

Libraries
Media
The Internet, Digital Media
Print Media
Radio and TV
Journalism
Kubus Cultural Videos
► Panorama
Background
Links
Science and Education

Media in Germany – Panorama

“USSR clichés dominate the reporting”. Interview with Gemma Pörzgen



In December 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev gave a televised address in which he announced the end of the Soviet Union. 20 years later, the German media looked back once more at this historic event. Gemma Pörzgen, a journalist specialized in Eastern Europe, examined how the anniversary was reported.

Ms Pörzgen, the Soviet Union was dissolved 20 years ago. How much importance was attached to this anniversary in the German media?

Not a great deal. A handful of media did focus on certain aspects – I noticed for instance that the TV channel Arte ran a series of documentary films by the Russian filmmaker Andrei Nekrasov. By comparison with other anniversaries, however, which are featured very comprehensively and in painstaking detail, the anniversary of the end of the Soviet Union did not play much of a role in Germany.

“A fundamental mistrust is still evident”

What did you feel that the reporting lacked?

One aspect in particular was ignored: on this anniversary one should be reminded of the fact that the breakup of the Soviet Union led to the emergence of many new states. That this was neglected ultimately reflects how we still think very much in terms of the old categories. When German media carry reports of Russia, in reality people still have in mind the Soviet Union and many characteristics of the Cold War.



A fundamental mistrust is still evident which does not exist in the same way towards other countries. One can observe a tendency towards arrogance in the German press: “We were the ones who won this dispute between East and West.”

Even journalists who work in news or foreign departments still have problems when asked to pinpoint Georgia or Uzbekistan on a map – and find it difficult to attribute much importance to events taking place there. The scope of reporting about these newly emerged states is crassly disproportionate to their size and importance.

What do you believe are the reasons for this?

Massive cuts are being made to foreign reporting in German media. Less and less money is being spent on this because it is thought that readers are not so interested in stories from abroad. What is more, there is a thematic hierarchy in editorial departments: domestic policy ranks higher than foreign policy.



There are hardly any editors-in-chief who themselves have worked as foreign correspondents. Almost always they are people who carved a reputation for themselves at home.

That influences the style of reporting: journalists reporting from the former Soviet republics find it correspondingly difficult to get their articles in print.

This narrow-minded view can have disastrous effects. After all, there are many regions in the former Soviet Union where developments are underway which could in future spark new, possibly even supra-regional conflicts.

A largely historical viewpoint

From which perspective was the anniversary featured?

In many cases the media reported on historical events such as the attempted coup against Gorbachev or his role in the collapse of the Soviet Union. That is nothing new. I think it would be better to use an anniversary of this kind to take a look at the present or ahead to the future, as that is often far more interesting.

What is more, the reporting is still characterized by the old coordinate system. When stories do come out about the former Soviet republics, the majority still originate in Moscow. Although Ukraine is a huge country, there are hardly any journalists who look at what is going on there. The reference point for reporting is still almost always only Russia, the focus here almost always being Moscow.

Explaining what is really happening

How has the picture of Russia painted by the German press changed over the past 20 years?

That always depends on who is doing the painting. Naturally there are good correspondents in Moscow who live in the country and give nuanced reports about the country. Their articles often provide a realistic picture of the situation. The problem is only that they frequently encounter editors who have clichés in their heads and therefore want to buy other reports – either because they are not curious to learn anything new or because they do not believe that their readers will be interested in the stories reported by the correspondent.



It is often the case that editors only want to have what they are familiar with. This increases the risk of the usual clichés being trotted out time and time again. Then the umpteenth report about the winter in Siberia or a journey to Lake Baikal is featured on the television. And women from Russia are frequently portrayed on TV as old babushkas wrapped in headscarves or as prostitutes. The protests over Putin do not really fit in with this picture, which helps to dispel the clichés. Particularly for younger journalists working in Moscow, this offers an excellent opportunity to explain what is really happening there.



Born in 1962, Gemma Pörzgen works as a freelance journalist in Berlin. She grew up in Moscow and read politics, Slavic studies and Eastern European history in Munich. Upon completing her training at the “Frankfurter Rundschau” newspaper, Gemma Pörzgen worked there as a news editor specializing in Eastern Europe. In 2002 she became South-East Europe correspondent for several print media in Belgrade, and later worked as a Middle East correspondent in Israel. Gemma Pörzgen is an executive board member of “Reporters Without Borders”.

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February 2012*

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