

International Media and Latvian Sovereignty: From Liberation to Today's Vexation

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This report examines the significance of international news in Latvian politics. Today, in light of coverage stemming from the crisis in Ukraine, news from Russia is a prominent concern, but a generation ago Latvian politicians working for independence from the USSR devoted their primary attention to news from the West. This study examines the relationship between press and politics in the twilight of the Soviet era and contrasts it with today's "information war" between the small Baltic state and its neighbor Russia. In the process, it suggests directions for future research based on the case of Latvia in conjunction with insights derived from research on the "CNN effect."

Keywords: Latvia, Russia, Soviet Union, Baltic states, international media, sovereignty, CNN effect, international politics

In April 2014, the government of Latvia banned the broadcasts of the Russian channel RTR on its territory for three months. The ban followed a similar measure taken by Lithuania. Both actions were in response to coverage of the crisis in Ukraine that appeared to justify military aggression in neighboring states. Latvia in particular has a large Russian minority and an even wider group of Russian-speaking residents, as is the case in east Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea and war in the Donbass put the Latvian government on edge about the possibility of Russian irredentism and made the government sensitive to the broadcasts.

Since then, tensions have only increased. In June 2015, Latvia's parliament elected as president the defense minister, Raimonds Vējonis, on hawkish credentials in the face of frequent probes by the Russian military. NATO has made its presence felt in the region too. Buzzwords like *hybrid warfare* and *disinformation campaigns* mark foreign policy debates, and the nexus of press and politics has become a prominent concern.

This is not the first time in recent memory that Latvians have seen the role of media as important to the country's sovereignty. As the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Soviet Union and the reestablishment of Latvian independence approaches, we can recall how international media have been considered significant to the survival of this small state. In the late Soviet period, Latvian independence-seekers were not solely concerned with Moscow-based media but also keenly interested in Western

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coverage. Today, we can see similarities and differences regarding the politics of international media in Latvia.

Russian-language media has long been seen by many Latvians as deleterious to the stability and sovereignty of their country. In 1988, the independence-minded newspaper *Atmoda* ("Awakening") was born complaining about *Pravda* ("Truth"). In its first regular issue, the first noncommunist newspaper in Soviet Latvia ran a story that griped that the central Party paper claimed all Latvians were nationalist, anti-Russian, and sought to oust the Russians from their country (Pakalniētis, 1988). Similar stories emanating from Russia still rankle the Latvian government (Muižnieks, 2008; Rislakki, 2008). However, Latvians were thinking not just about Russian media back then. They were concerned about the impact of all foreign news coverage on their ability to assert their sovereignty. Those seeking independence for Latvia from the Soviet Union saw Western and particularly U.S. coverage as especially important. CNN and other outlets were courted as allies. News was seen as bearing on U.S. policy but also as validation of the Latvian movement's progress to date. This short report explores the importance of Western media at the end of the Soviet period and the contours of continuity and change in international media and politics since then.

Liberation and the Perception of Western News Media in Latvia

In 1991, more than 1,000 foreign journalists were accredited to the information center of the Latvian parliament (Supreme Soviet) with 434 needing assistance on the bloody night of January 20, when five people were killed by Soviet "black berets" in an attack on the republic's Interior Ministry.² The foreign press corps included four journalists from CNN, which was reaching its star hour at the time as an international broadcaster.³ Their presence was most welcome. Latvians involved in the independence movement never entertained the idea that they could go it alone. The Latvian Popular Front, the main engine of the independence effort, cooperated closely with movements in Estonia and Lithuania, and also those from across the USSR (Muižnieks, 1995). Power centers in Moscow and Washington were of further concern. Mass media were part of the Front's efforts to strengthen its cause by attempting to create, organize, and mobilize sympathizers and allies at home and abroad (Chakars, 2010).

Sarmīte Ēlerte, who worked in media relations for the Popular Front and then the Soviet Latvian parliament before helping to found and edit the newspaper *Diena* ("Day"), recalled:

² Pro-independence candidates backed by the Latvian Popular Front won a majority of seats in an election to the Latvian Supreme Soviet (parliament) on March 18, 1990. On May 4, 1990, the parliament declared independence with a transition period intended to smooth the exit from the USSR and forestall retaliation from Moscow. Tensions mounted nevertheless, and in January Soviet troops occupied the Press House and attacked the Interior Ministry during what has come to be known as the Time of the Barricades. On September 6, 1991, three months before its demise, the Soviet Union recognized Latvian independence. In June 2015, Russian legislators from President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party asked that this recognition be declared illegal.

³ Aleksandrs Mirjins, personal interview, April 20, 2004.

