

PART TWO: CONDITIONS (CASE STUDIES)

ASSESSING PLURALISM AND THE DEMOCRATIC PERFORMANCE OF THE MEDIA IN A SMALL COUNTRY: SETTING A COMPARATIVE RESEARCH AGENDA FOR THE BALTIC STATES

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Introduction

The principal function of news media is to support democratization: to ensure that different opinions are heard and different interests can access media, and to act as a watchdog. Murdock and Golding (1989), for example, identify three kinds of relations between communications and citizenship. First, people must have access to information: they must be able to use media in order to register criticism, mobilize opposition and propose alternative courses of action. In other words, freedom of information and expression must be at the core of the fundamental rights. Second, people must have access to the broadest possible range of information, interpretation and debate in areas that involve political choices. This implies that pluralism of media actors offering diverse content is a necessary precondition for practising citizenship. Third, they must be able to recognize themselves and their aspirations in the range of representation offered across available media. From here, it follows that scholarly debate on media pluralism and diversity should focus on how democracy should work. Therefore, a number of critical questions must be asked, such as who gets access to the public sphere and has the power to set the public agenda; attention should also be paid to what is represented in media discourse, and how.

Indeed, the concept of 'media pluralism' has many aspects. It deals both with diversity of media structure (actors) and diversity of content (voices available in media). Therefore, media pluralism has to be understood as a complex concept covering all measures that ensures citizens' access to a variety of information sources, opinions and voices.

A very common approach to studying media pluralism is to concentrate on media ownership plurality (diversity of firms taking part in media business). Indeed, this approach is strongly inspired by an ongoing media-structural change and development towards more mixed ownership forms (cross-media and diagonal concentrations) on both a national and international scale. As claimed by many, the process of media concentration leads to an enormous opinion-forming power and its outcomes may be dangerous for democracy (Humphreys 1996; Meier and Trappel 1998). Media concentration may result in a skewed public discourse where only certain viewpoints are represented and others are silenced. The subsequence of such a process may be rather severe. A few strong media players may become very powerful and control the majority of newspapers, TV stations and also Internet news portals.

It is not difficult to see that in the media pluralism discussion two factors, namely the size and wealth of the news market, become of major significance (Doyle 2002). Indeed, in smaller countries, external media pluralism such as diversity of media actors can be more difficult to achieve. Hence, one must then look into the internal pluralism. For policy drafters, in such context, a principal question needs to be answered – what is to be supported (plurality of actors or plurality of voices) and through which measures? In spite of justified worries, one has to take into account the fact that only a few players present in a small market may not in itself threaten media pluralism. The way media content is produced, namely what kind of voices and how many of them are represented in media, also has an impact on the overall level of plurality in the media. Media companies may have and respect internal codes that promote diversity of opinion; in addition, certain measures, such as codes and agreements between editors and owners, academic media criticism, public debates on changes in the media sector, as well as other measures, may be considered to safeguard an implied abuse of power.

In the context of ongoing debates about media systems homogenization (i.e. increasing deregulation and media marketization, ongoing commercialization of content and marketing of politics) (Curran and Myung-Jin 2000; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Plasser 2005), the question on how to ensure media pluralism and democratic performance has emerged with a new urgency. A number of questions, therefore, need to be asked: which specific contextual conditions must media meet to promote democracy? In other words, is the market sufficient to support media external diversity? Are media companies strong enough and do they have enough expertise and resources to produce original quality content as opposed to imported information materials (thus, aiming at internal diversity)?

Also, it has been reported that aside from media structural changes and possible maladies associated with the process of diminishing plurality through an increase of media concentration, and possible pressures associated with this (such as abuse of power through possible commercial or political interests), another process is noticeable, namely the proliferation of mixed discourses. To put it more precisely, promotional content and PR-based writing proliferates, in conventional as well as in the Internet media (Scott 2005). As a result, diversity of content (voices and opinions represented) is vanishing: very often readers come across the same articles in different dailies; TV viewers watch the same news reports on different TV stations; and the Internet media readers find the same breaking news across different online news portals. There are many reasons for this. On the one hand, media firms tend to save resources and not produce all their articles or programmes themselves (especially news stories that are related to foreign news reporting). Rather, they tend to rely on outside agencies that supply information, photos, info-

graphics, and so on. On the other hand, the breaking character of some news media (online news portals) adds new requirements onto production: news needs to be filled on a regular and frequent basis, thus the easiest way to adhere to such a request is to fill the news hole with news agency, promotional and PR-based writing (Scott 2005; Balčytienė and Harro-Loit, in press). Provision of such inputs does not necessarily affect the quality of editorial content as long as it is balanced with original production (news, editorials, analysis, commentaries, investigative journalism, news features and so on).

