

Baltic Media Environments: Integrated or Divided?

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Resumo

Este artigo centra-se no papel que os ambientes dos *média* desempenham nos estados bálticos e o modo como promovem quer a integração e a inclusão ou a divisão na sociedade, ajudando ou mitigando a integração social e o desenvolvimento em geral. A questão no caso dos estados bálticos é se os *media* facilitam um debate sobre estes assuntos. A análise indicia que este assunto é premente à medida que estes três países, Estónia, Letónia e Lituânia, progridem nas áreas da democracia e da economia de mercado.

Palavras-chave:

Estados bálticos; Média; Integração e inclusão social

Abstract:

This paper focus on the role of media environments media in the Baltic states and how they either promote integration and inclusion, or promote division in society, thus helping or hindering social integration and development in general. The question for the Baltics is—can media help facilitate a healthy debate on these issues? The analysis shows that this issue urges, as these three countries, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, continue to make progress in the areas of democracy and market economy.

Key-words:

Baltic states; Media; Media environments; Social integration and inclusion

The Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—might seem too small and too far away for a Portuguese or Spanish speaker but in reality they are much closer than it seems at a first glance. All three Baltic states joined the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004 and now are full members of both. Even though these countries are geographically located at the other end of the EU, politically, economically as well as security wise all three Baltic states are partners and allies to Portugal and Spain, and developments in the Baltic states can also affect other members of the EU and NATO.

One of the issues of great interest to both of these international organizations before the Baltics were admitted was social integration. The EU is ethnically very diverse therefore it was important to the EU that the new members have the same standards in regard to national

minorities. The Baltics have made very good progress in the area of integrating minorities into the society, and the media has had its part in it. But one aspect still remains open—the differences between majority media and minority media are still obvious and often they are divided not by ideas and beliefs, as it is desired in a democracy, but by ethnic lines. As minority media in the Baltics is very influential and also plays a political role, especially in Estonia and Latvia, this is a very serious issue. It is important that all people get fair information but there are some doubts that some of the minority outlets in the Baltics are not providing this service to their readers.

This paper will focus on the role of the media in social integration and some political processes in the Baltic states. It will examine media environments and how they either promote integration and inclusion, or promote division in society, thus helping or hindering social integration and development in general. Even though the main issue in this paper is the ethnic and political aspects of social integration, it will also touch upon the issues of integration of people of different race and different sexual orientation. It is the next large social issue that media faces not only in the Baltics but also elsewhere in Europe. The question for the Baltics is—can media help facilitate a healthy debate on these issues? And the answer is simple—it has to make sure that this issue gets fair treatment, as these three countries continue to make progress in the areas of democracy and market economy.

A Look at Today from a Historical Perspective

The historic twists and turns have not always been so favorable to the Baltic states as they are today. Throughout 50 years (1940-1991) of Soviet occupation, the Baltic states were wiped off from the world map and after they regained their previously lost

independence, they had to start everything from a scratch. Not only the whole process of democracy, free market economy and free press had to be rebuilt but also people's understanding about values, work ethic and social responsibility had to be revisited. The damage that was done by the Soviet empire to these small freedom loving nations was enormous (Smith, Pabriks, Purs and Lane, 2002:24-43). However, it was not irreparable and, as the latest economic indicators and also results in other areas are showing, the Baltic States are making a great progress. Only after 16 years being independent, these countries are developing on their own without guidance from Moscow, as was the case during the Soviet times, or any other capital but with generous Western support and some financial assistance, and after joining the European Union, also funds that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are receiving for structural improvements.

Although much has been done already, there are several large challenges in the Baltics that remain to be solved in the future. Despite the fact that these three countries are linguistically and culturally somewhat different, main challenges are similar to all of them. One of these challenges is the issue of ethnic integration, which in the Baltic context is referred to as social integration and includes more than just ethnic integration. It also refers to integration of people of different race, sexual orientation as well as various socially disadvantaged groups.

According to political observers, in Latvia, the state should continue aggressive integration programmes to bring its nearly 700,000 non-citizens into Latvian citizenship. "The danger now is that the Russian-speaking community is indifferent, not antagonistic, to the new state. Latvia needs to involve all of its residents in state-building and the future of the country. Involving citizens and residents does not mean compromising ethnic survival or assimilating minorities, but means an acceptance and trust in the people to create

their own state," note Smith, Pabriks, Purs and Lane (2002:150). In broad terms, it is in everyone's interest to accomplish the process of social integration, as it is important for further development of the country.