Foreigners were very important because it was clear that we must get Western support in general to think about independence. It was not possible without Western support. It was totally clear that we must push Western politicians to think about this support.⁴

To illustrate the significance of foreign media to the Popular Front, it is useful to look at the Front's newspaper, *Atmoda*. Although journalists at the paper were sometimes more radically nationalist than the leadership of the Popular Front and entered into disputes with the political leaders of the movement, it nonetheless was born of the media-oriented concerns of the political organization. The founding documents of the organization make clear its concern for asserting its voice in mass media (Vāverniece, 1989), and the newspaper frequently exhibited the organization's concern for media coverage within and outside of Latvia.

To help frame its story for the West, the Popular Front printed an edition of *Atmoda* in English, closely monitored the Western press, and tried to influence it on its own terms with public relations (assisted abroad by groups such as the American Latvian Association), diplomatic efforts, and the creation of newsworthy spectacles. Whereas Latvian activists often felt stymied in their efforts to get what they perceived as fair coverage in the central Soviet press, in the Western press they found not only sympathy based on a Cold War prism of interpretation but often "objective" praise (Peters, 1989). The chief difficulty Latvian activists had with the largely sympathetic Western press corps was explaining the complexities of local politics and history to journalists who wanted quick, catchy, and uncomplicated explanations.⁵ The extent that such coverage influenced foreign policy in Washington or elsewhere may have had limits, but so could the admonishment of politicians such as U.S. Vice President Dan Quayle, who was more hawkish about the Baltics than his boss (Quayle, 1994). At the time, there was faith in the protective power of Western media, especially during crises such as in January 1991, when Soviet troops attacked in Vilnius and Riga. Further, such coverage was used to display outside validation of the effort and thus to strengthen the resolve of movement participants. Ēlerte recalled that she felt one of the key contributions of the press to the movement was to show readers and viewers that they were not alone.⁶ *Atmoda* reprinted many stories and even cartoons from the Western press in translation. Together they gave an impression that independence activists were not alone among Latvians or forgotten abroad.

The Latvian Popular Front worked with groups small and large throughout the Soviet Union, with émigré groups in the West, and with journalists from around the world to strengthen its cause. The Front believed Washington and Moscow to be the two grandest sources of help or hindrance and so paid attention to these sites through the press and through more traditional person-to-person diplomatic efforts (Ritenis, 1999).

When considering the role of media in contentious politics, particularly in contests between unequal forces, as in the case between the Soviet regime and the Latvian independence movement, we need to look beyond the press of a movement or challenging party. In such contests between underdogs

⁴ Sarmīte Ēlerte, interview by author, Riga, Latvia, April 15, 2004.

⁵ Pauls Raudseps, personal interview, March 3, 2004.

⁶ Ēlerte, interview.

and top dogs (greater, more established powers), the latter have existing institutional capabilities that favor their control over the media landscape (Wolfsfeld, 1997). Thus, when CNN came to Riga in January 1991, it was important, but Latvian understanding of its importance came not from excitement about new media or the “CNN effect” but the inherited experience of other political movements and concern that there should be publicity in the Western press. For instance, Latvian activists had learned from Mohandas Gandhi about the utility of the foreign press. They read about how Gandhi had received attention and support in Western media and that international support could be increased in this manner (Hildebrants, 1988).

The Latvian-language edition of *Atmoda* had a recurring feature in 1991 called “The Press Review.” At first glance, it looked like a wrap-up of important international news, but all the stories reproduced were from Western papers, usually American, British, or the Paris-based *International Herald-Tribune*. They showed sympathy for the Baltic movements and explained Western foreign policy. They presented Latvian readers with an encouraging picture of great power—even superpower—support for their cause and validation of their nonviolent methods (Akermans, 1991). They also showed the concern that the Latvian Popular Front had for the Western press and Western popular and governmental support. The Popular Front dutifully monitored the Western press and the local and central Soviet news media.⁷ The Front and the Supreme Council took pains to accommodate Western journalists, translating documents, arranging and conducting interviews, and publishing *Atmoda* in English. “We had to show the West that we have been an independent state and that the Soviet Union was not possible if we are an independent state,” said Aleksandrs Mirjins of the Supreme Council Information Center, the public relations unit set up in parliament after the Popular Front was elected to power in the republic.⁸ He continued that Western media figured prominently in the January 1991 barricades plan, a nonviolent action in which thousands of civilians came to defend the parliament and key media institutions from an attack by the central Soviet government. It was important that no Latvian violence occurred in front of CNN’s lenses and that any Soviet violence be caught by Western cameras. After all, even George Bush watched CNN.

