government propaganda and ignore issues relevant to citizens. Most foreign newspapers and periodicals remain banned but satellite dishes provide some access to foreign programming.

Factors Contributing to Divergent Press Laws in the Three Regions

Researchers have yet to persuasively and comprehensively quantify the variables that individually or in combination explain why certain countries adopt and sustain free and independent press systems, while other countries fail to do so. Scholars in journalism and mass communication, political science, area studies, and other disciplines have tried to pinpoint variables to explain why some countries develop free press systems while others do not.

Logically, many if not most variables relate to the presence or absence of other institutions of participatory democracy. Among them are: separation of powers, including judicial review of executive and legislative actions; multiple political parties, free and fair elections; statutes that effectively protect human rights; and a vibrant NGO sector. As Shafer and Freedman (2009) wrote, other proffered predictors include factors internal to each press system such as media economics, Western-oriented training of personnel, newspaper circulation and broadcast audience size, and professional journalistic practices. The study also suggested consideration of other factors as well such as “demographic, cultural, ethnic, religious, and historical variables that may serve as predictors of press freedom” (865).

Several Cold War-era studies suggested variables such as distribution of population and wealth, literacy, and gross national product (Nixon 1960); religious traditions (Gillmor 1962); and life expectancy and education levels (Farace and Donohew 1965). Connolly-Ahern and Golan (2007) also suggested inclusion of religious composition variables in press freedom measures.

However, even without quantitatively verifiable variables, we can speculate on major factors that made it possible for only three of fifteen former Soviet republics—to adopt pluralistic democratic structures of governance with strong protection of press rights and, more broadly, free expression.

In a study of mass media in the Baltics, Hume said the region came nearest to
the Western model because of “a journalism vacuum after communism fell. Non-communist models of journalism found elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe did not survive World War II and the Cold War in the Baltics. All the journalists perished and the profession of journalism ceased to exist” until the Soviets employed new reporters and editors to establish a new form of state propaganda media (2011: 23). For example, she said, “In Estonia, the end of Soviet hegemony in the 1990s coincided with the arrival of a new generation of journalists, who were open to a different model, including the Western inverted pyramid style of writing taught by a University of Tartu (Estonia) teacher who had spent a half a year in the United States in the editorial office of Newsweek” (2011: 23).

We point to three potentially significant indicators of freedom of the press: differences in history, geography, and religion.

First, we postulate that a country’s pre-Soviet or pre-communist press history, at least in these three regions, is a major contributing factor to current divergent media freedom environments.

Journalists in the Caucasus have pushed for press freedom throughout their histories in the context of wider opposition to invaders and occupiers. In czarist times, Russification policies included strict press censorship and suppression of national languages. Armenians were “among the first to use the press to fight for nationalism,” their journalism “has been mainly revolutionary” since the late 18th century, and they were “the first Near Easterners to enter communism by developing an Bolshevik journalism in the Caucasus” through the activities of revolutionaries (Mooradian, 1970).

Similarly in the Baltics journalists had a history of press freedom advocacy before the two Soviet takeovers in the mid-20th century, advocacy that was dangerous given the countries’ vulnerable location between Eastern and Western powers (for example, see Hoyer et al, 1993) and their susceptibility to German, Prussian, Swedish, Polish, French, and Russian invaders and occupiers. Lithuanian intellectuals, not professional journalists, produced newspapers from the earliest days of the press, including the czarist-era Aušra (1883-86) and Varpas (1889-1906) (Balkelis, 2009: 28. And as in the Caucasus, heavy censorship and suppression of national languages were cornerstones of Russification policies.

In contrast, the Central Asian situation differs because there was no advocacy of press freedom pre-Soviet (Czarist) era Central Asia known historically as Russian Turkestan. In fact, there was little mass media at all. There were no printing presses in the khanates when the Russian conquest took place between 1864 and 1876, although a local print trade—owned by Russians, not Central Asians—developed during imperial rule, such as the official Arabic-language organ Turkistan Wilayatining Gazeti (Turkestan Gazette) launched in 1870. As Khalid (1994: 188) wrote, “The Russian authorities had the political power to control the output of the presses through licensing and censorship, and the general poverty of the agrarian economy inhibited the investment needed to operate a printing press.” Thus the tradition of professional journalism did not exist for Central Asians before Russian
imperial occupation, and when journalism did develop in Central Asia, it depended on the Russian language and Russian professional traditions. In summary, Central Asian journalists who were trained under the Soviets did not have an alternative national press tradition to return to after independence.

