

Baltic Media Structures and the Influence of Media

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This paper provides a critical analysis of the most important transformations and paradoxes in changes and development of media institutions and journalism in small Baltic nations. In spite of agreements that in many ways Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are comparable according to selected variables (small news market, very liberal climate of media regulation, weak traditions of professional journalism and weak journalistic accountability), this paper draws attention to the idea of “journalism culture” and argues that each small country follows its own individual path in the development of professional journalism.

Among the most interesting results of this discussion is the discovery that in comparative studies of media systems it is important to incorporate the analysis of the factors which affect the evolution and change of different systems, namely the analytical dimensions uncovering “historical legacies” such traditions and cultures of institutional development. Many of these legacies emerge due to so-called situational factors such as the size and wealth of the market as well as cultural traditions and norms of journalism development. As will be demonstrated, the institutional and constitutional design in the Baltic States produces peculiar social structures which lead to a “mediatized public sphere”. Hence, a very active role of the Baltic media is among the main findings of this study.

Introduction: Small and peripheral nations

Although there are obvious differences across the Baltic nations, media in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia can be studied and researched as belonging to a single group of media systems with defining characteristics such as each country having a very small news market (with populations varying from 1.34 million in Estonia to 2.27 million in Latvia and 3.36 million in Lithuania), liberal media regulation and weak media accountability.¹

Generally, small markets have particular characteristics in both economic and cultural terms, and these characteristics have a direct impact on media production.² From the economic point of view, small countries have small production and sale markets. In smaller countries the numbers of professional journalists, editors, screenwriters and producers are smaller as well. Consequently, smaller countries are less influential internationally as their professional communities and the critical mass needed to produce creative ideas are much smaller. Small countries have less power to affect global processes, thus they are more inclined to adjust to external influences and developments on a global scale. Most often, small countries act as importers of cultural products and ideas, and because of that small countries are more severely affected by global influences such as media concentration, commercialization

and cultural diffusion. One of the biggest economic concerns for smaller markets is the production of high quality domestic products to compete on international scale or with foreign production.³ Having limited resources and small market size, the media industry in small states tends to show monopolistic or oligopolistic structures. Marginal markets are also less attractive for foreign investors from the outside, but exceptions could be found even in very small countries with different language communities (e.g., in Latvia and to some extent also in Estonia where Russian-speaking audience comprises almost one third of the country's entire population). Nonetheless, media companies in the Baltic States are mainly nationally owned, which contrasts with the situation in other Central and Eastern European countries such as Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Romania where a significant number of big companies from Western Europe (Germany, France, Austria and Switzerland) are operating.

In cultural terms, certain historical legacies (such as histories of censorship and development of book publishing and reading traditions) are of no less importance in attempts to explain media's democratic (non)performance in small nations, including the three Baltic countries. Indeed, media production and journalism is not only a technical profession with its routines, skills and competences. Rather, media production and communication practices are closely associated with the country's more general culture, – in other words, with histories of media development, relations between media and politics, as well as general values and norms supported through communication.⁴ In such context, one more indicator closely intertwined with the variable of smallness of the country is the concept of “communicative proximity”. In a small country, for example, only a limited number of news sources are available for journalists to comment on a particular political or economic matter, thus relationships between journalists and political or economic experts are structured differently than in bigger countries. Consequently, the media industry in smaller states is closer linked to the political (and economic) power than in larger states.

The political influence is most clearly present in structural features and editorial decisions made in the newsrooms. In all three Baltic States research has shown that there is a good reason to be concerned about internal censorship and self-censorship in some (mostly regional and local) news media. For example, Baerug (2005) has studied the answers of TV journalists from the three Baltic countries working for national, regional and local TV stations on the issue whether they would accept payment for inviting political figures to their programmes. The study concludes that no matter in what national settings they work media professionals attribute such practices to the market pressures to have high ranking politicians/celebrities on TV. At the same time, journalists propose different means to control such practice by imposing supervision (e.g., court cases for breaking the law against hidden advertising: according to journalists, since there has been no court trial over the issue of hidden

advertising, thus nobody is afraid of placing hidden advertising on TV), having stricter regulation, having thorough public discussions and better education of journalists, and so on. In another study it was shown that the relationship between the media and politics in the Baltic States is basically structured around an informal (non-institutionalized) practice of communicating.⁵ Indeed, the reduced distance between journalists and political news sources helps them to get news operatively but also strengthens clientelistic relationships. As popularly conceived, clientelism is a particularistic form of social organization in which formal rules are less important relative to personal connection and commitment to particular interests.⁶ Likewise, clientelism can also be addressed as a form of media instrumentalization.