Media's Role in Restoration of Independence

Media and communication played a vital role in restoration of independence in all three countries, as it is also noted by various authors on transition and democratization of Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union. In these momentous events, journalists played a leading role (Mickiewicz, 1998:33). In late 80s, when the countries were still under the Soviet rule, newspapers had more freedom than ever in the entire Soviet period and anywhere in the former Soviet Union. During Gorbachev's glasnost papers in the Baltic countries took the word per say and used the openness in the real sense of its meaning and started speaking openly about the painful history.

Many believe that the media was the source of inspiration for independence movements in all three countries. The peaceful revolution in the Baltic States is also known as "the singing revolution", and no doubt, many of the songs were sung by the media. Media was there when the large manifestations gathered to speak out to the world about the unfair destiny of the Baltics, national radio and television stations in Latvia and Lithuania were the objects that were guarded by people, when the Soviet forces attacked, journalists were the ones that reported even during the hopeless moments of crisis. It was by all means the "golden era" of the media in the Baltics. "The names "popular (people's) radio" and "popular (people's) television" appeared as radio and television were the only sources of information at that time. They worked around the clock, transmitting news regularly and giving hope and comfort to the

people,” observe media scientists (Brikse, Duze and Sulmane 1993:238). The trust levels to the media still remain high today (Lauristin and Vihalemm, 2002:44) and largely it is due to the role they played during late 80s early 90s in the independence movements.

The changes in the media after independence have been tremendous. During the Soviet years all papers were owned by the communist party and such thing as a free press did not exist, it was all owned by the party (Lauristin and Vihalemm, 1993:177-186). Newspapers were cheap and easily available but there was not much in them to read. Most articles were about the leaders of the only party as well as some praise of some workers in some factory or farm. Often front pages contained transcripts of government documents and decrees. After 1991, all that had to be changed because the press was free now. It was free to write what it thought appropriate. Also the ownership matters had to be taken care of. Most newspapers were privatized by journalists and editors themselves. It was easier with broadcast media—state channels remained in the hands of the governments but all private media had to be established from the scratch, as no private radio or TV existed during the Soviet system. First years right after independence were very hard for the media economically, as the prices of papers had to go up but people were not ready to pay them, because overall economic conditions were bad. They had to invest in development, in paper, and in journalists after all. The concept of Western style reporting emerged together with free market conditions. The existing journalistic tradition was very poor, so journalists had to learn themselves and also educate the new generation of reporters and editors at the same time.

Media as an Agent for Social Integration

One of the largest problems in today's Baltic reality is social integration and this problem is closely tied to the media. "The links between popular mass media and social integration were easy to perceive in terms both negative (more crime and immorality) and individualistic (loneliness, loss of collective beliefs), but it was also possible to envisage a positive contribution from modern communications to cohesion and community," writes Dennis McQuail (205:52) in regard to the situation in the United States with integration of immigrants. The same can be applied to the situation in the Baltics after regaining independence when large minority groups of people suddenly realized that they do not live in the Soviet Union but in an independent country with different culture and language. Local culture and language was there during the Soviet times but ideology and power at that time did not respect it and even tried to get rid of it, promoting a united Soviet identity and Russian as unifying language. After political changes, media was the agent who chooses whether to have an optimistic vision of the future, or pessimistic, and whether it in its content promotes integration and solidarity, freedom and diversity, or dominance and uniformity and normlessness and loss of identity (McQuail, 2005:90).

Due to the uneasy history of these countries, there is a large number of ethnic minorities living in all three, especially in Estonia and Latvia, largest of them being Russian minority (also most other minorities, for example, Belorussians, Ukrainians and Jewish use Russian as their primary language). Some of them are historic minorities but many of them have migrated to the Baltics during the Soviet period because of economic reasons. Among other issues that this situation raises, the most important one probably is the issue of communication among these groups, as it can facilitate more

successful social integration of majority and minority groups and promote united understanding of issues as well as full participation in various political and economic processes. Media plays an essential role in this process.

People in each country speak predominantly two languages (Estonian or Russian in Estonia and Latvian or Russian in Latvia), there is an issue of cross communication between two ethnic groups, which does not help integration. Although officially there is only one official language in each country (Estonian in Estonia and Latvian in Latvia), not all ethnic minority representatives speak it. Due to various reasons, relatively large numbers of minority groups do not speak the official language and it creates a communications problem, as people use various sources of getting information, divided by language lines. One of the reasons in Latvia, for instance, is unwillingness to speak the official language out of the indifference to the Latvian government (Smith, Pabriks, Purs and Lane, 2002:150). And it can easily be explained also by looking at the media environments, which we will do shortly.