As regards journalism, the media pluralism and diversity debate deals with a normative goal to reflect diversity in society, on the one hand, and gives access to and acts as a forum for different interests, on the other hand (Jonsson 2002). Thus, in the media pluralism discussion another perspective also needs to be addressed, namely the role of the audience. A central question here is whether different news media should select and present the same events and in the same way. Indeed, diversity should deal either with variation in the selection of news (selecting news and setting public agenda) or variation in the presentation of the same news events (changing news discourse by framing stories and adding different voices and opinions). As Jonsson (2002) poses, to decide what is desirable in this context is a complex matter: if the audience only uses one news channel then there is nothing wrong if all news media report on the same event in the same way. But if people subscribe to several newspapers, watch several TV news programmes or access different news portals and come across the same news, then this becomes problematic. The question then deals with diversity of voices in different media, namely the variations in the media discourse across different news channels.

To sum up, the goal of this article is to review media performance in the Baltic States according to a normative ideal of democratization. To achieve such an aim, the article looks into media structures from a perspective of media pluralism and diversity. It aims to investigate the circumstances under which liberal regulation and increasing media competition, as well as other factors associated with free market logic, lead to media pluralism and professionalization of journalism (autonomy and independence of media from external and internal pressures, also media accountability), and when it fails to achieve this.

Media ‘made in the Baltic countries’: Similarities and differences

A very natural approach is the tendency to treat the three Baltic countries as one region. As will be demonstrated, differences exist in media structures of the three countries: since the transition to a free market economy and consolidated democracy there are divergences (due to historical, social, cultural and technological reasons) observed across the media systems of the three countries. At the same time, in spite of differences, media systems and journalism practices of the three Baltic countries can be researched as belonging to a single group with defining characteristics, such as each country having a small market (geographically and linguistically restricted) and a very recent history of political, economic and social transformations.

Despite the fact that in the Baltic States the sizes of news markets, their recent histories as well as media regulation climates are comparable, differences influencing the journalism culture in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia still exist. For example, from the point of view of language, the news market in Lithuania is small but homogeneous, while in Latvia and Estonia the markets are even smaller and split between two language groups (Latvian or Estonian and Russian) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Baltic Media Indicators (1 Euro = 3.4528 Lithuanian Litas, LTL; 15.646 Estonian Kroons, EEK).

Indicators	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
<i>Population and major linguistic groups</i>	1.34m (2007) 68.6% Estonians, 25.7% Russians, 3.3% Ukrainians and Belorussians	2.27m (2008) 59% Latvians, 28% Russians, 4% Belorussians, 2% Poles, 1% Lithuanians, 5% other	3.38m (2007) 84.6% Lithuanians, 6.3% Poles, 5.1% Russians, 1.1% Belorussians, 2.9% other language groups
<i>Reading culture (first dailies in the national languages, newspaper reach according to WAN)</i>	Luhhike Oppetus (1776) WAN: 68.5%	Latviesu Arste (1768) WAN: 64.7%	Nusidavimai Dievo karalystėje (printed in Lithuania Minor, 1823) WAN: 56% (2006)
<i>Media regulation climate</i>	No company or person may simultaneously own a TV station, a radio station and a daily or weekly paper No restrictions on foreign ownership No provisions in the broadcasting act against political organizations owning media Concentration is controlled by general Competition Law	Each broadcasting organization, except public broadcasting organizations, may not produce more than three programmes No restrictions on cross-media ownership The monopolization of electronic mass media in the interests of a political organization (party), etc. is not permitted Non-EU ownership of a mass media is restricted to 49 % Restrictions against political advertising	There is no restriction against foreign ownership or as to the structure of capital of media It is a duty of media firms to indicate changes in media ownership structure There are no restrictions on cross-media ownership A political party may not be the owner of a Broadcaster State should create equal legal and economic opportunities for honest competition of public information producers and disseminators No restrictions on cross-media ownership Restrictions against political advertising
<i>Media advertising revenues (2006)</i>	1355m EEK	76m LVL	430m LTL
<i>Total number of newspapers, number of dailies (WAN, 2006)</i>	143 (2006) No. of dailies: 16	130 (2006) No. of dailies: 22	325 (2005) No. of dailies: 22
<i>Major dailies, their average circulation numbers (000): data</i>	Postimees (mainstream), 65–9 SL Õhtuleht (tabloid), 63–5 Eesti Päevaleht (mainstream), 35–9	Diena (quality/mainstream), 33–52 (weekend edition) Latvijas Avize (quality/	Vakaro žinios (tabloid), 130 Lietuvos rytas (mainstream), 50–130 (weekend edition)