By and large, in the countries of young democracy, the relationships between actors of political communication, the channels of communication and the procedural rules of their support are rather weak, if not completely absent; their professional values are not articulated and recognizable – as a result, their relationships, channels of communication used and the overall professional practice of communication are not settled yet. This finding contrasts with the situation in other small states like the Scandinavian countries, where such communicative proximity is less noticeable: institutional interests are publicly declared, transparent and separated, and channels of communication institutionalized (the channels are formalized, thus they are recognizable).

The effects of journalism culture: The role of traditions, values and norms

In general, the profession of journalism as well as its characteristics is related to different political, economic, social and cultural conditions where these professional traditions have developed and are sustained. This assumption directs our attention to the idea that there is no universal culture of journalism or communication. Instead, a variety of journalism cultures exist which can be compared and contrasted according to certain comparative criteria such as histories and traditions of media development, the media economic environment (characteristics of media external and internal concentration), levels of journalistic autonomy as well as other indicators of media's democratic performance. On the other hand, in spite of different assumptions about the critical impact of traditions and norms as well as the influence of situational factors on media's performance, many scholars have drawn attention to the ongoing processes of globalization, regional integration, technological and cultural diffusion and their impact on unification and homogenization of media production routines and messages.⁷ Indeed, differences among different cultural contexts are diminishing and a general trend towards more market-oriented, commercialized and popularized production is taking place in many countries around the world; however, the idea of journalism cultures remains very strong. Local histories and traditions are still very powerful, and affect how news is

selected and messages produced by communications professionals, and how people construct interpretations and communicate with each other.

In addition to sharing many experiences in their most recent political and social histories (having established independent states in 1918 and being incorporated into the Soviet Union for five decades in the second half of the twentieth century), the Baltic countries and their social institutions share other characteristics as well. For example, the most common features of the present day media are loose regulation and weak journalistic professionalism.⁸ In the early 1990s, liberation of the media market in the Baltic States was the biggest priority in the politics of information, while the support for public interest journalism by using various means to maintain the diversity of information was given much less attention. In terms of media regulation, Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian legislation contains no special provisions on media concentration. In all three countries, the media sector comes under the more general competition law, which forbids dominant positions, meaning over 40% of a market. In Lithuania, for example, media concentration has not yet reached such critical levels as in Estonia where very few companies dominate on the national level and regional media are practically non-existent, but observations could be made that the highest concentration exists in the television section (CR3 reaches 62%), which is followed by the newspaper market (50.2 %) and the radio market (43.8%). No sanctions have ever been imposed in the Baltic countries for abuse of dominant positions by owners of more media in pursuing their business interests. Indeed, it is difficult to prove that media ownership concentration has direct impact on media content but certain observations can be made: research studies show increasing power of media owners and their dominating position in setting public agenda.⁹

Another characteristic of the Baltic media is a weak tradition of professional journalism. Although there is no censorship in the media, yet a certain degree of self-censorship exists, and research studies confirm “soft” attempts to control media content by both media owners and “outside” forces (advertisers) (see also the chapter by Anda Rožukalne in this volume).¹⁰ Lack of explicit mission statements and rules for internal newsroom organisation are disclosed as a serious problem in some (particularly, commercial) media organisations. The majority of journalists in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia say they are independent in choosing their topics and feel no pressure from the owners. At the same time, they would not in most cases produce a negative report on the owners. It is a warning indication of a lack of internal newsroom autonomy which may lead to limitations of the media’s democratic performance. Although Baltic media organisations receive income from diverse streams, sponsoring agreements are found in some, mostly regional and local, media. For example, in 2007, the Lithuanian chapter of Transparency International published a study on the level of corruption in the Lithuanian media. According to the data provided in this research, 13% of businessmen

who participated in the survey and who had dealings with Lithuanian media in 2005–2006 said they reciprocated by advertising or commercials for the publication of positive material about them or for suppressing negative information. Most often respondents claimed they bribed the press; national TV channels are described as less corrupt than local ones. Baltic journalists describe the watchdog role as one of the most important functions of media, but the biggest priority is given to the mission of informing society and presenting the biggest scope of opinions. In addition, journalists claim that it is important to report news which has tangible consequences for ordinary citizens. This kind of journalism takes a keen interest in public opinion – it is important to provide news which is watched and is interesting to the audience. Also a general trend is observed that in favor of expanding profit margins the mainstream media gradually abandon public service mission of journalism: entertainment programmes and sensational news dominate in commercial media channels (see the chapter by Anda Rožukalne in this volume).¹¹ In all three countries public criticism and regular public debates on media performance are taking place only on an irregular basis, and a broader analysis on the impact on changes in the media field on citizenship is lacking. Any organized process of self-criticism in media is also quite rare except for a few social media projects.