Independence seekers had faith in the protective powers of Western media and their influence on Western policy. *Atmoda* cited *The Wall Street Journal* to say that Gorbachev would lose Western support if he reacted too harshly in the Baltics (Bērziņš, 1991a). This does not mean that the Popular Front was under any illusions that the West would militarily liberate Latvia but that it thought that the West could be helpful and that the press could influence those in power to bring pressure on Gorbachev (Bērziņš, 1991b, 1991c).

Latvian independence seekers ascribed special value to the foreign press, especially the Western press, at the time of the barricades. Mirjins called such news media “most important” and “absolutely

⁷ For example on January 15, 1991, *Atmoda* did a roundup of press attention in Sweden, England, and Denmark as well as TASS and the *International Herald Tribune*. “Pasaules prese un politiķi par notikumiem Baltijā [The world’s press and politicians on events in the Baltic],” p. 13. *Atmoda* also translated and reprinted articles from *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, and elsewhere. See “Preses apskats [Press review]” in *Atmoda* from February 12, 1991, March 31, 1991, and June 6, 1991.

⁸ Mirjins, interview.

indispensable.”⁹ Jānis Krūmiņš, parliament deputy and former *Atmoda* journalist, went to CNN twice at the barricades and tried to keep friendly relations with all foreign reporters, particularly those from CNN, CBS, Reuters, and the Associated Press, although he found them to be more supportive than their governments.¹⁰

The nonviolent parliamentary-way strategy of the Latvian Popular Front also perfectly suited the foreign policy aims of the U.S. government because of the emphasis placed on peaceful tactics, democratic procedures, and incremental goals. This made it easier for the United States to lend vocal support and at the same time to pursue its negotiations with Gorbachev. It also fostered sympathy in the Western press corps. The effect of the press on U.S. policy, considering the historical and political context of U.S. foreign policy (the United States and most other Western countries never recognized Latvia’s incorporation into the Soviet Union de jure), can be argued, but it is clear that Latvian independence seekers cared about the Western press. This care translated into political behavior in Latvia toward media. “The strategy was simple. Many Western journalists were here and the more they talked about us the better,” recalled Mirjins. Thus, while press coverage may have mattered at times in some ways to U.S. policy—George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev remembered that it came up during trade negotiations (Bush & Scowcroft, 1998; Gorbachev, 1995), for instance—consideration of the effects or significance of international mainstream media may be turned away from Washington and pointed at Riga. Mirjins remembered that when the Gulf War began, Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater was asked what President Bush was doing. He answered that he was watching CNN. This occurred during the same week that barricades were being erected and guarded in Riga. “We hoped that the U.S. president watched CNN at the moment and CNN would cover the events in Latvia . . . That was the main strategy,” Mirjins said.¹¹

Latvian leaders appreciated Western, and especially American, news coverage, which they saw as so supportive that virtually all coverage was welcome even without their seeing it. Front activists took Western coverage as beneficial as an article of faith. For example, Romualds Ražuks, chair of the Popular Front, recalled, “We didn’t really know what CNN was because we had no opportunity to watch foreign channels, but thanks to CNN’s live transmission, people in the whole world could see what happened in Riga’s streets.”¹² That was the strategy, however, even before CNN’s cameras came.

Similarity and Difference, Continuity and Change

Western, especially American, media coverage of Latvia is still closely followed in that country. When Paul Krugman criticized the Latvian austerity program following its economic crisis of 2008, it certainly caused more notice and discussion there than in the United States. Further, just as in 1988, Russian media are still beamed into Latvia, and this continues to concern government leaders. According to the latest census, 37.2% of Latvian residents speak Russian at home. This is a large local audience for foreign broadcasting that Russia’s robust programming reaches. While Latvian state television broadcasts

⁹ Mirjins, interview.

¹⁰ Jānis Krūmiņš, personal interview, February 10, 2004.

¹¹ Mirjins, interview.

¹² Romualds Ražuks, personal interview, January 26, 2004.