<i>publicly provided by newspapers</i>	Äripäev (business daily), 22–6 Postimees in Russian, 15–20	mainstream), 45–8 Vesti Sevodņa (mainstream), 23–9 Vakara Zinas (tabloid), 12 Vesti Segodna (in Russian, mainstream), 39	Respublika (tabloid) Kauno diena (regional), 40 L.T. (tabloid) Lietuvos žinios (mainstream), 20 Verslo žinios (business daily), 10
Number of TV broadcasters	4 (3 national, 1 local)	28 (4 national)	31 (4 national, 1 regional,
Number of radio broadcasters	32 (4 national, 16 regional, 12 local)	41	48 (10 national, 6 regional, 35 local)
Major Internet news portals and their types	Delfi.ee (online-only news portal) Postimees.ee (news portal of Postimees) Sloleht.ee (news portal of SL Õhtuleht) Epl.ee (news portal of Eesti Päevaleht) Etv.ee (news portal of ETV)	Delfi.lv (online-only news portal) TVnet (online-only news portal) Apollo.lv (online-only news portal) Politika.lv (specialized news and analysis online-only news portal) Dialogi.lv (specialized news and analysis online-only news portal)	Delfi.lt (online-only news portal) Lrytas.lt (news portal of Lietuvos rytas) Alfa.lt (online-only news portal) Balsas.lt (online-only news portal) Vz.lt (news portal of Verslo žinios) Bernardinai.lt (online-only specialized news portal) Lrt.lt (news portal of LRT)
<i>Internet penetration</i>	69%	56%	52.9%
Free media (free dailies)	Linnaleht	5 min (in Riga and metro area, in Lat and Rus) Rītdiena (nationally, the biggest newspaper – 173 thousand subscribers for year 2008, but it has not come out this year due to financial problems, future is uncertain)	15 min (in major cities: Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda) Miesto žinios (in Vilnius)
Major media groups and ownership types	Eesti Meedia (owned by Schibsted, cross-media) Ekspress Grupp (print media) Bonnier Business Press (print media) Ühinenud ajakirjad (print media, Finnish owners) Moles (print media) Modern Times Group (MTG) (broadcast media) Metromedia International (radio) Sky Media (radio)	AS Diena (Bonnier Media, print media) Santa (magazines) Lilit (magazines) Petits (print media) MTG (broadcasting) News Corp Europe (broadcast media)	Lietuvos rytas (cross-media) Achemos grupė (cross-media) Respublikos leidiniai (print media) Žurnalų leidybos grupė (Schibsted, magazines) Verslo žinios (Bonnier Media, print media) Modern Times Group (MTG) (broadcast media) Diena Media News (previously owned by Orkla Media, print media) MG Baltic (cross-media) M-1 (radio)

As in many countries worldwide, television in the Baltic States is an important medium of information for citizens. The broadcast market has public service providers and private owners. In Estonia, the public service broadcaster ETV already seized advertising in 2002 – the main reason being attempts to promote the development of domestic TV channels by creating better funding opportunities for the private broadcasting sector. In all three countries, private broadcaster TV3 (which is a Baltic-Scandinavian network owned by the Modern Times Group from Sweden) is the most popular, with around 25 per cent of audience share. The public service station takes only third place in each country (with only around 12 per cent of audience share). Although viewers in Estonia consider national television news programmes to be important sources of information, agenda-setting is carried out primarily by newspapers (television news programmes often just broadcast the main newspaper stories). This creates a paradoxical situation: although the influence of television on public opinion is very significant – at least in terms of the importance Estonians attribute to it as a source of news – TV channels in Estonia do not appear to take advantage of this position (OSI and EUMAP 2005).