In short, weak media professionalism (weak systems of media's self-regulation, absence of journalistic autonomy), absence of publicly available media monitoring efforts and lack of adequate media analysis and criticism affect both media accountability and public knowledge and willingness to take part in media related discussions and in public life in general.

Young democracies without people

Although being fairly informative the finding that Baltic media professionalism is low does not produce a full picture and does not explain why media fails to meet democratic performance requirements. A new analytical approach is needed where both fields of media and politics could be combined to adequately address political and social changes.

In the early 1990s in most post communist countries both systems – politics and media – had to be designed from scratch.¹² Development of new institutions has been a particular challenge especially for the three Baltic States which for the second time in the 20th century reappeared on the European map. Two decades later, in spite of normative expectations on how the Baltic media transformations should proceed and which courses of action these should take, there is a great deal of uncertainty and lack of clarity on what is happening in these countries. There were some calls to address the changes in a much more integrated way but these were very few and did not provide sufficient methods for further analysis. For example, already in the mid 1990s the Slovenian media scholar Slavko Splichal argued that by merely looking at the prescribed models of post communist transition one fails to notice that there may be different

assessments of the concept of democracy and civil society in different social and cultural settings.¹³

One approach to matching the two fields of media and politics was proposed by Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini in their seminal book “Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics”.¹⁴ The authors coined the concept of “political parallelism” which explores how the media mirror the political climate in the country, i.e. how major political divisions in society are reflected in the media. For example, it discloses the degree (strong or weak) as well as the nature of the linkage (for example, through the analysis of political communication culture such as journalists’ relations with their political sources and so on) between the media and political and social divisions of society.

Generally, the political life in the Baltic countries is structured in a peculiar way. On the one hand, the impression is that Baltic societies are “shapeless” or somehow “blurred” – they are distinguished by weak parties and their vague ideological backgrounds, unarticulated values and their continuing leveling. On the other hand, especially in Latvia, the linguistic orientation of political parties and political life in general is bordering on the ideological issues (see the chapter by Iveta Kažoka in this volume).

In the Baltic States, the party press tradition (which was born in the end of the nineteenth century) was broken in the mid twentieth century and suppressed by totalitarianism. Although in the early 1990s there was a short period when partisan press emerged, soon it was destroyed by its imitations and declarations of independence of the press, pretending to implement the principles of impartiality and fairness which were “imported” together with the models of liberal journalism. In Lithuania, for example, in new Media Act introduced in 1996, a chapter restricting party ownership of media was added. Although it was perceived as a strategic (policy) attempt to limit domination of certain ideologies and potential foreign (Russian) interests, in the long this restriction has potentially weakened the party system. Having no channels to mobilize their voters, the political parties have gradually and significantly diminished their ideological “left-right” leanings. An outcome of such transformations is rather severe as today no public communication spaces are left where different ideological views could be presented, discussed, questioned and crystallized out. The absence of quality public communication space also has a certain effect on the political climate in Lithuania and in Latvia also. According to research studies, the main reasons for citizens’ passiveness are the weakness of political parties and a vanishing boundary between the right and the left wing in the party system.¹⁵ Indeed, citizens are inclined to vote when they can identify with the party, when they can clearly recognize their choice and are able to articulate it. When values are blurred and ideological leanings in communicative spaces are unclear, not adequately articulated or not fully distinguishable, consumerism and populism become the most popular practice

in both politics and mass media. In this context, the characteristics of political communications develop around the media logic (media becomes the “creator” of politics) as well as strategies of public relations. Accordingly, the news which dominates public discourse is that which is saleable to media companies and guarantees the biggest readership (and financial income) at the same time.