We also believe that geographic proximity to countries with relative press freedom and other press traditions helps explain why the Baltics moved in one direction after 1991 while Central Asia and the Caucasus stayed close to the Soviet attitude toward the mass media and constraints on free expression. Although bordered to the east by Russia and Belarus, residents of the Baltics—especially those who are not of Russian ethnicity—are much more likely to turn toward the Nordic countries, Germany and further westward for news, information, and entertainment. During Soviet times, the Baltics were more apt to host anti-communist dissidents and outlawed underground publications known as *samizdat*, as well as citizens who clandestinely listened to news transmissions from the West and had access to smuggled Western publications.

The geographic constrains of the Caucasus and Central Asia is far different. With the exception of Turkey which has a deeply troubled but still contentious press, no bordering countries—Russia, China, Afghanistan, Iran—are democracies and none have a free press. At the same time, the dominant foreign media—the most watched, listened to, and read—in these two regions are based in Russia, a country increasingly hostile to media freedom.

Finally, there is the possibility that the religious histories of these countries may influence the presence or absence of press freedom—or at least influence citizen attitudes toward freedom of expression, freedom of faith, and other attributes of democratic governance. To deconstruct these diverse histories would be more ambitious than this article allows. We will, however, provide examples of religion-related circumstances and relationships that are germane to establishment of democracy in these countries.

Islam is the predominant religion in Central Asia and Azerbaijan, although the degree of observance varies. In Armenia and Georgia, the Orthodox Church predominates. Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion in Lithuania. In both Estonia and Latvia, the majority of citizens don’t self-identify with any religion. Among those who do, the largest affiliation is Lutheranism (9.9 percent in Estonia and 19.9 percent in Latvia). We give less attention to religious identification in the Baltics states because of their histories and geographic, cultural, and media proximity to European influences.

Politics, public policy, and religion are closely interrelated in the Caucasus and Central Asia where regimes tightly monitor religion as well as the media, and where religious conflicts persist. Much of the repression of religious coverage by the press in Central Asia is based on fears that the press will inflame Islamic extremism and threaten existing governments. So far, Central Asia has not been a fertile ground for activist or revolutionary religious movements but that situation could change.

There is a logical connection between suppression of religious rights and
suppression of press rights. For example, the U.S. State Department designated Uzbekistan—which has one of the world’s lowest press rights scores—as a “country of particular concern” regarding religious persecution in 2006 and 2011. In that country, religious freedom of unregistered groups is restricted by prohibitions against activities such as proselytising, and adherents of minority religious groups have been fined and jailed for violating such laws.

Because the Orthodox churches of Georgia and Armenia are pillars of nationalism and encourage cultural and political attachments for their adherents, relations between religion and government are somewhat less problematic than in neighboring Azerbaijan. Church authorities are clearly identifiable and can be controlled or manipulated by government. The church, in turn, may influence government and avert elements of authoritarian control.

Conclusion

Press freedom cannot survive in a vacuum and comprises one of several critical elements of civil society (Shafer and Freedman, 2009). The overall results of extensive initiatives to graft or adapt Western democratic press rights principles onto Central Asian and Caucasus polities have proven disappointing to advocates of free expression. Reasons for this failure include cultural traditions, history, internal and trans-national politics, economics, national rivalries, Soviet press and human rights legacies, geography, and the drive by those in power to maintain power. It is unrealistic to assert that one size—one model of press constraints, regulations, and rights—will fit every country in these two regions. As a result, we anticipate that the pace of improvements in their mass media environments will be uneven.

