# Media in Power: Media Actors in Ukranian Legislative Body and Zelensky's Phenomenon

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**Abstract:** *The role of the media and its representatives has grown significantly due to mediatisation, which is especially evident in periods of weakening political institutions. In Ukraine, the Orange Revolution (2004) and the Revolution of Dignity (2013) opened the way to politics for an increasing number of media actors, which made it possible to analyse their legislative activities in 2006–2019 to define domination media or political logic. The ascension of new political figures in 2019, led by V. Zelenskyy and his Servant of the People party, can only be partially attributed to mediatisation and populism.*

**Keywords:** *mediatisation, populism, media, democracy, politainment, parliament, revolution, Ukraine*

## Introduction

The media increasingly infiltrates our lives, modifying not only our interpersonal communication but also reshaping the political landscape. The erosion of traditional media monopolies over information is due to the emergence of the Internet and the proliferation of social media, along with the rise of the populist movements and the global weakening of democratic institutions.

Consequently, media representatives (journalists, bloggers, actors, etc.) are increasingly engaged by political parties to run for office, while politicians actively employ marketing and entertainment technologies to attract voters. In a stable democracy, media logic and political logic compete on an equal footing. However, the weakening of political institutions creates conditions for political processes to be subordinated to media logic. This shift enables media representatives to come to power, as demonstrated in Ukraine and, to some degree,

in Poland, with the recent appointment of its new parliamentary speaker. This raises an essential question: Do media actors use their access to the legislature to serve their professional, political or personal interests?

## Mediatisation, democracy, populism and the 'fourth estate': A literature review

Today, mediatisation affects 'all spheres of society, from family structure to the ageing process, from gender relations to power, from the political apparatus to economic structures' (Mazzoleni 2008a: 3052). Many researchers believe that mediatisation is the main axis around which the modern process of political communication revolves (Brants & Voltmer 2011; Kriesi et al. 2013).

The emergence of new media and new communication tools that allow people to connect easily and continuously with their social environment, as well as to access, consume and produce a diverse range of content, has strengthened mediatisation. Traditional mass media alongside these new tools have penetrated so deeply into all spheres of human activity to the extent that no individual or social group can exist outside media influence. Hjarvard (2008) conceptualises 'mediatisation' as a process of modernisation, at the centre of which the organisational, technological and aesthetic operating mode of the media shapes the forms of interactions between social institutions.

Marcinkowski and Steiner (2014) suggest that mediatisation should not be understood as a straightforward, media-driven influence but rather as an outcome of a complex interaction of multiple media and non-media causes. They consider it a consequence of the functional differentiation of society and, in particular, the functional autonomy of the mass media system, which is influenced by three determining factors: universality, exclusivity and autonomy (Marcinkowski & Steiner 2014: 74, 77–78).

In a broad sense, mediatisation is a process of social transformation driven by media both as technology and an institution independent of other institutions and social spheres, shaping their communication processes. Consequently, these institutions and social spheres become deeply influenced by the media, which leads to structural changes in how they interact with each other. This influence impacts and modifies their actions and practices to the point that they become dependent on the media and its logic (Altheide 2013; Hepp 2013; Hepp et al. 2010; Meyen et al. 2014; Strömbäck 2011; Strömbäck & Esser 2014).

Meanwhile mediatisation of the political sphere is not to be interpreted as indicative of a declining political culture or as a pathological colonisation of politics by media. Instead, it primarily serves to make politics function under conditions of increased interdependencies, high political complexity and inclusivity. Thus the media, acting as 'summoned ghosts' that cannot be banished again, may produce unintended side effects for the system – a possibility that

cannot be ruled out. But even in this case they remain merely 'summoned' ghosts and not diabolical visitations (Marcinkowski & Steiner 2014: 88).

We fully agree with the view that it is erroneous to consider mediatisation a developmental process externally 'imposed' on the political system to get it wrong. 'Mass media cannot… force anything on politics, not even media-savvy self-presentation. It is politics itself that realises its dependence on media more than ever and is therefore reprogramming itself to appear more attractive' (Marcinkowski & Steiner 2014: 86).