To conclude, media policies drafted at the beginning of transformations two decades ago have set in motion the business of Baltic media. In the early 1990s, the ideal of market liberalization was initiated by immediate needs (to promote development of domestic actors), thus certain bans and restrictions in media regulation were lifted. However, high-ranking press freedom in the Baltic countries is not accompanied by responsible journalism. Indeed, there is less change and more continuity in the manifestations of professional practices in the Baltic journalism: its principles and attitudes are unstable, very few ethical rules and norms are observed. Consequently, the informational spaces of Baltic countries do not offer their readership diverse high quality content which could create new spaces for public deliberation.

Mediatized public spaces

From what has been discussed above it follows that the structural conditions of both media and party systems influence how media organizations position themselves in the public sphere. In other words, the structural conditions influence the norms and values of professional orientations and behaviors which are associated with a specific commitment of media professionals to the public and the intention and obligations to serve certain segments of the public.¹⁶ Hence, a new comparative dimension of “the structural conditions in the media and party system” seems to be very useful in this context as by addressing different status of party structures (weak or strong) as well as media structures (commercial media or party press) four dominating types of media discourses are disclosed (Table 1).

Table 1. Structural conditions in media and political systems, and their impact on dominating media discourses.

| Structural conditions in the media system and political system | Commercial media | Party press/Media structures resembling features of party-press parallelism |
|---|--|---|
| Strong parties | <i>Professional discourse</i> (classical professionalism) | <i>Advocacy discourse I</i> (media having party-political profile; politization of the media) |
| Weak parties, fragmented societal (interest) groups | <i>Secular discourse</i> (commercialization of the media) | <i>Advocacy discourse II</i> (literary roots of journalism and evaluative elements in the media) |

According to this categorization (Table 1), the discourses of “Classical professionalism” and also of “Advocacy discourse I” (both emerging in the media systems with strong parties and organized interest groups) refer to the basic understanding of representative systems of democratic governance in political life, whereas secular discourse refers to society which is fragmented and organized around the individual needs of consumers.

Following this line of reasoning, it seems that journalists deploying a secular news discourse wish to distance themselves from the system actors and institutional issues that are considered to be of little interest to their audiences. As such, the secular discourse is clearly market driven; it reacts flexibly to audience demands. In fact, the trend towards commercialization, secularization is observed in many countries around the world: in many countries media are using formats which promise high public attention and guarantee reach; moreover, media generic diversity decreases and issues are covered with personalized, sensational and human touch perspectives, etc.

In spite of certain similarities in media functions, few differences among the small Baltic nations can be observed. It appears that both for Lithuanian and Estonian media the profit motive becomes crucial, while the Latvian media play an active role of their own – in Latvia, both Latvian and Russian-language media play an active role in defining and reinforcing the Russian/Latvian ethno-linguistic cleavage (see chapters by Anda Rožukalne and Ammon Cheskin, in this volume). Despite differences, as mentioned by different analysts, media discourses which proliferate in the public spheres of the Baltic countries are close to what has been identified as secular discourse.¹⁷ In Lithuania and Latvia, also another observation is noticed, namely a literary tradition of news presentation which persists (although in different degrees) in many present-day publications. Very often information (facts) is mixed with opinions and assessments, which seems to be a particular form of cultural heritage: both Lithuanians and Latvians have developed a certain conscious relationship to their national language seeking to preserve it from outside influences, thus figurative expressions, literary elements have persisted also in modern journalism (“Advocacy discourse II” according to the Table 1).

To conclude, the institutional and constitutional design in the Baltic States produces a “mediatized public sphere” where media is an active player on its own and imposes its rules on other fields such as politics or business. Although arrangements discussed above are noticed in many countries around the world, an aggressive media role is more dangerous in the nations where democratic traditions and journalism professionalism is very young. As proposed by Barbara Pfetsch, in young democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, dominating secular discourses, marketization of journalism and politics could lead to situations in which politics no longer plays a role in the public discourse.¹⁸ Although transferring political news and messages, such media gradually depoliticize public discourse on politics and in the long run a situation

could arise in which the public can no longer recognize the connection between populist political issues presented in media and political performance and decision making.

The media-oriented communication culture registered in the Baltic countries is close to what is found in the Liberal Model countries. But very small nations with linguistically restricted audiences with low journalistic autonomy and weak professional identities, absence of adequate norms and ethical rules in media performance and (politically) active media focused on the commercial imperative have contributed to their country-specific communication nuances most evident in dominant populist, sensational and PR-inspired and hybrid discourses.

