

Latvian media identity and diversity

MIERVALDIS MOZERS

Department of Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Latvia

E-mail: mozers@latnet.lv

In this article the author evaluates the conformity of Latvia's media environment with the unique demographic and political situation of the country in the EU context. In terms of the audience, the number of non-citizens in Latvia is disproportionately large, and this segment of population is addressed by the pro-Russian forces to pursue their own interests. Latvia being one of the poorest of the EU countries, the purchasing power is very low there, as is the demand for high-quality media. This is why the author appreciates the fact that foreign, especially Scandinavian, capital is being invested in Latvia's media.

Key words: media environment, identity, diversity, Latvia

STATE AND MEDIA PARADIGM

The peculiarity of the Latvian media market is that it has been divided into two target audiences: Latvian-speaking and Russian-speaking audiences. This historical situation, which is mostly seen as a result of the Soviet occupation, assigns the State of Latvia to a unique place in the context of the old and the new member countries of the European Union.

In Latvia the proportion between the basic nation and minorities is 60% to 40 %¹. Being aware of the perilous trends in the demographic development (the average decrease being minus 10 000 annually)² makes us realise that the number of the perspective of Latvian and non-Latvian media consumers, including children and vision-impaired and hearing-impaired people, roughly speaking, is one million Latvian and one million Russian consumers.

This unique situation has been the basis for several laws in Latvia that are especially protective in reference to the use of Latvian in the public sphere. There is a very simple, but exceedingly harsh formula in Latvia: the language identity is the national identity, and the national identity is the State identity. In other words, the State of Latvia where most people speak Russian is a totally surreal vision. However, very many foreign as well as local public figures see it as quite an acceptable development.

And a very huge role in the preservation or destruction of the above formula "language–nation–state" is played by the media and the problem of media ownership concentration.

Another very important aspect is that Latvia, upon entering the EU, ranks first among the 10 new member states (before Bulgaria and Rumania joining the EU) with the lowest GDP per capita, 49%³. It means that the purchasing power of Latvia's media consumers is extremely low. It also means that the media consumers are in a very peculiar situation when they must choose the cheapest one or the media that are for free, which, from the point of view of media contents, means wide possibilities to manipulate the audience and aim to satisfy the poorest tastes. From the point of view of media concentration, it opens almost unlimited opportunities for the subsidized and various artificially sustained information channels.

Advertising plays a very significant role in maintaining an independent status of media, practising democracy and freedom of expression. During the last three to five years after

¹ http://www.np.gov.lv/index.php?lv=fakti_lv&saite=iedzivotaji.htm

² <http://www.csb.lv/Satr/rad/A2.cfm?kurs3=A2>

³ <http://www.csb.lv/Satr/larh.cfm?tema3=ikp>

Russia's last crisis, which had a very serious influence on Latvia's economic situation on the whole as well as on the financial situation of the media in particular, a very rapid development of the advertising market has taken place, reaching 100 million euros last year, with the relative growth of 20% in comparison with each preceding year⁴. This, in fact, is the first pleasant news that I can communicate concerning the media situation in Latvia.

The growth of the advertising market is a direct reflection of the economic growth in Latvia, which is a surprisingly good phenomenon both in the European as well as the world context. The GDP growth in the country in these last years has reached 7–10%⁵ in comparison with each preceding year. That is why, in spite of a number of unfavourable factors that I have mentioned earlier, there are a number of media that have successfully found their target audience and have attracted advertisers, to work with an increasing profit and to become increasingly high-quality and independent in their voice.

On the other hand, all of these media are connected with or fully owned by foreign capital. This is easy to understand because to be competitive in, for example, TV market or in a weekly media market it is necessary to possess new technologies, exercise modern principles of work organisation and possess new knowledge. The above mentioned can be more easily obtained by profitably selling a successfully started national medium to foreign investors. In a similar way, foreign capital regulates the market of PR services and the advertising market where the dominant element is about 20 huge agencies of integrated communications that are involved in the global network⁶.

