

Opinion-Leaders and Managing the Ethnic Diversity in Latvia

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Abstract—The aim of the article is to show how the opinion-leaders writing in Latvian see the problem of national identity in ethnically divided society of Latvia. Which values, according to them, should serve as the corner-stone of the common national identity.

Via the case study, the article seeks to identify which model of nation (i.e., the ethnic or the civic) is embraced. The article reveals that the model of ethnic identity is strongly favoured. The case study is indicative for a layer of “frozen” problems regarding the project of shaping common national identity, as some aspects of reality are consistently stressed, while others — marginalized. The elite of opinion leaders try to shed light on stresses and strains under which society strives to consolidate its identity identifying the problem and pointing to the shortcomings in project of establishing a common identity.

Keywords—civic nation, ethnic nation, intellectuals, national identity, opinion-leaders.

I. INTRODUCTION

ONE of the aspects of the Soviet occupation legacy in Latvia is the substantial difference between the geopolitical identities of the various ethnic groups in Latvia [1]. The ethnic Latvians make up only 59.6% of all population, according to the figures. There are 27% of Russians and members of several other ethnoses whose representation is less than 5% (Belorussians, Ukrainians, Poles, Lithuanians and others) [2]. Studies also reveal that large portion of the Russian-speaking community is responsive to Russia’s consistently applied *soft power* initiatives due to the close ethnic, linguistic and historical ties with the neighbouring state [3]. Thus, generating a sense of belonging to Latvia among the members of this community, is a significant challenge for agents capable of forming an alternative discourse and approximating Latvian and Russian-dominated discourses. This article aims to show what language is used by the Latvian-speaking opinion leaders, what messages do they communicate to the audience, and what consequences does that cause.

The ambiguous process of nation-building, national identity shaping, as well as the basis of integration policy have found their expression in discursive practices on all societal levels, from intellectuals to mass media, and broader publics. In this

article I seek answer to the question which aspects is seen by the Latvian-writing opinion-leaders as substantial for nation-building, and what kind of nation do they envisage – the ethnic one or the political.

Building upon the assumption that there is a definite group of agents in society endowed more than others with the powers to create and sustain certain stereotypes and myths, which are further reified and depicted in broader mass perceptions and actions, I direct my attention toward the opinion-leaders. I chose for the analysis the stances voiced in opinion articles of staff journalists and society members whom I label as intellectuals (writers, poets and members of academia) as guest-authors, in a daily newspaper of a moderate drift—*Diena* (printed in Latvian; circulation—31000) [4]. Those authorized texts are looked through which were published from October, 2010 to February, 2012. Overall, I selected for the analysis texts from 50 persons writing for *Diena*. This period deserves a particular attention as in this period the attention to the ethnic question was brought to the forefront of the political debate. *The* referendum on granting Russian language the constitutional status of the second state language (02/18/2012) was initiated by the protagonists and took place. On September 17th, the extraordinary elections of Parliament (the Saeima) took place after the president of the time had initiated dissolution of the Parliament, and the results of the succeeding referendum were cogent—94.3% of all who participated supported the dissolution [5]. This was the first time in the history of the state when the president put into practice this power. Taking into consideration this background, one can argue that the socially political discourse was highly imbued with developments and opinions. It might also be argued that in such periods the public is more responsive to the messages sent in framework of the public sphere. Thus the soil for bearing some influence to the public opinion and impacting attitudes is more ripe.

II. VALUE-ORIENTATIONS, THE WRITTEN WORD, AND THE SOCIAL MEDIATION

It is a widely acknowledged premise that the identity is a phenomenon socially constructed through the discursive practices. It is a process in which the mass media play a crucial role [6]. The authors of the texts selected for the study are agents of political process who use to practice their politically relevant activities outside the field of practical politics. They primarily use the written and spoken word as a tool by which they provide an informed and justified opinion on socially

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political matters and processes. This choice rests on the notion that activities in the public sphere of these socially committed persons naturally contain at least a modicum of social criticism. Michael Walzer concludes regarding this matter: "What makes criticism possible, or relatively easy, (...) is a certain quality of not being involved, or not fully involved, in the local forms of getting and spending, not being responsible for what happens, not being politically in control" [7].