Mediatisation, as a historical process of social change driven by the ubiquitous presence of media, explains the dominance of media logic. Media logic is a set of rules and regulations for covering politics and seeking to attract the attention of the audience in the face of fierce competition for this scarce resource (Mazzoleni 1987). It is perceived as an important or 'even dominant' feature of election coverage, when news about personalities, party strategies, campaign events and horse-race type stories take precedence over substantive political issues (Strömbäck & Kaid 2008: 425). Consequently, political institutions – parties, governments, parliaments – have adapted their communication practices to media logic in their struggle for publicity and for the attention of voters. The media logic is most clearly manifested in the United States, where tabloids and mainstream outlets have decisive influence on political campaigns, while the public service broadcasting structures in most European countries were able to resist its power (Brants & Van Praag 2006; Strömbäck & Dimitrova 2011). News media 'constrain the choices of these other political actors, i.e., they structure… the actions of those working in the three official branches of government, in public administration and in different stages or parts of the political process and develop different practices to manage them' (Strömbäck & Dimitrova 2011). Moreover, this process transforms not only discourse, but also leads to organisational and procedural changes. In other words, the logic of media is not only the grammar of communication, but also a force that pushes for institutional change (Asp 2014; Couldry & Hepp 2013; Hjarvard 2008). From the media's point of view, politics was seen as any other topic to be covered by its audience, created and presented on the basis of the 'news values' of the media industry and often show business. The most tangible result of this was the transformation and adaptation of traditional stylistic features of political communication to typical media formats (Altheide & Snow 1979). Strömbäck (2008) explains this transformation as the so-called 'third phase of mediatisation', when the media further emancipate themselves from political actors and succeed in making their formats, content, grammar and rhythm so pervasive that 'no social actor who needs to interact with the public or influence public opinion can ignore the media or afford not to adapt to its logic' (Strömbäck 2008: 238).

Political logic is the opposite of media logic and aims to facilitate collective decision-making and ensure the implementation of political decisions. During an

election campaign, the main actors are parties and candidates who address voters with topical issues and policy proposals. During governance, the discussion, negotiation and decision-making by the legislative or executive branches of government come to the fore, as do the implementation of and accountability for political decisions (Esser & Strömbäck 2009; Sampert et al. 2014; Strömbäck & Esser 2014).

The mediatisation of politics is a component of the broader mediatisation of society, particularly significant in relation to power dynamics and associated relationships. It can be defined as the influence of media on the political sphere: 'the media have become central to most political processes, such as election campaigns, government communications, public diplomacy and image building' (Mazzoleni 2008a: 3048). Politics, political communication and information are changing towards a 'Mediatization 2.0' situation wherein the logic of traditional media merges with interactive communication modes, rendering the political system more dependent than ever on the media (Mazzoleni 2014: 44).

The process of mediatisation transforms the meaning of media for democratic regimes. The raison d'être of media as the 'fourth estate' is to serve as a counterbalance to the three estates of the Legislative, Executive and Judiciary. Its role is to be 'set apart from the rest of society to provide the checks and balances necessary to make society function well' (Stiglitz 2017: 14). Mansbridge et al. (2012: 20) argue that any democracy requires political media to play the role of transmitter of reliable and useful information, helping citizens interpret facts and make connections between facts, roles and policies, and acting as watchdogs, critics and investigators.

A decline in democracy limits the dissemination of accessible information, thereby undermining the independence and influence of the 'fourth estate' (Haggard & Kaufman 2021). Furthermore, in the age of mediatisation, technology and ownership have become dominant in moulding the fourth estate to a form of 'hyper-commercialization', sensationalism and oversimplification (McChesney 2016).

The concentration of ownership, the consolidation of media markets through a web of alliances, and changes in the production, distribution and consumption of news negatively impact media as the fourth estate. Some researchers refer to this phenomenon as 'media capture' – that is, 'a situation in which the media have not succeeded in becoming autonomous in manifesting a will of their own, nor able to exercise their main function, notably of informing people. Instead, they exist in an intermediate state, with vested interests, and not only the government, utilize them for other purposes' (Mungiu & Pippidi 2013: 41). Stiglitz (2017) argues that the fourth estate is a crucial component of the checks and balances within democratic society and 'when the media get captured by those they are supposed to oversee – whether government, corporations, or other institutions in our society – they cannot or will not perform their critical societal role' (Stiglitz 2017: 15–16).

