

Media and politics in the Baltic States

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The international scientific conference “Interaction of Media and Politics in the Baltic States” was held at the Faculty of Communication of Vilnius University on 7-8 May 2015. Researchers from universities in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Poland and United Kingdom analysed issues in media policy, propaganda, information warfare, political communication and investigative journalism.

The Institute of Journalism at the Vilnius University Faculty of Communication organized the conference in partnership with the Department of Communication Studies at Riga Stradins University, and the Institute of Journalism, Communication and Information Studies at Tartu University.

The conference was arranged into four main sections: 1) media policy, 2) propaganda, information wars and media audience, 3) political communication and 4) journalism, education and politics.

Epp Lauk from the University of Jyväskylä opened the media policy section. The researcher compared the functioning of the media self-regulation mechanisms in Estonia and Finland. The Finnish model of media self-regulation can be called “Nordic”: strong (positive) state involvement, no state interference. It also has a high degree of reflexivity and transparency. The highest value in this model is the credibility of journalism. Meanwhile, the Estonian model of media self-regulation has limited transparency and reflexivity. There is no state involvement at all. The Estonian model lacks interaction among all the actors of media self-regulation system. According to Epp Lauk, it obviously needs much longer than 25 years for a self-regulation mechanism to develop from nothing to a well functioning body.

Ainārs Dimants from Turība University analysed the communication in the creation establishment of a unified public service media corporation in Latvia. Andres Jõesaar (Tallinn University) presented the findings of a survey, which indicated that two radically different information fields exist in Estonia: the Estonian-language media promotes European values, while the Russian-language media promotes “Putin’s values”. Andres Jõesaar criticized the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, which, according to the author, should be revised to prevent unfair competition that stems from third countries in the Estonian media market.

Deimantas Jastramskis from Vilnius University presented research about the economic policy on the social security of media workers. The main focus of this presentation – the economic policy decisions aimed at increasing the social security tax for the author agreements in the period of economic crisis. Such a policy step had a substantial influence on the decrease of the number of media workers and the earnings in media enterprises. These decisions have also dramatically stimulated the increase of the number of persons working on the basis of certificates (freelancers).

As the need for investigative journalism is only growing, Halliki Harro-Loit from the University of Tartu talked about investigative journalism and how to develop specific skills. She presented two case studies from the training experience at the University of Tartu. The studies showed that high-level information processing skills and training in moral reasoning are needed in order to carry out investigative journalism. The training requires several years. Interdisciplinary approach (teachers and students with different disciplinary backgrounds working together) provides an opportunity to create new expert knowledge.

The section of political communication had many various presentations. Beata Ociepka (University of Wrocław) raised the question if and how small countries can gain international visibility and analysed the position of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in international communication. It can be said that the visibility of a small country can be improved

by the country's political leaders and by the content of messages (e.g. criticizing a big neighbour during a crisis).

Gintaras Aleknonis from Mykolas Romeris University analysed the role of information warfare as a uniting theme shared by the majority of the population. Renata Matkevičienė (Vilnius University) discussed negativity and popularity as communication strategies in mediated political discourse. Ilze Šulmane from the University of Latvia presented a case study of the role change of a candidate before, during and after the Latvian Saeima elections. Normunds Kozlovs (Rīga Stradiņš University) talked about the autonomous libertarian DIY (do it yourself) media in the Latvian political context.

Milda Celiešiūtė (Södertörn University) gave an overview of methodological challenges and research on informal relations between journalists and their elite political sources. The author of this paper emphasized alternative methods as the next step in the research of journalist-source informal relations, reconstruction interviews and social network analysis. She noted that the journalistic right to keep some sources anonymous remains a challenge for this type of research.

Džina Donauskaitė from Vilnius University examined how the environment of networked media affects the culture of online journalism and discussed the process of commodification of journalistic content.

The case study of the 2014 European Parliament election and the analysis of negative campaigning in Lithuania compared to other countries was presented by Andrius Šuminas (Vilnius University), who outlined the theoretical concept of negativity in political communication, defined the differences of negative campaigning in a two-party system and a multi-party system, and pointed out the main characteristics that affect the likelihood of the politicians' or parties' intentions to use negative campaigning.

The section of propaganda, information wars and media audience had the largest number of presentations. Anda Rožukalne from Rīga Stradiņš University conducted research on a very relevant topic. She evaluated the aggressiveness level of major Latvian news websites,

by comparing the commentators' reaction to the news content about Ukraine on Latvian news sites. The main conclusion made from this research is that there is a clear domination of Russian media as a source in Latvian news sites. A huge and stable news flow from Russian media fills the content of other media and minimizes the amount of alternative information.

Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt (University of Tartu) analysed social media as terrain for information wars. Ainius Lašas from the University of Bath examined and compared the democratic cultures of old and new EU member states in order to assess their resilience to competing informal practices and to demonstrate why culture matters for analysing the relationship between media and politics.

Nerijus Maliukevičius (Vilnius University) talked about Russia's take on information warfare and the history of the Russian information warfare concept, starting from the Soviet experience with this concept and continuing with its evolution up to contemporary Kremlin's understanding of information warfare. Nerijus Maliukevičius discussed two specific strategies: strategic deception and active measures and their practical implementation by the Soviets during Cold War conflicts. He also discussed how much of this Soviet experience is incorporated into contemporary Russian military thinking about information warfare and its practice.

Deniss Hanovs (Riga Stradiņš University) analysed the connections between Catherine II and Vladimir Putin, the Russian Empire and contemporary Russia. The presentation analysed the politics of the collective memory, which creates a mixture of imperial and Soviet cultures in the common space of memories of a national community called the Russian people, which in turn becomes a heroic community.

Mantas Martišius from Vilnius University talked about the countermeasures that could be efficient against Russian information warfare activities. He stressed the need for institutions to coordinate activities and to get a better understanding of information warfare.

Viktor Denisenko (Vilnius University) analysed the basic concepts of the Baltic States' image in the Russian press after the collapse of the

Soviet Union and the evolution of this image. The author of this paper noted that the exploration of the basic concepts of the Baltic States' image in the Russian press could be helpful in the search of a way to better understand the views of the Russian society towards Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as "the most hostile states".

Jānis Krēķis (University of Latvia) talked about collective memory as a resource in the Russian information warfare against Latvia. The presentation of Mantas Bražiūnas (Vilnius University) focused on the relationship between the legal press and the authorities during the German occupation of Lithuania in 1941–1944.