The Western tradition since the Dreyfus affair in France stresses the power of the written word employed in the public discourse. The Dreyfus affair established the public role of an institutionally non-engaged individual writing and reflecting on matters reaching far beyond her primary field of action. Jean-Paul Sartre [8] talks in this respect of „somebody engaging in matters which are none of her business”.

Hence, the second notion — it is necessary for any free society to have figures providing a certain continuity and cohesion for it. It needs the social eidos, the totality of symbols through which community interprets and affirms itself, no less than the material, the socio-economic basis. Necessity for agents providing a drift of values for society while at the same time ensuring its integrity, stability of values and simultaneously assisting to accommodate to permanently changing realities, is also an inalienable part of the social life [9].

Agent's inclination for engaging in public discourse and discussing issues of a general relevance is fostered by various aspects, as it is stated in literature. It is less important in what kind of professional field is the individual occupied or trained. However, it is argued, it is more likely that politically relevant messages will be sent in the public sphere by writers, poets, journalists, humanitarian scientists. In these fields, a more favourable conditions prevail for undertaking activities bearing certain social consequences (such as ability to grasp processes in toto advanced by the educational background, identification in large segments of society; inclination to produce original judgements instead of proper, etc.). I discuss here the attitudes of persons being interested in social and political structure in its whole [10]. A harsh judgement is voiced in this respect by the distinguished American political philosopher Robert Nozick (1998) who has argued that those who deal in their daily obligations with mathematically and quantitatively framed information, use to take indifferent stance towards the social and political matters [11]. Those labeled by him the *Numbersmiths* are, according to the scholar, inclined to be more reluctant regarding engaging in public discussions on social and political issues than the *Wordsmiths*. It also has to be taken into account that the power of the written or the spoken word is meaningful only if being used in a certain manner, i.e., argumentative and consensus-building, aimed at promoting mutual understanding among individuals, different layers, segments and classes of society [12]. All the above-mentioned is the opposite to actions containing elements of propaganda (those which do not support the reflective, argumentative ideals of public communication), demagoguery, etc. [13].

Mass media should be mentioned among the the most powerful agents in the public sphere capable of stirring value-

orientations in certain direction. As some conceptions envisage, persons who work for media structures, are members of substratum of intellectuals. At the same time, others stress the capacity of this milieu to transfer the ideas generated by the group of intellectuals, and shaping mass attitudes (i.e., they are seen as mediators). Press belongs to the interpretative layer, and it bears a direct influence on perception-formation within large segments of society [14]. Persons who represent this setting, occupy a position and possess an ability to create, re-produce, transform and translate symbols of individual and collective identity. Media discourse produces, reproduces and sends dominant messages to the masses of recipients [15]. The writer Laima Muktopāvela [16] writing herself commentaries for *Diena* in the period, states: „The media is endowed with ability to shape an attitude”. This might indicate that at least some members of the writing publics acknowledge their peculiar social role stemming from the access to the source of stream of not only information but also opinions. There are persons among those who are esteemed and thus large segments of society are inclined to turn to these for the advice. Black [17] has indicated in his study, these individuals are labeled in literature in various ways, for instance, the trusted others, the significant others, the innovators, thought leaders, trend setters, influentials, opinion givers, as well as opinion leaders. Such labels use to imply qualities which overstep a simple informal advice-seeking from peers. This strongly suggests influence, it is argued in the bunch of literature [18]. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet [19] argue that the flow of information from mass media to individual is mediated by opinion leaders who enjoy the social power with which they are endowed due to the capacity of holding and transmitting information. There are no obstacles for even relatively uninformed citizens to take part in democratic government as they use to rely on others when making political decisions [20], [21]. This means however that the content of messages sent by opinion-leaders should be carefully assessed in order to gain a clue on what might be the future trends in society.

III. NATIONAL IDENTITY—WHERE DOES IT STEM FROM?

In social sciences, there is a distinction between the *civic* and the *ethnic* notions of nationhood. It traces back to the polemic deployed at the end of the 18th century between the German romanticists and the Republican tradition. The Republicans insist that nation is a product of a set of conscious choices which individuals make as they believe that participation in a political community benefits to their personality. This means that being a member of nation is a voluntary act, this membership is endowed with open and calculated nature. Nation is thought to be a modern political community, and it should not be seen separately from the state institutions. Institutions embody the values and interests of individual citizens (the idea of popular sovereignty is embraced in this conception), and offer a mix of benefits and obligations to the citizenry. The nation and its political institutions are seen as a constant battleground of conflicting interest groups. This battleground arises as the preferences of individuals vary. Besides, as individuals constantly adjust their cost-benefit appraisals of national belonging to mutable

circumstances, this school of thought treats the nation as a contingent entity related to contemporary socio-economic issues. In short, the nation is a political community, it is produced by a deliberate human agency, and is endowed with a dynamic, heterogeneous nature.