The major part of advertisers is comprised of international brands, and in Latvia they are mainly adapted. These usually constitute long-term campaigns, which, of course, have an impact of depressing uniformity, but they give long-term guarantees to the medium, actually being something similar to subscription, ensuring the perspective of the medium.

RATIONALE OF REGULATORY FUNCTIONS

The legislation that regulates media activities in Latvia has developed favourably, in accordance with the recommendations of the EU and the EU directives, and the experience of international associations for printed and electronic media, broadcasting and press associations. All the topical legislation in Latvia corresponds to the accepted international norms. As concerns the Law on the Press of the Republic of Latvia, for example, with such specific regulations as on the dissemination of erotic material, Latvia has been a pioneer and an example for the teams working on similar legislation in other countries.

On the other hand, with the collapse of the Soviet system of trade unions, the missing element has not been replaced by anything new. In fact, it means that in Latvia journalists are not united in their demands to employers and that as a very important entity of leaders they cannot put forward any strict demands to their employers. This is why the media concentration, welcomed earlier, means that along with the inflow of foreign capital such laws, contracts and traditions penetrate Latvia that essentially heighten the status of the journalist as an employee. Consequently, the larger the number of employees in the media, the higher is the journalist's status and ability to function. It undeniably reduces the aforementioned danger to manipulate and influence the journalist as well as the public.

Latvia's legislators and Latvia's National Radio and Television Council take into consideration further development of media technologies, and they have prepared proposals for the

⁴ <http://www.tns.lv/?lang=lv&category=showproduct&id=adex>

⁵ <http://www.csb.lv/Satr/larh.cfm?tema3=ikp>

⁶ <http://www.lasap.lv/news/5/>

Parliament, thinking, for example, of the possibilities of digital television entering Latvia's media market.

Latvia's experience in the restriction of monopoly and the field of competition monitoring must be highly evaluated, whereby the corresponding institutions react very promptly and precisely, preventing the possible breach of the law. Therefore, looking at the perspectives, Latvia does not think that another, additional legislation and monitoring of monopolisation process and media competition on the European level is necessary.

In this context, one must not forget to mention the development of Internet communications. Practically all the influential media in Latvia operate Internet versions. The Internet advertising market shows essential growth. Unfortunately, the existing legislation in Latvia, like everywhere else in the world, has not yet weighed up the positive and negative trends of the Internet development and has not produced any legislative documents to that effect. My personal point of view is that in the nearest future this may cause negative repercussions on the advertising business as such, because at present advertising on the Internet runs a brutal game without rules.

MEDIA CONCENTRATION: CONSIDERATIONS OF THE FUTURE

As media concentration is inescapable, it is believed that in Latvia's context it principally has a positive effect. The practice so far has shown that, unfortunately, it is not possible to speak of media concentration in the context of European regionalisation, for example, forming the Baltic States media groups or the Nordic countries media groups, which would be logical from the economic and geographical point of view. If this was possible, Latvia's and Baltic influence in the EU and in the global development context would be greater and would synchronize with the principal national interests of the Baltic countries. The common interests can be expressed by two terms: 1) rapid growth of welfare, 2) lasting security.

It is the last aspect that is of greatest concern, in terms of the media concentration. If Scandinavian or American capital influx in Latvia's media market brings along traditions and tasks of democratic media, then the capital that is backed by Russia's interests and presence in the Latvian media market, especially this year, works in an adverse way.

The media whose owners strive to achieve political goals in Latvia and to influence the huge Russian-speaking audience in Latvia, involves about 0.45 million non-citizens. These media aim at disrupting the agenda of the existing lawful power of Latvia by putting forward their own agenda of absurd and scandalous questions, in this way hampering a normal dialogue of the state power and society, and various social groups. They have been pursuing through Latvia, for example, a controversial aim to have the Russian language as one of the EU working languages, by striving to give it a legal status of the second state language in Latvia⁷. These tendencies are aimed at making pro-Russian elements more functional in the Parliament as well as in local governments, and on the level of international organisations.