Mediatisation exerts both functional and transformative effects on politics and democracy. However, some researchers contest the notion 'that we are moving towards a media-driven democracy' and concluded that we are witnessing 'an intense but harmless mediatisation of politics' (Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999). Mediatised political communication can negatively impact democracy in several ways: 1) it may sustain communication injustices by excluding 'out-groups' from the national discourse; 2) it may lead to neglect or pay only inconsistent attention to significant, long-term social challenges; 3) due to the perpetration of monolithic framing and stereotyping, it may severely limit citizens' awareness of the options available for tackling important issues and their ability to make informed choices when acting politically themselves; 4) policy proposals, decisions and outcomes may be subjected less often to informed scrutiny; 5) the opportunity that citizens can gain something worthwhile from voicing political differences may be reduced if those exchanges are little more than slanging matches; 6) mediatisation can obscure the chain of accountability that is supposed to operate in a democracy (Blumler 2014: 37).

A substantial body of literature explores the significance and role of media and its representatives in the context of the increasing importance of media (mediatisation), the interaction between media and politics, and media's impact on the course of democratic processes. However, there is a notable lack of empirical research on the behaviour of media actors in the political environment when they manage to become a member of the legislature or head an executive body. As a member of parliament, a media actor can influence not only public opinion, but also alter the legal norms that govern social relations and have a long-term impact on the development of the state. In other words, what agenda will the media actor promote? Will they defend professional interests and improve the conditions for media operations, following the political programme of the party they represent in parliament, or will they pursue their own interests? In the context of mediatisation, this pertinent question emerges: Will media logic prevail over political logic or will the reverse occur?

Before moving on to these issues and in order to understand mediatisation in Ukraine better, it is worth briefly discussing populism and politainment. It may have contributed a qualitatively new level of mediatisation not seen in other countries. In Ukraine a media actor and entertainment business owner with no political experience became the head of the executive branch of government for the first time, while his political party gained a majority in the legislature. It is widely believed that a combination of populism and experience in implementing entertainment projects is the determining factor in V. Zelenskyy's victory in the 2019 presidential election.

Mazzoleni (2014) stated that populism can only be fully understood within the framework of the media-driven influences that shape its contemporary features and proposed the dual concept of media populism, which allowed us

to understand how, when and where populism is affected by mediatisation. On the one hand, the 'close connection between media populism and the popular content spread by the media industry causes the media's own brand of populism to provide a platform that is conducive to political populism'. On the other hand, 'some news as well as entertainment media not only play an indirect instrumental role but also act as primary players in promoting a populist agenda' (Mazzoleni 2014: 49).

Laclau (2005) noted that one of the effects of populism, for better or for worse, is the revival of politics. For example, in Poland the YouTube channel of the Sejm, the lower house of the Polish parliament, has attracted more than 650,000 subscribers – more than five times that of Germany's Bundestag (Minder & Erling 2024). The showman behind what has become known as Poland's Sejmflix is the parliament's new Speaker, Szymon Hołownia, who previously hosted Poland's version of the Got Talent television show, and who has encouraged citizens to 'stock up on popcorn' and tune in to more exciting and inspirational parliamentary debates than those held before. Now the Sejm is 'the most popular parliament in the world' because people yearn to witness the country's expected legislative overhaul.

Until recently, researchers largely overlooked the role of media entertainment in political communication, apart from a few exceptions (Van Zoonen 2004; Tenenboim & Weinblatt 2009, Curran 2011; Williams & Delli Carpini 2011). Curran (2019) argues that the media entertainment impinges on public life by values, perceptions 'facilitate a debate about values that underpins politics, they can also impinge on public life in another way' (Curran 2019: 287); the formation, maintenance and adjustment of social identity, and the maintenance and revision of public norms (Curran 2019: 287–292).