Two Media Environments

Two major languages mean two sets of newspapers. It can cause headache to advertising and public relations professionals but it does more than that. It is not only language that separates the two language newspapers. It is also what's in them. Media experts in Latvia have defined it as a problem of two information and communication spaces (Ruklis 2001:46). People live in two parallel environments. They might be living in the same apartment building but depending on their language they might be concerned about totally different issues. If a Latvian family, for instance, watches news from Riga (capital of Latvia), a Russian family might be watching a

news program from Moscow on cable and get a totally different set of news, and which is even worse, Moscow television would often distort news about the Baltics in such way doing a disservice for its viewers in the Baltics. It is both true in Estonia and Latvia, not to such extent in Lithuania. We will discuss the situation in Lithuania later, but now let's focus on Estonia and Latvia.

Unfortunately the Baltic Russian-language media still today has largely kept the poor journalistic tradition and has not fully adopted Western reporting standards, like Estonian-, Latvian-, and Lithuanian-language media has. Most of them strictly separate editorial content from opinion, news from editorials, and use verifiable information selection and reporting criteria. Russian-language media's style, however, is something between the old Soviet journalism school where only positive stories or highly critical stories about the enemy were reported and the Western tabloid yellow press style. Vesti Sevodnya, a Russian language newspaper in Latvia actually looks like German Bild with a semi-naked lady, an animal and huge, exaggerated picture on the front page, except it positions itself as a quality Russian-language daily. The understanding about division between tabloid and quality paper seems to be unknown to the editors of this newspaper, and also some other Baltic Russian-language papers.

If this would be the only major issue with the Russian newspapers in Estonia and Latvia, the situation would not be so bad. Minority media also tends to be highly critical of the governments, sometimes even being on the border with being hostile towards them. From time to time these papers also question the sovereignty of these countries and often draw their agendas from electronic and print media in Russia. On some days reading these papers seems that they stand closer to official Russia with President Vladimir Putin in charge than they do to their own governments and presidents, thus creating a different media environment from the one created by

Latvian and Estonian media respectively. And it is not only about the quantity of their news reports, it also counts the viewpoints on various issues. It can be anything ranging from domestic issues such as situation of retired in the Baltics, Russian minority rights to war on terror and global warming.

When journalists are asked which newspapers contribute more to social integration, Latvian journalists say that the Russian media doesn't contribute to social integration as much as they do and vice versa. As a matter of fact, not a single Latvian journalist that participated in this research believed that Russian press contributes anything to the process (Ruklis, 2001:74). Each newspaper group believes that it does the best service not only to their readers but also to the process of social integration as a whole.

Two journalistic communities share quite different political beliefs and attitudes towards economic, political and social development of Latvian society and different attitudes to their professional roles. Media experts have accused the press, especially some Russian language editions of impeding integration processes. (Sulmane, 2001:1).

Dividing Force—Broadcasts from Moscow?

Broadcast media might provide some answers to the issue of such vast differences between the majority and minority media groups. Traditionally in Estonia and Latvia Russian broadcast tradition has been relatively weak. During the Soviet years television from Moscow satisfied all needs. It had programming for all tastes so there was no need to produce programs locally and besides it would cost a lot of money and would be for a relatively small audience of Estonia's, Latvia's or Lithuania's Russian speakers. Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian television was better developed because it was the only

broadcast source of information in these languages besides radio. After independence, unfortunately Russian language television in Estonia and Latvia did not develop as well as television programming in Russia and therefore many of these viewers turned to TV stations from Moscow that can be received in the Baltics over the cable for a relatively small fee (in the first years after independence it was possible to receive it even over the air). And Russian television from Moscow is probably the single biggest obstacle to media contribution to social integration, or the lack of it, to be more precise.

According to the agenda setting theory, Russian TV sets the agenda which the Russian newspapers in the Baltics have to follow because their readers also watch television. Of course, editor in Riga or Tallinn can not decide to ignore the news (and also the slant of the news stories) that get broadcast on the nightly news program that his or her reader watches the night before reading newspaper. And so the problem begins. If the Russian government is critical of any aspect of Latvia, the Russian newspaper has to do the same despite the fact that it has better access to information than his counterpart in Moscow television bureau. The credibility to the newspaper might be lost if the newspaper doesn't follow the agenda. In the free market of newspapers where there is competition, maintaining credibility among readers is very important, if not crucial.

