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The burden of freedom: Lithuanian media during the transition

A decade into its existence as an independent state, the Lithuanian media landscape has pitifully little to offer in terms of investigative analysis and critical reporting. Almantas Samalavicius concludes that the media still has to get used to its newly found freedom.

The term "post-communism" is used in Lithuanian public dictionaries only occasionally and almost always unwillingly, perhaps for several reasons: on the one hand it immediately brings back memories of a rather shameful past that many people who experienced the Soviet way of life now would like to forget, on the other hand political and cultural discourses these days rather prefer words like "market economy", "welfare state", "democracy", "traditions of liberalism" and the like. In fact, these later categories almost never refer to the reality of the present, but always contain a dimension of something projected to a desirable near future. Besides, these verbal phantoms help to create an impression that problems of post-communist condition were overcome and that we are victoriously reaching the promised land of the European Union, while the harsh social realities of today are temporary inconveniences before the boom of an everlasting welfare. By remarking that these terms stand for something else, I don't mean to say that Lithuanian society is suffering from a lack of democracy, it would be much more just to conclude that it suffers from an inability to profit from what democracy offers.

After a dozen years of independent statehood, the Lithuanian media faces more problems than ever. Even a superficial comparison of what daily papers wrote ten years ago and what they offer to their audiences today indicates that in many aspects they are just a bleak shadow of promising and brave projects that came into being matured in the attacks against censorship and the power, supporting Lithuania's strife for independence. A survey of the Lithuanian press during its first five years of independent being suggests that former champions of a free speech, investigative journalism and analytical publications gave up their previous ambitions and became play-grounds of superficial entertainment, mirrors of glamorous ways of life of the newly rich and containers for production of a pulp fiction type of journalism. They seem to have failed to pass the exam of independent existence that was so effectively attempted during the last days of *perestroika*.

What is perhaps even more frightening is that the leading daily publications have turned out to be strongly associated with power structures. The biggest independent national paper – *Lietuvos rytas* daily that over a period of several years has been labelled as the most objective publication and praised for its

regular attacks on seemingly corrupt political figures a couple of years ago was subjected to a huge national scandal when it was found out that its editor-in-chief and the prime minister were spending their holidays abroad together, though both of them fiercely denied the fact until sufficient documentation finally surfaced. Many readers of this paper eventually realized that the denial of a close relationship between the prime minister's office and a daily paper was nothing more than an attempt to manipulate the readers and mask the origins of some of the investigative articles published in the paper, that by no means served the goals of the ruling power. Of course there have been much more media scandals lately; however I choose to mention this particular one because of its symbolic meaning. Learning about a secret bond that tied the leading national publication and the head of state power, many people who formerly shared the belief in an objective and truthful form of journalism had to give up their hopes that anything like "objective" or "truthful" is possible in a post-communist society that once more proved to be vulnerable, inconsistent and corrupted. It would be however, a gross mistake to overrate the impact of this story on the mentality of Lithuanian society. Many previous or later public revelations of this kind did not develop into a consistent exorcism of post-communist consciousness, neither did it contribute significantly to replacing the current mentality based on popular myths and beliefs and reinforced by the media. Like other transitory societies lacking a longer experience of democracy, the Lithuanian public soon forgave the publication that proved to be lying to its readers and after an outburst of public indignation, readers quickly re-embraced their favourite paper.

It is not the aim of this report to get into the details of one or another media scandal. Much more important is to discuss the general state of press and other media sources in a society that seems to be entering the space of a common Europe with a relatively higher speed of success than some of its close neighbours. There are many facts related to the media that need further discussion and elaboration which of course go beyond the scope that this paper provides. Yet some of the obvious tendencies of Lithuanian media should be brought into closer scrutiny.

The obvious and undeniable fact is that the audience that the Lithuanian daily papers are reaching has grown sufficiently smaller than it was ten or even five years ago. In April the average circulation figures of the allegedly biggest daily *Lietuvos rytas*, were as low as 42–43.000, while its closest rival *Respublika* was circulated in a print run of 36–37.000 copies. The third national daily paper *Lietuvos aidas*, once established by the right-wing political structures did not even give this information publicly, most probably trying to keep to themselves facts about its miserable sales. Ten years ago, the first two publications were selling above 100.000 copies respectively per issue. If we compare these figures to those in Western countries, it becomes obvious that the decline of even such quantitative indicators as circulation says a lot about the state of the Lithuanian media.

Though some analysts think that economic factors account for such low sales figures, I would doubt the validity of such arguments. What seems much more plausible as an explanation is the gradual decline of the quality of reading that these papers offer. Though there is a variety of straightforward gutter press in the country, the leading Lithuanian national publications are lately trying to imitate their style instead of working out their own strategies of appealing to the public. The lack of journalistic material that might have been termed as analytic, well-informed or even well-written has become a sign of their intellectual poverty. The inability to reach out to a middle-class audience is

replaced by a style that is geared towards an hysterical, manipulative lower-class public.