An impressive example: several years ago a journalist of a Russian newspaper *Panorama Latvii* published an appeal to pensioners to gather for a non-sanctioned meeting at the Riga City Council in protest of heating tariffs. Several participants of the picket consciously barred the traffic of a very busy street so that the policemen had to interfere to move the picket participants off the street. A skirmish took place. It was recorded by the world's most influential media representatives and interpreted as the maltreatment of the Russian minority by the state of Latvia⁸.

Similar reports have recently appeared, with just the Russian-capital maintained media coming out with exaggerated interpretations of the staged protests by school students against

⁷ <http://www.politika.lv/index.php?id=109531&lang=lv>

⁸ <http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/96-98/stranga.pdf>

teaching the Latvian language in Russian schools. Most of the international media correspondents in the Baltic States reside in Moscow and know the Russian language. Therefore, they provide the world with a one-sided view of the situation in the Baltic region which is mainly based on Russia's media or Latvia's media under the influence of the Russian capital. As a result, it all essentially interferes with Latvia's political dialogue with the world public. This creates the so-called Baltic card that Russia plays against the EU, NATO and other organisations in the name of her political interests.

Money has no nationality, but the capital that is invested in the media acquires national identity. And, in terms of the media concentration, this is a really dangerous aspect that Latvia needs to consider. The existing multi-party system in Latvia and the transition period do not permit talking about media concentration as a threat to the political system or the idea of pluralism, as it is for example in the case of Italy (where the Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi owns an influential media empire) or in other similar cases⁹.

These tendencies moved very much to the fore in the near past, when Latvia was on its road to the EU membership. On the one hand, this was a great opportunity for the flourish of democracy; on the other hand, it opened possibilities for non-democratic forces to use the situation in achieving their aims.

The examples are close at hand: the case of the Russian-capital influenced Lithuanian president Rolandas Paksas¹⁰; a delegation of Latvia's Russian-speaking students being granted a visit to the officials of Russia in the Kremlin where the support was clearly voiced and transmitted on TV; the staged growing unrest among the Russian-speaking population of Latvia in protest against teaching Latvian in Russian schools. Tatiana Zhdanoka, member of the European Parliament, invited a group of students from Latvia to Strasbourg to stage a picket at the European Parliament in opposition to the educational reform¹¹.

It is well-known that one cannot choose one's parents or neighbours. One of Latvia's historical neighbours and partners is Russia, a good and perspective neighbour. Latvia here has certain advantages in comparison with other European states, having had long-term experience and ties with Russia. Therefore, Latvia, as no other country, has always wished to realize the ideas of the most beneficial cooperation with Russia.

FINAL POINTS: THE DOUBLE NATURE OF MEDIA OWNERSHIP AND CONCENTRATION

Media concentration and media ownership by foreign capital is a process that cannot and need not be stopped. However, while with the Western or American capital Latvia's media are urged by the impulses of well-established democratic traditions, the capital from the parts of this world that do not possess such traditions and are driven by their national political interests exercises an unwelcome, at times dangerous influence on the media market and media contents.

This is the situation we face in the media development in Latvia: on the one hand, the flow of foreign capital into Latvia's media should be welcomed and should in no way be restricted by any specific EU regulations. On the other hand, an unrestricted buying and selling in the media market in the case of Latvia ultimately may pose a threat of eventual change of the political bias.

Received 23 July 2007

Accepted 10 September 2007

⁹ <http://www.financenet.lv/news/law/index.php?id=68581-77k>

¹⁰ <http://www.ltv-panorama.lv/panorama/2003-10-31-23k>

¹¹ <http://www.politika.lv/index.php?id=109531&lang=lv>