In the age of internet, this problem has become even more complicated, as Russians in the Baltics often use news portals produced in Russia to get their daily news. And newspapers do the same, as they heavily use Russia's wire services for their news. This new media influences the agenda setting process for Russian-language Latvian and Estonian newspapers in a similar way as television from Moscow.

Russia and Baltic Media

Unfortunately relations between the Baltic States and Russia are not at its greatest at the moment. There are many issues that all three Baltic countries, but again, especially Estonia and Latvia, have trouble agreeing on. Among them are border treaty disputes, economic issues, but most importantly perhaps, the Russian minority situation. Lithuania has been more successful in dealing with this situation, as most Russian speakers in Lithuania have been granted citizenship and they have been integrated into the society very successfully, including most of them speak the official Lithuanian language. Things are not so well in Estonia and Latvia, where the Russian minority is larger in numbers and also politically not so loyal to the countries. Perhaps Latvia and Estonia could have taken lessons from Lithuania on this, although the situations differ—Russian minority in Lithuania is much smaller than in Estonia and especially in Latvia. Without divulging into political nuances, we will just leave it at discussing the significance of successful social integration.

Russia has been very critical of Estonia and Latvia for their treatment of Russian diasporas in these countries. Russia believes that their compatriots have been mistreated by these governments and therefore it continues to criticize these small countries in all possible ways, from all international tribunals. Fairly or not, it remains for history to answer but from the communications standpoint a noticeable damage is done to the social integration in these countries, as Russia uses every opportunity to bring these issues back on agenda in their media. As a result, in Russia, according to polling data, 49 percent of Russians consider Latvia is enemy number one (Gute, 2007: 1), and replaces the United States, which occupied that position during the Cold War and several years after it had ended. It is unthinkable that such a small country as Latvia could pose any kind

of threat to large Russia, but it proves how media by constant repetition of the same message—be it true or not—can achieve verifiable results. In this case these results are damaging the development of a country and is not helping to the people who already are undergoing tough and stressful times trying to find their identity between Russian, Latvian (or Estonian) and European Union.

Conclusion

As the Baltic states are trying to fine-tune the solution to the problem of social integration and communication aspects of it, life goes on and people live their everyday lives no matter whether their ethnic background is Latvian, Estonian, Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, Jewish or Roma. The problem of two information environments in Estonia and Latvia today is mainly political and being exploited for political purposes. In general, social integration in the Baltics has been acknowledged as successful by many Western observer organizations and there is nothing wrong with having different opinions in the media, as long as it does not endanger the stability of democracy which it can hardly do today with the Baltic states being members of the European Union. With the accession of the Baltic states, the EU not only welcomed the first post-Soviet states but also the first significant number of Russian speakers. In today's world nationality plays a different role and as Europe becomes more diverse, we will have to learn how to live together, share common values and celebrate the differences.

As a matter of fact, another proof to successes in social integration in the Baltics is sports and culture. Most Latvian ice hockey players on the team are Russians by ethnicity but they are Latvian heroes to everyone who knows what ice hockey is in Latvia, no matter their nationality. Also, the only Eurovision winner for Latvia

is a Russian by background but that did not stop the whole of Latvia celebrating the victory and loving the singer. The three final songs for 2007 competition were all more than just Latvian—one was even sung in Russian by a Latvian singer, the other one featured two lead singers—a Latvian and a Russian and even the winning song was sung by five Latvian singers, some of whom have Russian last names, and (!) an Italian, who lives in Latvia. And thousands of people voted for these groups, from all ethnic backgrounds.

As the Baltics are still trying to overcome the aftermath of the past and sort out some multicultural issues, other tolerance subjects such as racism and homophobia have surfaced in all three countries. These issues are being seriously raised by various non-governmental organizations, and governments are starting to seek for solutions to these problematic issues. And again, the media phenomenon is very interesting—this time not divided by the language lines but by their understanding of tolerance. These issues are on agenda not only in the Baltic states but also elsewhere in Europe and other parts of the world. Hopefully the Baltics will look at the best examples and come up with even better solutions. Media has a vital role to play in debates about these issues as well.

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