The examples of infotainment and politainment are evident in several highly mediatised political contexts. Infotainment applies to the entire news business, and not only its political content, as it 'denote[s] the decline of hard news… programs and the corresponding development of a variety of entertainment shows that mimic the style of news' (Baym 2008). The term politainment refers to the 'blending of politics and entertainment' and 'the entangling of political actors, topics, and processes with entertainment culture'. This encompasses two processes: (1) political entertainment – how the entertainment industry leverages political topics across various entertainment formats; and (2) entertaining politics – how political actors capitalise on their celebrity status (staging photo-ops, party convention spectacles, talk-show appearances, etc.) to enhance their images and promote certain issues through media access (Nieland 2008: 3659–3660).

Some recent research has refuted the argument that the popular media are more inclined than the traditional media to give greater prominence to populists, and found that there are 'no differences between the various media outlets'

(Bos et al. 2010: 157), and that 'there is no ground for the idea that popular newspapers are more sympathetic toward populist parties than quality newspapers' (Akkerman 2011: 942). Nevertheless, the media play a key role in different phases of the populist movement lifecycle, as any media outlet – tabloids and mainstream media – are potentially 'complicit' in one or all of the four phases identified by academic research (Stewart et al. 2003; Mazzoleni 2008b).

The aim of this article is to determine whether media logic, which is a defining characteristic of mediatisation, dominates political logic in the activities of public authorities. This will be assessed through an analysis of the rule-making activities of media actors in the Ukrainian parliament from 2006 to 2019 as well as during the 2019 presidential election.

## Media and populism: The case of Zelenskyy

Growing public dissatisfaction with the geopolitical course and dominance of the pro-Russian party regions of Ukraine led to the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014. As a result, Viktor Yanukovych was ousted from power, while Russia annexed Crimea and occupied part of Ukraine's eastern territory. Almost the same pro-democratic forces led by P. Poroshenko and the parliamentary coalition 'European Ukraine' (comprising the People's Front, Petro Poroshenko Bloc, 'Self-help' (Samopomich), Oleh Lyashko's Radical Party and the All-Ukrainian Union 'Motherland' (Batkivshchyna) came to power for the third time. However, they failed to address the pressing needs of the war-torn country, leading to a significant rise in public discontent.

There was a growing demand for new faces and a new generation of politicians, which was effectively met by Volodymyr Zelenskyy, an actor and entertainment business owner with no prior political experience. He garnered 73% of the votes in the second round of the 2019 presidential election. As a result, the previously unknown party 'Servant of the People', lacking any experience in rule-making, achieved an unprecedented victory, winning 254 parliamentary seats (56%).

Throughout the history of world politics, there have been a number of media representatives in the broad sense (actor Ronald Reagan) or media owners (S. Berlusconi) leading a country. However, they either had prior political experience or their media business was a minor part of their broader business empire. V. Zelenskyy made history as the first media person to lead a nation without any political background.

His success was attributed to the use of populist messaging (Ash & Shapovalov 2022; Kim 2023; Viedrov 2022; Yanchenko & Zulianello 2023). Though voters usually get frustrated with populists quickly, reflected in their falling ratings and renewed trust in traditional politicians, V. Zelenskyy maintained the best balance of trust among his main competitors in both 2019 and 2024,

which cannot be solely explained by the rally round the flag in the context of the full-scale Russo-Ukrainian war. According to opinion polls, even now his primary rivals have failed to get closer to the public.

**Table 1: Balance of trust and distrust in politicians**

| Politicians | Balance of trust and distrust (%) | |
|---|---|---|
| | 2018 (1) | 2024 (2) |
| Zelenskyy V. | -24.8 | 16 |
| Tymoshenko Yu. | -45.8 | -67.1 |
| Poroshenko P. | -68.4 | -42.9 |
| Boiko Yu. | -60.2 | -67.8 |
| Klychko V. | -68.1 | -4.4 |

Sources:

1. Six months before the elections: ratings of candidates and parties, motivations for voting, expectations of citizens (2018)

2. Assessment of the situation in the country, trust in social institutes, politicians, officials and public figures, attitude to elections, belief in victory (2024)

## The fourth power in Ukraine: Data and methods

Can Zelenskyy's victory be explained by the growing influence of the fourth estate in the context of mediatisation? To explore this question, we analysed the legislative activities of media representatives in the Ukrainian parliament between 2006 and 2019.