Newspapers in Estonia have the biggest advertising revenues (more than 40 per cent of the media advertising market), while in Lithuania and Latvia television has the largest share of advertising (around 40 per cent). Another important characteristic of the Lithuanian news environment (also detected in Latvia) is the large number and wide availability of regional and local TV channels, many of them also having local news programmes. Radio in the Baltic countries is strongly commercialized and orients itself towards entertainment. In Lithuania there is a 24-hour news radio (*Žinių radijas*), while in other countries music channels dominate.

Estonia is described as a small country, promoting an online life style (almost two thirds of the population are Internet users), while Lithuania is a less Internet-oriented country with only a half of the population (53 per cent) using the Internet. In Estonia, as in the Scandinavian countries, traditional newspapers are the strongest online news providers. Besides the online-only *Delfi.ee*, the three portals of national dailies (*Postimees*, *Eesti Päevaleht* and *SL Ohtuleht*) are among the five most visited websites in Estonia. In Lithuania, in contrast to Estonia, there is only one daily (*Lietuvos rytas*) that has a stronger voice online (with *Lrytas.lt*). The need for online news in Lithuania is met by mainstream (*Delfi.lt*, *Alfa.lt*, *Balsas.lt*) as well as specialized (*Bernardinai.lt*) news portals. Latvia, too, has mainstream (*Delfi.lv*, *TVnet.lv*) as well as specialized news and analysis portals (*Politika.lv*, *Dialogi.lv*).

In all three countries, free newspapers are in the lists of the Top Five most read dailies. The arrival of free dailies is a fairly new thing in the Baltic countries and which has challenged the identities of print newspapers (especially in Lithuania). New challenges, however, are emerging in this context: How to deal with free media? How free is the free media and who pays for free news, broadcasting and journalism online?

Fruits and roots of liberalism

In Europe, there is no universal model to categorize media policies (ideas enshrined in media regulation) according to the many diverging parameters. There is no unanimous agreement, and different forms of regulation are applied across different countries. In the Baltic States, there is an obvious stress on the ideals of free market and liberalism.

Three fundamental things affect media pluralism and the diversity climate in the Baltic countries: (1) the role of the state is fairly constricted, (2) market logic is highly promoted and (3) media

accountability is weak. On the one hand, if assessed structurally, liberal regulation of media creates an open space for media firms to compete with one another, making it possible for citizens to access all kinds of content both offline and online. On the other hand, the logic of the market is dictated by media firms and the outcome of that is rather disappointing: media production is guided by the principle of 'producing content as cheaply and quickly as possible'.

Media culpa

Baltic journalism is facing strong pressures: different players are involved in media production, distribution and consumption; technological changes, too, translate into a variety of transformations (digitization, convergence) affecting audience segmentation. Indeed, the number of news channels (free newspapers, broadcasting time, online news portals and specialized magazines) is increasing in all countries. As a result of these changes, scholars (not only in the Baltic States) are now discussing the need to preserve professional journalism, whereas media mainly produce mixed content, concentrate on more sensational and more entertainment-oriented reporting and blur boundaries between news and advertising (Erjavec 2005; Balčytienė and Harro-Loit 2007). Mixed discourses proliferate in magazines, broadcast media and online. Therefore, different policy proposals are suggested, ranging from formalization of professional training (emphasizing media analysis techniques and critical reflection skills as well as the importance of journalistic and editorial autonomy) to media literacy education in schools.

Indeed, the media climate in the Baltic States is very competitive. A negative outcome of this is the fact that journalism is mainly driven by a consumerist approach. Expenses of producing serious media such as local news or investigative reporting in a small country are becoming extremely high. Therefore, some media, suffering from bottom-line pressures, tend to overlook professional requirements by producing hybrid media. This trend supports a number of worries also outlined in different studies. For example, experience in different countries shows potential negative effects of too much or unregulated competition: as a result of 'savage deregulation', certain content becomes marginalized, for example foreign reporting or investigative journalism. It has also been experienced that over-strong competition results in a decline of diversity and quality. This is because competing providers make different trade-offs: in a small country, demand for non-mainstream information is potentially smaller than in larger markets. Thus with increasing competition, reluctance to invest in new products and quality becomes rather strong, and professionalism suffers.