16 hours in Russian per week on a secondary channel, Russia's Channel One boasts a budget equivalent to a tenth that of the entire Latvian state (Ragozin, 2015). Even though this does not mean Russian speakers are calling for reunification with the motherland, it still makes some policy makers nervous. It is also worth noting that although *Pravda*, Channel One, and RTR (formerly Channel Two) were also once watched ominously for signs of Kremlin intent and influence, Russian speakers did not prevent the reestablishment of Latvian independence. However, some of them did oppose it, and many were indifferent even when not oppositional. It is this same segment of the population and the descendants of Soviet state television channels that worry authorities now. Russian channels are seen ominously, as Jean Chalaby (2009) described other media reaching migrants (in an adaptation of the dilemma Monroe Price [1994] observed) as in the "market for loyalties." In the Baltic states, there are current arguments and proposals for creating more home-grown Russian-language programming to offset Moscow media. Such proposals were made in the late 1980s as well (Chakars, 2013). And again, Latvian authorities are looking westward, and especially to the United States, for support. The key difference is that now as an independent state and NATO member, Latvia can look to the force of arms as a deterrent above words to smooth its fears about threats to its sovereignty. This security cushion may also contribute to a lack of policy coordination among the Baltic states, who 25 years ago exhibited a high degree of solidarity and shared a strategy of public diplomacy but today have struggled to develop a shared response to their mutually perceived threat of Russian political and media heft (Pētersone, 2015).

Implications for Research

This brief report indicates the significance of international reporting for domestic political concerns and actions. As such, it echoes research on the CNN effect. Indeed, it is worth recalling such research now. Thinking about the case of Latvia in conjunction with CNN-effect research suggests new directions to which we may point our lens of inquiry. We might do well to look for the effects of international reporting not in the metropolises from which reporters are sent but in the places they cover. Whereas the impact of foreign correspondence might be slight, or only reflective of uncertainty (or previous conviction where policy certainty exists) in Washington (or Moscow if we take the emphasis off the ilk of CNN), it may be notable in the area being reported on.

Rising from the crucible of Soviet collapse—the moment of concern for the empirical portion of this study—came the CNN effect, but the theory never really posed a significantly new question, only a new answer. The most basic question remained: What is the relationship (or are the relationships) between news media and international politics? Further, while technological change (round-the-clock cable television), including the speed at which information and images could be delivered, appeared relevant, the technodeterministic aspect of the theory was always open to the charge of oversimplification. No government decision making takes mere minutes, and no TV channel exists in a vacuum. However, the underlying drive to discover the relationship between journalism and politics was sound and even timeless.

The fact that further technological innovations in media (not to mention ratings) have already begun to render the appellation *CNN effect* anachronistic only serves to highlight that theorizing about

news media and foreign politics might best focus on journalism in various forms rather than in a more restricted fashion. It is not just CNN, or even channels like it, that matter.

The CNN effect centered on real-time television. It was inspired by the rise of the channel as a symbol of new instantaneous, all-the-time news coverage that supposedly gave foreign correspondence a new powerful gravitas and new opportunities for media influence in an environment of policy uncertainty that developed after George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev (with Margaret Thatcher in tow) ended the Cold War. CNN by itself, however, was not as crucial as news media more broadly in a new political and technological environment. The immediacy and singularity of CNN transmission was a less than realistic factor—foreign policy is not knee-jerk.

In its heyday of the 1990s, researchers interrogated and modified the CNN effect theory from triumphalist media hype to a more critical and qualified approach (Gowing, 1994; Livingston, 1997; Livingston & Eachus, 1995; Mermin, 1999; Minear, Scott, & Weiss, 1996; Shaw, 1996; Strobel, 1997). This critical trend continued into the new millennium (Entman, 2004; Robinson, 2002; Van Belle & Potter, 2011). However, research interest waned for lack of strong and consistent findings until pronounced dead by some researchers. Piers Robinson (2005) traced the theory's trajectory from overstated to qualified to null and void in the post-9/11 era. He argues a new kind of policy certainty akin to the Cold War has developed. Nik Gowing called formulations of the CNN effect "a hangover from past times" (2011, p. 13) that had been superseded by social media. Others, most notably in a collection of articles published in a recent issue of *Media, War & Conflict*, are less willing to completely drop the theory and probe for different places and means to apply or improve it.

In the set of studies in *Media, War & Conflict*, Babak Bahador (2011) argued that media independence may have been overstated and too disassociated from other political actors, but journalism generally has and continues to play a role in policy making. Ekatarina Balabanova (2011) argued that the theory should be tested on media and governments outside London and Washington and found an uncomfortable theoretical fit in Warsaw and Sofia. Lauren Kogen and Monroe Price (2011) urged that opinion polls be considered. Steven Livingston (2011) wrote that research should be reoriented to focus on the nature of governance and the information environment. Livingston also argued that new actors and new media technologies need to be considered.

The findings of this study echo these arguments in that they suggest a continuing and important role for media in international politics. The Latvian experience shows that we need look to other places. The Latvian case urges us to pay attention to various media and agrees that, as Bahador (2011) suggests, we might see links between media and politics that are in some ways more stable across time, if not as mighty and singular as originally predicted.