Meanwhile, technological changes will continue to have a growing impact on the media environment. As Bowe et al. wrote, “Around the world, social media offer an informal virtual space for citizens who feel disenfranchised to connect socially. But for those who live in countries such as the three former Soviet republics of the South Caucasus—where free expression is curtailed and official news outlets are under government censorship—…[information and communications technology] offers an increasingly important alternative vehicle for political expression” (2011: 6).

However, technology is a multi-edged sword. It may prove to be a boon, a barrier, or both to press freedom. On one hand, it expands the potential reach of news disseminators, but that includes those with no commitment to fairness, fact-based reporting and opinion, accuracy, or ethical standards. It creates new or different audiences, but simultaneously drains audiences and advertising revenue from traditional news outlets. It may circumvent or bypass censors and onerous media regulations, but at the same time exposes unsophisticated and vulnerable bloggers and other information-spreaders to arrest, prison, assaults, libel suits, and assassination.

Among the countries covered by this study, Freedom House’s 2013 report on
Internet freedom rated Estonia and Armenia as “free”; Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan as “partly”; and Uzbekistan as “not free.” (Its report did not include the other countries.) Discussing ways that regimes try to control the Internet, the report placed government and other anti-Internet freedom tactics and barriers into three categories:

- **Obstacles to Access**—including infrastructural and economic barriers to access, legal and ownership control over internet service providers (ISPs), and independence of regulatory bodies;
- **Limits on Content**—including legal regulations on content, technical filtering and blocking of websites, self-censorship, the vibrancy/diversity of online news media, and the use of ICTs for civic mobilisation;
- **Violations of User Rights**—including surveillance, privacy, and repercussions for online activity, such as imprisonment, extralegal harassment, or cyber attacks.

For would-be communicators—especially non-professionals—easier access to new media platforms is blurring traditional borders between “journalists” and “non-journalists.” We are witnessing so-called “citizen journalists” using these platforms in countries as alternatives to the traditional and mainstream press that are muzzled.

While that may be good for diversity of viewpoints and opinions, it raises important questions about public trust in “media,” government regulation, and government manipulation of information. It also complicates the mission of traditional press rights defender organisations by making it less clear who is a journalist.

Meanwhile, the Baltics have cultivated pluralistic, comparatively free, and independent media environments that have implications for other post-authoritarian nations in transition to democratic, transparent governance, informed and participatory publics, and independent journalists and news organisations pursuing and disseminating fair, balanced, ethical, and accurate reporting.

How likely are citizens and governments in Central Asia and the Caucasus to develop and sustain a commitment to press freedom and a pluralistic media system? For example, the independent watchdog role that is generally accepted in the West is not an expectation of ordinary citizens and governmental officials in these two regions. Rather, many if not most appear to accept the view that journalists should be agents of state-building and nationalism and owe their primary responsibility to the country and its regime of the moment. That thinking creates serious obstacle to building public support for sustainable, independent media. Thus a change in attitude, policies, and laws requires a dramatic shift in opinion to allow the press free rein to criticise public officials and the government.

As for future mass media research, one area to explore is the impact of journalists’ social and economic status before and after independence. Journalists in all of these countries had worked under the generally monolithic and engineered Soviet press system and had shared its professional conditions, career advantages, and experiences. Their handling of new work routines, missions, and relationships...
with their media owners and colleagues may also have been influenced by factors of national or ethnic character. Some transitioned from the Soviet press system where they were apparatchiks of the Communist Party and state to a new nationalist press system, with or without heavy constraints. In Central Asia and the Caucasus, these professionals had to decide whether to comply and collaborate with a new authoritarian system, to proactively resist press controls individually or collectively, or to leave the profession.

Another prospective research topic is comparative studies of press freedoms and constraints in politically transitioning countries and regions. That could include comparisons of the Baltics’ experience with that of former Warsaw Pact countries. In addition, the regional comparative approach of our study may provide insights for researchers examining the evolution of press rights and constraints in countries that once were parts of the former Yugoslavia.

Coupled with this article, these kinds of studies may help practitioners, scholars, policymakers, journalism students better develop strategies, laws, and policies that encourage, nurture, and sustain freedom of the press and thus strengthen other formal and informal democratic institutions.

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