Larger and wealthier markets (with greater resources available for the provision of media) can afford a greater diversity of output than smaller markets. Therefore, for smaller markets, a particular concern is the availability of resources to support the production by domestic media groups of original content as opposed to imported production. In a small market, shortage of funds causes a decline in (expensive) foreign news coverage and foreign news quality; research studies prove that only few media companies have foreign correspondents and invest in foreign news reporting (Balčytienė et al. 2007; Tammpuu and Puulerits 2007).

Despite trade-offs associated with content, one more outcome associated with this trend is an increase in media power. Media acts as 'watch dog' and demands transparency from the other institutions in the society. In a small country where liberalism is promoted in policies but professionalism of media is weak, the media itself, as observed rather often, remains the most opaque.

Unwanted state

In the Baltic countries, the participation of the state in the matters of media is fairly constricted. The intervention of the state, which can be assessed in the frameworks of state as owner, regulator or financier of media, can be of different degrees – it can vary from a low to a high level of control (see, for example, Hallin and Mancini 2004). Compared to other countries in the region (for example, the Scandinavian countries), the voice of the state in the Baltic States is silenced. Media regulation in the Baltic countries is very liberal: there is no restriction as to the structure of capital of media, but it is compulsory that changes in ownership structures be indicated. There are no restrictions on cross-media ownership; however, regulation requires the state to create equal legal and economic opportunities for honest competition of media. In addition, the state must ensure that no single person can occupy a position of monopoly or abuse such a dominant position. There are no restrictions against foreign ownership. A political party or organization may not be the owner and operator of a broadcaster.

Indeed, to adequately assess the reasons of promotion of certain restrictions (on the one hand) and liberalism (on the other hand) in media policies, it is crucially important to go back into the early 1990s and study historical preconditions for such steps. In the 1990s, immediately after the political breakthrough, the fundamental goal of the Baltic countries was to create national systems of media and no other alternatives to liberalism were perceived as acceptable. Because of still-active memories of the communist past, when everything was under very strict supervision and state control, state participation in the matters of media was treated as totally unacceptable; certain steps were also taken to limit political affiliation (for example, through ownership) of media (Tapinas 1998).

The result of liberal regulation, changing journalism and the scepticism of media towards outside criticism has resulted in a complex situation. Very often, media plays a role of ‘attack dog’ rather than of ‘watch dog’. At the same time, however, any attempts to impose stricter regulation and de-liberalize the media market, for example, by introducing restrictions on cross-media ownership, would be interpreted as an unpopular move: in European media politics as well, there is a general tendency towards neo-liberal policy promoting de-regulation, competition and openness.

The trend towards the homogenization of media systems, with increasing commercialism and other market-led fashions, has become worldwide. In this respect, media marketization in the Baltic States has its own character. As practice reveals, the new democracies have not yet completely disengaged from soviet histories: in all three countries, civil society structures are not sufficiently developed and media cultures are too weak to withstand different kinds of (economic or political) pressures (Dimants 2005; Baerug 2005; Balčytienė, 2007; Lauk in press). Indeed, the new democracies have jumped into the free market model practically unprepared in practices of professionalism and accountability. Although the Scandinavian models of self-regulation were ‘exported’ to their Baltic neighbours, the period of adaptation did not happen immediately (see, for example, Harro-Loit and Balčytienė 2005; Rosslund 2005). In contrast, in the Scandinavian countries, media has traditionally been seen first and foremost as a social institution: the Nordic countries have cherished the ideal of social responsibility as part of the media system, thus, even with commercial goals being promoted, there are certain measures (such as a long tradition of professionalism and agreements protecting editorial autonomy from influence by media owners as well as public control) which secure pluralism and protect diversity ideals from being misused (see, for example, Brink Lund 2007; Nord, in press).

Culture of communication

Media does not operate in a vacuum. Whether or not media can accomplish its functions and objectives does not depend on media alone. Media does not act from some independent, outside world on individuals and society; rather, media organizations and activities are embedded in social power relations (McQuail 2000).