In 2004 the Orange Revolution concluded with the victory of democratic pro-European forces, largely due to the active work of civic activists and journalists. Using the new opportunities brought about by the Internet and social media, they were able to mobilise millions of Ukrainian citizens in support of one of the presidential candidates – Viktor Yushchenko.

In previous convocations with the introduction of a mixed election system the political parties and blocs invited famous personalities – primarily artists and athletes – while journalists were represented as active party members (working in party newspapers or combining party activities with journalism). Oligarchs were also represented in the parliament, controlling almost all the most popular media and contributing to the establishment of a brutal censorship regime during the presidency of Leonid Kuchma (1994–2005). This is why the period from 2006 to 2019 was chosen to analyse the influence of the media on the political process within the example of activities of media representatives in the parliament.

For the purpose of this article, we analysed the biographies and legislative initiatives of Ukraine's MPs from 2006 to 2019 (V–VIII convocations) to identify media actors among them and to assess their legislative priorities via content analysis. In analysing the list of MPs, only media actors were taken into account – individuals who work or have worked in print or online media, on radio and television as journalists or editors, and are members of professional organisations (for example, the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine). Individuals who own media outlets were also classified as media actors, even if such ownership is not their primary business, but rather a part of their corporations.

The opposition status of media actors is determined at the time of the announcement of parliamentary elections. Following the Orange Revolution (2004), the parliamentary elections in 2006 led to the formation of a democratic, pro-European 'orange' coalition known as the Coalition of Democratic Forces. However, this coalition faced growing internal contradictions and collapsed within a year, resulting in a snap parliamentary election in 2007. Accordingly, pro-Russian political forces campaigned as the opposition. Although pro-democratic parties won the elections again and managed to form their own coalition, after the 2010 presidential elections – which were won by pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych – the parliament was restructured. Communists with pro-Russian forces created the 'Coalition for Stability and Reforms'. As a result, democratic pro-European parties ran in the 2012 parliamentary elections as opposition, as well as in the snap parliamentary elections in 2014.

According to the People's Deputies of Ukraine official website, particular attention was paid to two types of legislative initiatives submitted by MPs. Firstly, these are so called 'professional initiatives' that relate directly to journalistic activity. These initiatives encompass draft laws that regulate the media sphere (broadcasting, publishing, cinematography); advertising as the main source of media income; usage of media for political campaigning; access to information; censorship (public morality); control over the activities of law enforcement agencies in persecuting and obstructing the activities of journalists (reports of the Prosecutor General's Office, temporary parliamentary investigative commissions); protection of journalists' rights. Additionally, this includes legislation on the activities of supervisory state bodies in this area – in particular, the National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine, a collegial public authority responsible for ensuring compliance with Ukrainian laws in the sphere of television the observance of Ukrainian legislation in the sphere of television and radio broadcasting – as well as temporary parliamentary investigative commissions and the protection of journalists' rights.

The second group of initiatives relates to the societal roles of journalists as the fourth estate, emphasising their function in holding those in power accountable, as a watchdog ensuring transparency of public policy. In the Ukrainian context, this primarily involves combating corruption, responding to the cases

of abuse of power (and creation of temporary commissions to investigate cases of abuse that have been the subject of journalistic investigations, high-profile cases, etc.). Anti-corruption legislation includes establishing and ensuring the functioning of anti-corruption bodies, temporary investigative commissions to investigate corruption, control over the work of law enforcement agencies in responding to abuse of power (by officials and law enforcement agencies), and government cleansing (lustration).

The presence of pro-democratic forces in opposition opens up significant opportunities for media actors. Following the revolutionary events, the number of new media actors without parliamentary experience surged by 50% in the 5th convocation and by 64% in the 8th convocation (see Table 2). However, both professional journalists and media owners virtually overlooked the potential to enhance the legal framework for their activities. The issue of corruption became relevant only after the Revolution of Dignity (2014).