Structural changes in the presentation of information have also become visible. A few years ago a general practice pursued by almost all national papers was to provide space for regular columnists. Daily papers offered columns for a number of political activists, former statesmen and writers. Today, most of the regular columns have vanished, except a few still written by the staff members of dailies. More professional, expertise commentaries were substituted by mere and most often rather superficial journalistic viewpoints. The shrinking space previously provided for specialized columns and analytical investigative journalism signifies a larger problem – most of the national publications that boasted of a reputation of serious press lately surrendered to providing entertainment. They all adopted supplements dedicated to "life-style", "sports", "leisure", "TV guides" and the like. Most of them are especially keen on reporting about imagined "high society" events, disseminating gossips about private or intimate life of renowned public figures. They make almost desperate attempts to create virtual worlds in which social problems give way to the glamorous style of life of quasi-elites that also partly belong to their own imagination.

Another tendency in the Lithuanian media has also become apparent: the big press today demonstrates indifference and, occasionally, an open aversion towards culture. Unlike in Nordic countries where cultural supplements of daily papers appear each day and have a double space on week-ends, their Lithuanian counterparts provide one weekly section at best. Even those modest presentations have become short and fragmentary clippings about cultural events that hardly represent or review the cultural life. Reports on cultural events most often focus on insignificant facts; they become the focus of media attention only on those occasions that contain a potential for scandal. Otherwise, reporters visit cultural performances to notify how much food or drinks were consumed during one or another event... Five years ago one could find at least three or four reviews of books on average in a cultural section of the daily paper; today only *Lietuvos rytas* occasionally reviews a couple of books, and other publications gave up reviewing literary works completely. As I have noted elsewhere, Lithuanian dailies remember intellectuals or artists only on the occasion of the annual National Award ceremony (reviewed as an "event") or otherwise feeding on misfortunes or problems of their private/intimate lives. Strange though it might be, but more information about books or personae of cultural sphere can be found these days in women's journals; publications that in spite of their shallowness still show attempts to popularize seemingly unpopular subjects.

It should be noted though, that the tendency to give up culture or intellectual life in daily papers is in a way compensated by the professionalization and quality growth of cultural journals and weekly's. About a dozen of publications of this type not only managed to survive during the dozen years of independence: some of them can rival any normal European cultural journal in shape and contents. Discussions going on in this kind of media though usually reaching up to several thousand readers of each publication make up a public space for normal discourse of social and cultural criticism, that despite of a limited audience still remains an influential and in a certain way, stimulating voice of intellectual dissent. There have been several occasions recently when critical discussions that took place in the cultural and intellectual press were instrumental enough to influence power structures to stop some devastating projects. Although the big national media is rather indifferent to the opinions

of intellectuals, cultural publications still remain relatively powerful strongholds of public opinion and social criticism that post–communist society needs. One more remark should be added: though the daily papers in their present shape are defective, some signs of life and potential for future is to be found among a few weekly publications (for e.g. Veidas or Verslo Ūinios) that aim for a broader audience and focus on a large number of issues, including academic and cultural ones.

So far I have been referring to the printed media exclusively because it indicates all the ill–habits of the fickle society press: primarily, the inability to become a source of truly reliable information and qualified social commentary. In some aspects, TV media is much more informative, selective and professional as far as news programs are concerned. Though all three privately owned commercial national TV channels are hooked on entertainment– as all other media – their news programs remain an important flow of public information. The public national TV channel, subsidized by the state is certainly the most important instrument and mirror of public opinion. In spite of many problems, associated with the growth of competition between media giants, lack of sufficient funding and as an outcome – good marketing, professional staff and impressive broadcasts, it constructs a certain space for public debates and discussion of the most urgent social issues. No wonder that this vulnerable institution has recently been subjected to the attacks of its rivals, who, using their lobbyists in the parliament initiated an ongoing campaign, the goal of which is to stop broadcasting advertisements on public national TV.

If these requirements are institutionalized, it means that the only public TV channel in Lithuania is deprived of an important source of income and the burden of this is passed on to the state budget and tax payers who have to compensate for the losses. This infamous campaign, most fiercely conducted by the present chairman of the parliamentary committee on culture and science and surprisingly enough, supported by some circles of intellectuals is one many of examples demonstrating that a free media in a post–communist society is an illusion like independence of other social institutes. It is constantly threatened and thus should be carefully watched over and protected when needed. I do hope that the future developments of this campaign will indicate whether Lithuanian society has matured during these twelve years of independence or if it still remains imprisoned by the mentality of manipulated serfs, shaped during the infamous regime. So far many controversies that broke out in post–communist Lithuania prove that the transitory period that defines our road from dependence to Western liberal democracy is far from over despite many institutional and structural changes or processes of European integration that in their own way, provide the basis for the desired changes in the media sphere.

Soviet totalitarianism has taught us some lessons. We took to heart some, but not all of them. First of all we learned to understand what happens when state– and party power control the free–flow of information, when it manipulates public opinion. Freedom provides us with lessons on how the media has to defend itself against the pressure of the market forces. These lessons are still to be learned.