Another critique of the CNN theory hints at its value. Etyan Gilboa argued in 2005 that the research agenda of the CNN effect was not only exaggerating the effect but also turning attention away from the other impacts that media might have on international politics. The CNN effect was important for reinvigorating the examination of fundamental questions about the relationship of international politics and foreign correspondence; however, its channel and policy focuses limited where researchers looked for

influence. Virgil Hawkins (2011) provides an example of where we might shift the lens of our attention. He argues that media coverage or the lack thereof has an effect at the site of conflict. A lack of coverage in particular can have consequences in zones of conflict that, when out of view, can result in unrestrained violence and inattention from policymakers. Thus, he suggests that when considering media and international politics, researchers should look in multiple directions: not just at Western foreign policy makers and media but also at the zone of conflict. Indeed, the study of Latvia in this article indicates that there may be significance beyond the narrow scope of early CNN effect research, as Gilboa (2005) suggests. It also confirms that the site of conflict and coverage are important, as Hawkins argues. Late-Soviet-era Latvians hoped for international attention as a kind of protection against Soviet violence (which came anyway but could have been much worse), but it was important in other ways as well. Therefore, we may do well to not throw out the baby with the CNN effect bath water. Rather, we can simply shift our exploration for the impact of foreign news media from inside the Beltway to foreign shores.

Today's Vexation

In Latvia, state builders—be they the Popular Front or the governments following the reestablishment of independence—have been ever concerned with the fragility of independence. Further, the architects of the state have been largely Latvian (although minorities have strong representation in parliament, they remain the minority) and the *raison d'être* of the state is as a Latvian homeland. At the same time, Latvia is a multicultural space with a significant Russian diaspora population. Indeed, Latvians are the minority in major cities, and although the mayor of Riga, Nils Ušakovs, is a naturalized citizen of Russian decent, the integration of Russian speakers, as non-Latvians are often referred to in the country, has been complex. A full examination of citizenship policies, ethnic relations, and party politics is beyond the scope and purpose of this article, but a note about current ethnic attitudes and politics is in order for explaining the context of concerns, particularly in the government, about Russian media in Latvia.¹³

Īvars Ijabs (2015), following Rogers Brubaker (1996), argues that Russians in Latvia are caught in a political triangulation that connects them with the nation-building politics of their home country and the external politics of their ethnic motherland, which takes a protective role with its diaspora. The tensions between these points account for the unease of the Latvian government regarding its sovereignty and the media produced in Russia (and consumed by the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia).

Recent public-opinion surveys by the firm SKDS indicate the complexity of this ethnopolitical triangle. Whereas Latvians and Russians have high rates of mutual trust (around 70% for each) in everyday life, many feel their identities politicized and threatened. For instance, around 60% of Latvians, even after a generation of independence, still feel their language to be threatened in Latvia. Around 35% of Russians also feel that their language and culture are under threat. While nearly all Latvians and

¹³ Interested readers can consult Ole Nørgaard's 1996 work, *The Baltic States After Independence* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar), for an examination of the early post-Soviet period, or the 2006 work *Latvian-Russian Relations: Domestic and International Dimensions*, edited by Nils Muižnieks (Riga: University of Latvia), for a more recent treatment.

Russians understand the purpose of the Latvian state is to preserve Latvian culture, more Russians (87.7 compared to 65% of Latvians) believe the point is to protect minority cultures as well (Ijabs, 2015).

Attitudes toward Russia vary considerably as well, with 63% of Russians (versus 30% of Latvians) believing Russia is better governed than Latvia. Almost 41% of Latvians consider Russia a threat to Latvia (this spiked above 60% around the annexation of Crimea), as opposed to only around 4% of Russians (this rose to about 8% just after Crimea). Also significant, about 73% of Russians feel closely attached to Latvia, but about 33% also feel closely attached to Russia. When it comes to Russian president Vladimir Putin, 60% of Russians like him, and 70% of Latvians do not. Around 40% of Russian speakers found the takeover of Crimea justified, while about 81% of Latvians did not (Ijabs, 2015).

None of these results indicate that Russians in Latvia are necessarily a fifth column itching to undermine the state and rejoin Latvia with Russia. They do, however, indicate a gulf between the communities, the politicized nature of identity in Latvia, and the way such identity politics can connect to domestic and international politics. It is the enduring ties and affinities among a segment of the Russian-speaking population to Russia and its government that worries Latvian leaders. In such a context, international media also become politicized, and for Latvians, who have experienced only a little more than four decades of independence over the last 800 years, and for their government, a matter of concern for national security. What the Latvian government does about it and how they justify any curtailment of media flows in Latvia are ongoing matters (Richter 2015), but foreign media coverage will likely remain an issue.

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