Discussion: From media freedom institutionalization to its consolidation

Absence of political parallelism, dominating secular discourses in the media as well as other characteristics of (politically) active commercial media contribute to peculiar social structures in the Baltic societies. As mentioned, the lack of public political participation which is reported in the Baltic States is associated with weakness of political parties, absence of value divisions on the “left-right” scale in the party system as well as other features. Another important finding in the Baltic States is high public hopes for popular journalism and politics. Such a situation contributes to a growing value crisis in the country: when ideological values are unclear or mixed, comfortable situations are created for populism to emerge and dominate in the public sphere.

Indeed, establishment of democratic institutions is important but not a sufficient factor for the consolidation of democracy. As practice reveals, in many post-communist countries the institutions are there, but there is no (or very little) public support and compliance with the ethical rules and behavioral norms of these institutions because adequate values are not there. In this context, Peter Bajomi-Lazar proposes a concept of “media freedom” which, according to the author, could be used in the analysis of the emergence of attitudinal and behavioral foundations of certain professional cultures.¹⁹ The concept of media freedom is best revealed through three dimensions: 1) the institutional (legal establishment of institutions: laws, regulatory authorities, media self-regulation institutions, media support funds), 2) behavioral (development of consensus among political elites and media that democracy and media freedom is the only “game in town”), and 3) attitudinal (commitment of citizens and their understanding that media freedom is a value which is inseparable of democracy). This line of reasoning clearly stresses that public support and commitment enhances the consolidation of media freedom while public alienation hinders it.

Democratic consolidation evolves through civil society, political society and the rule of law. So the fundamental question to be asked is whether civil society believes in democratic values. It seems that in many post-communist

countries there is a certain delay in transformations in different fields of politics and society. Taking the argument developed by Bajomi-Lazar further, it looks as if in post-communist countries the delay is between democratic consolidation (development of institutions) and media freedom consolidation. For example, in Lithuania and Estonia, in terms of media quality control, institutionally, it would appear that adequate wording is in place (systems of self-regulation are established in both countries; moreover, Lithuania has an institution of Inspector of Journalist Ethics, i.e. the Ombudsman); in reality, however, there exist certain drawbacks in their operations.²⁰ As research reveals, in many organisations there are no formal means that would oblige journalists to follow the requirements of the code of ethics. The methods of reaction towards mistakes or breaches of ethics done by journalists are very similar in both countries – no strict sanctions are usually applied except extraordinary cases. Also, the requirements for an internal code of ethics in media organisations is implemented only formally as there is no legally binding commitment to ensure editorial independence. In Latvia, the journalists' professional environment is even more fragmented: Latvian journalists' professional identity is very weak; also, the Latvian Journalists' Association is not respected among professionals and lacks the status of an authoritative or credible opinion leader.

What emerges from this discussion is that the two processes of institutional development and consolidation are not parallel. Figuring out how journalism culture affects these differences is one step towards understanding the failures. As mentioned, many challenges must be approached in the process of consolidation of media democratic performance in the Baltic States. Some of these challenges are quite new and related to global effects and influences such as convergence and technological and cultural diffusion (emergence of market-oriented journalism and abandonment of public service mission in media). Other challenges are emerging as contextually shaped concerns, and relate to the particularities of communication histories and traditions of national context and national communication culture, and their impact on working routines of journalists and messages communicated.

Endnotes

1 Balčytienė, 2006.

2 Puppis, 2009; Hallin, 2009; Balčytienė, 2009.

3 Doyle, 2002.

4 Hallin and Mancini, 2004b; Mancini, 2008.

5 AIM Research Consortium, 2007.

6 Hallin and Mancini, 2004b.

7 Hallin and Mancini, 2004a.

8 Harro-Loit and Balčytienė, 2005; Balčytienė and Lauk, 2005.

9 Balčytienė and Naprytė, in press; Lauk, 2009.

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- 10 Balčytienė and Lauk, 2005; Balčytienė & Naprytė, in press; Dimants, 2005.
 11 Balčytienė and Juraitė, 2009.
 12 Jakubowicz and Sukosd, 2008.
 13 Splichal, 1994.
 14 Hallin and Mancini, 2004b.
 15 Žiliukaitė et al., 2006.
 16 McQuail, 2005; McNair, 2000.
 17 AIM Research Consortium, 2007.
 18 Pfetsch, 2004.
 19 Bajomi-Lazar, 2008.
 20 Harro-Loit and Balčytienė, 2005.

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