A different vision was embraced by the camp of romanticists (Johann Gottfried Herder, among others) who see the nation as an entity of a permanent, closed and homogenous nature (meaning that a conscious human action is unimportant in its formation). The boundaries and temper of nations were fixed and highly resistant to the social pressures of the day. Protagonists of this model look at the nation as a natural entity having deep roots in the past. Membership in the nation is built on an emotional need to be a member of a wider cultural community. The collective harmonious will of the nation is accumulated in political institutions, and these express it. Individual interests are less important. The ties which keep individuals attached to the nation (traditions, native language, ancestry, religion) are seen as having immaterial, cultural and permanent character [22].

A republic is a political community of persons who have not chosen to belong to one formation voluntarily, but are bound together by historical ties, instead. There exists a variety of interdependencies in such type of community, and persons belonging to it lay claim on a common vision and plans for future. These persons thus share a common fate and common concerns. Besides, republicanism is based on interdependence rather than commonality [23]. Here, the boundaries of political community are of a practical nature. As Hinohan puts it, these boundaries should depend on levels of interdependence; structures for non-domination and collective deliberation which are important for those who have to live together, even if they differ in fundamental cultural beliefs and practices [23].

IV. THE PREFERRED MODEL BY THE OPINION LEADERS— THE ETHNIC NATION

As the content analysis of commentaries written for *Diena* proved, the opinion leaders put emphasis on language, culture and unequivocal interpretation of history as crucial elements for sustaining a sense of belonging to Latvia among the citizenry: „Latvian language is in essence the only tool for creating a social unity” [24]. Here is the extract of elements mentioned as important in the nation-building process. As one can see, these mainly correspond to the model of ethnic nation:

- use of Latvian language in both — the private realm, and the public space;
- deepening understanding of Latvian cultural traditions and ethnic rites (this mainly refers to the non-ethnic Latvia living in Latvia);
- growth of level of tolerance among the ethnic Latvians towards the non-ethnic Latvians [25];
- decreasing the role of the ethnic element in political struggles [26];
- commonly accepted interpretation of history. Its central component is a consensus regarding the fact that Latvia was for a period occupied by the Soviet Union (internationally recognized historical fact, contested

however by Russia and ethnic Russians in many respects);

- non-accusing the fellow-citizens for the lessons-learned due to the occupation period;
- bridging the gap between the informative spaces producing the informative and analytical content targeted exclusively at Russian-speaking or Latvian-speaking audience. Creating of a unified infospace is desirable in which the ideas can be exchanged, and ideas reified. Traditionally, in Latvia, there are separate informative spaces for people who consume the information in Latvian, and those who do it in Russian language. What concerns the mass media targeted to the audience of non-Latvians, these will always and genetically (due to common conception of history, cultural space) be friendly with Russia and sceptical (at best) towards Latvia.
- „well-arranged economy” [27];
- „a fundamental civic agreement among those speaking in Russian and in Latvian” [28], not elaborating, though, on how this goal might be attained.

The opinion-leaders writing in Latvian argue in favour of aspects contributing to sustaining the ethnic identity in Latvia. The idea also persists that certain educational and cultural institutions should promote the ethnic identity and to serve as agents in sustaining it (this applies to schools, higher education institutions, literary field). “All what is typically Latvian is basis of the world-view holding together the national state, and reproduction of this idea is to be promoted through school curricula. [...] The new education system should be based on three facets: creativity, all what is typically Latvian, and spirituality” [29]. Although one can agree with such stance in many respects, it also has to be acknowledged that opinion-leaders fail to address properly the issue of managing the ethnic diversity which is still a pressing issue.

Instead of taking the role of mediators and social critics, the members of the community writing for printed press can be seen in various respects as vanguard standard-bearers of the particular ethnic group. Unflattering commentaries are rarely directed towards the ethnic group the columnist him/herself represents, and inappropriate practices of the respective community are disregarded in most cases, instead of being brought to light and challenged.

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