

## **Communicating democratisation conflicts: The dynamics of power, identities and values in comparative perspective**

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### *Abstract*

Recent decades have seen an unprecedented spread of democratic governance across the globe. From the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011 and the protests on the Maidan in Kiev early this year, popular uprisings against autocratic rule have become global media events: International journalists provide intense, empathetic coverage, while domestic media struggle to find their new roles between old autocratic routines, advocacy for revolutionary movements, and the representation of diverse claims in an emerging democracy.

Democracy is widely seen as a form of government and participatory citizenship that enables the peaceful negotiation of antagonistic conflicts and promotes tolerance towards divergent world views, identities and beliefs. In this negotiation, independent media and the freedom of expression are indispensable: Providing a forum for divergent voices to be heard and enhancing the accountability of those in power, media are supposed to contribute to ‘democratic peace’ (Kant). However, the experience of many emerging democracies shows that these expectations are rarely fulfilled. In a significant number of countries, the introduction of free media and democratic politics has not pacified society, but exacerbated existing divisions. In addition, the reconfiguration of power generates new conflicts between the winners and losers of the regime change (Collier 2009). In many of these conflicts the media have become active participants by taking sides in the ongoing struggle and, in some cases, by making themselves advocates of sectarian hatred and intolerance.

This paper investigates the roles of journalistic media in what we call democratisation conflicts: social and political controversies which accompany, are triggered by and follow transitions to democracy. We outline the research programme of the recently commenced, internationally collaborative, EU-funded FP7 project on ‘Media, Conflict and Democratisation’ (MeCoDEM). This project investigates the dynamic relationship between public communication and democratisation conflicts in four countries from regions that constitute specific conflict constellations and transitional pathways: Serbia (Western Balkans), Egypt (Middle East), Kenya (East Africa) and South Africa. We argue that the roles of journalism and the media in democratization conflict cannot be sufficiently understood in isolation: They have to be seen as part of an arena of public contestation that is occupied by multiple actors, each of which thriving to dominate the interpretation and outcome of ongoing conflicts. The investigation of communication in democratisation conflicts therefore encompasses the media (both traditional and new) as well as the mobilising communications of political activists and the communication strategies of governments and political officials. Thus, the practice and development of journalism in democratizing countries is shaped by a rich constellation of pressures and contextual influences.