**Table 2: Number and legislative activities of media actors of V–VIII convocations**

| Convocation of the Parliament of Ukraine | Number of media actors (media proprietor) | Novices | Opposition status / (change of party affiliation) | Profes-sional initiatives | Anti-corrup-tion initiatives | Efficiency of media interests protection (% of the total number of initiatives) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| V (2006–2007) | 20 (4) | 10 | 16 / 1 | 42 | | 16% (42/254) |
| VI (2007–2012) | 24 (3) | 6 | 3 | 230 | 14 | 28,6 % (244/853) |
| VII (2012–2014) | 14 (4) | 2 | 10 / 1 | 85 | 30 | 25% (115/460) |
| VIII (2014–2019) | 22 (5) | 14 | 17 / 2 | 277 | 146 | 16% (423/2613) |

Source: Archive by convocations of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine

It would be reasonable to expect that media actors would follow media logic and mainly advocate their professional interests by proposing changes to the legislation. However, with few exceptions, they did not take advantage of this opportunity. The comprehensive law on media, which harmonised media legislation and aligned with the acquis communautaire, was only adopted in 2022, despite numerous opportunities for law making. Notably, one journalist-blogger was identified who, having been a member of three convocations, did not submit a single legislative initiative until the eight convocation, during which they submitted 25 initiatives. It should be noted that media owners in the parliament also did not use their position to improve media legislation (only two out of six media owners), and two almost ignored law making activities (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Legislative activities of media proprietor (V–VIII convocations)**

| Media proprietor (convocation) | Legislative efficiency, % (adopted / proposed initiatives) | Professional bills | Anti-corruption initiatives |
|---|---|---|---|
| Akhmetov R. (V) | 0 (0/1) | - | - |
| Akhmetov R. (VI) | 100 (1/1) | - | - |
| Bahraiev M. (V) | 0 (0/2) | 2 | - |
| Bahraiev M. (VI) | 70 (7/10) | 9 | - |
| Bahraiev M. (VII) | 0 (0/12) | 11 | 1 |
| Kniazhytskyi M. (VII) | 14 (5/35) | 19 | 4 |
| Kniazhytskyi M. (VIII) | 38 (68/180) | 44 | - |
| Lovochkin S. (VIII) | - | - | - |
| Muraiev Ye. (VIII) | 0 (0/167) | - | 6 |
| Poroshenko P. (V) | 67 (30/45) | - | - |
| Poroshenko P. (VII) | 30 (3/10) | - | - |
| Tretiakov O. (V) | 0 (0/3) | 2 | - |
| Tretiakov O. (VI) | 20 (2/10) | 2 | - |
| Tretiakov O. (VIII) | 26 (57/217) | 1 | - |

Source: Archive by convocations of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine

## Conclusion

We can define mediatisation as a process of social transformation driven by media, both as technology and institution, operating independently of other institutions and social spheres, and shaping their communication processes. But in politics it should not be interpreted as indicative of a declining political culture or as a pathological colonisation of politics by media. Instead, it primarily serves to make politics function under conditions of increased interdependencies, significant political complexity and inclusivity. Therefore, we analysed the behaviour of media actors who have gained the opportunity to directly influence politics by becoming members of the legislature, which sets the rules of conduct for all political actors. In the context of mediatisation, one could expect them to continue following the media logic and promote their own professional (media) interests. However, our content analysis of media actors' legislative initiatives over the four parliamentary convocations revealed a limited impact of mediatisation.

According to the analysis of MPs of the Ukrainian parliament between 2006 and 2019, the status of opposition in the context of growing authoritarian ten-

dencies gives journalists without political experience a better chance of getting elected. Media representatives in the role of legislators don't follow media logic, practically neglect the interests of their profession and are prone to co-optation by political forces, advocating instead for conforming to political logic. Most of them converted their media potential into political and administrative potential (positions in public authorities after completing their cadence). We could state that the role of media actors depends on the stage of development of the political system. They play a prominent role in mobilising voters to protect their rights and democratic institutions, as they did during the Orange Revolution and the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine. But in other cases, they have minimal impact on the trajectory of political processes, even in relatively young democracies where democratic institutions are still being reinforced because they are co-opted by political actors as a tool to influence public opinion.

Regarding the Zelenskyy phenomenon, his victory should not be seen as a manifestation of mediatisation on the wave of populism's success. It can largely be attributed to anti-elitist sentiment within Ukrainian society along with a high level of distrust toward politicians from the first decades of the post-Soviet period – one of the leading themes of populist discourse. However, we should not expect this phenomenon to be repeated in countries where elites are circulating, and centrist politicians maintain substantial voter support.

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