In a small news market, these power relations acquire unique aspects; for example, journalists' relationships with sources are built upon a certain logic of proximity. In addition, different news-worthiness criteria affect news management and the production routines of journalists working in small or large media firms.

Journalists' relationships with their political or business news sources are based on a certain culture which affects media performance. One of the outcomes of this proximity is that media carefully monitors national political life. In the early 1990s, media went through a process of diversification along ideological lines. However, this was a very short period and soon (in the mid 1990s) business discovered media as an important sphere for ownership. As a result, political affiliations were erased from the flag lines of dailies. Indeed, newspapers proclaim themselves to be free and independent, but in reality, media in the Baltic States has not fully separated itself from the fields of politics and business. Media is carefully monitoring the national political agenda. Political actors, too, seek to have a hand in media: through financial grants (by prepaid advertising) they force the media to take an appropriate position; in addition, politicians use media for political news management. Business, too, is tempted to control media: on the one hand, this is done for purposes of self-defence, on the other hand, to ensure that targeted news about the business itself reaches the public.

This creates a tricky situation where media becomes an instrument in the hands of different actors (politicians and businessmen) aiming to achieve their aspirations. The tendency to accept a publicly-hidden agenda is reminiscent of the Italian media system (also of other southern European countries) where partisanship of media is strong, a strong integration between media and political elites exists and professional consolidation of journalists is low. However, the situation in the Baltic States is a bit different. The Baltic countries have developed a strong orientation to *laissez faire*; they have developed a weak-state tradition. Indeed, in a competitive environment there should be nothing wrong with different business companies owning different media. The existence of diversity of media actors balances business interests and therefore creates external pluralism. Within one medium, it is important to bring a wider spectrum of news and information in order to reach a wider readership. This creates internal pluralism. Such logic, however, looks nice only in theory. In reality, especially in a small news market where the reach of newspapers and readership of dailies is fairly low, only few people buy or subscribe to more than one newspaper. As already mentioned, a tendency is emerging where many rival media (the largest national dailies, TV news programmes) start to compete with the same kind of (hybrid) content as competition increases.

Discussion and further research needs

The three indicated characteristics of the Baltic news markets – being small, with liberal regulation and weak accountability – create a complex situation. The logic of the market is highly valued: liberal regulation opens new fields and forms for media development. The journalistic culture of Lithuania, Latvia or Estonia is affected by the liberal-media model (media competition is highly promoted, state plays a restricted role), but weaker historic journalistic

traditions, as well as a weak civil society, a young system of self-regulation and lack of tradition of professional journalism, has created obvious drawbacks.

The size and wealth of the market is a decisive parameter which needs to be taken into account when discussing media changes, development and journalism culture from a comparative perspective. As demonstrated above, small news markets face different challenges and problems than big markets. For example, an important factor necessary for the media to carry out its democratic functions (provide information, create public forums and observe those in power) is availability of resources, namely a rich advertising market, and different forms to fund media (subsidies from the state, tradition of public funding and so on). Also, media performance is strongly affected by the culture of political communication (journalists' relationships with sources and how these are maintained).

To assess in comparative perspective how media actually serve democracy (also where media fail to meet the democratic performance expectations of the media) requires a number of critical questions to be posed: Does media perform its democratic functions adequately? Whom do media serve – itself (media owners, advertisers), audiences (consumers or citizens) or government?

As mentioned, the parameter of proximity acquires rather different nuances in a small than in a large market. Therefore, it becomes important to investigate how the size of the market affects the culture of political communication: What aspects of news management are observed in a small news market? What channels (formal or informal) are used by journalists in their communication with political and business news sources? Related to this, one more aspect needs to be covered, namely the web of relationships between different interest groups and media, and the effect of these on the development of normative journalistic culture. In other words, it becomes crucially important to ask: Is there a dialogue between social groups and media? Whose power dominates?

Indeed, contemporary media systems are rapidly changing, with many challenges affecting national media structures and journalism cultures and culminating with more or less similar results, such as increased commercialization of the media, growing power of news sources or changes in news production and presentation and so on. Thus, the comparative research perspective becomes vital.

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