



CS2. Country case studies on critical junctures in the media transformation process in Four Domains of Potential ROs (2000–2020)

The aim of the second case study is to provide analysis of risks and opportunities concerning the diachronic changes in four domains defined by the project in the 21st century.

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LATVIA

Critical junctures in the media transformation process

By Anda Rožukalne, Ilva Skulte, Alnis Stakle – Rīga Stradiņš University

Executive summary

Based on the bibliographic data of media studies, this paper analyses the most important areas of media development-related risks and opportunities for deliberative democracy. Accessing data in political, economic, social, and technology development from 2000 to 2020 in Latvia, the most important critical junctures have been defined as follows: first, the media legislation development during the first decade of the new millennium did not prevent politicians from influencing the independence of the media authority and, secondly, the state of journalism was affected by changes in the structure of the public communication environment in the early 2000s (the PR field and digital communication expanded) and during the economic crisis (2008-2010), which caused the restructuring of education in journalism (the demand for education in journalism decreased), and the relatively low salaries in media companies reduced the prestige of journalism as a profession; third, the technological development, digitisation and advent of social media contributed to the change of audience structure, media repertoires, uses and trust in news media; fourth, inclusion of media literacy in general education and public discourse as a response to the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014.

Keywords: media system development, Latvia, politics, media regulation, journalism, media use, media competencies.

1. Introduction

Several decades after re-gaining national independence in 1991 and entering the EU in 2004, the Latvian media system has been described as typical for CEE countries in the late phase of transition - as hybrid liberal (Dobek - Ostrowska, 2015, 2019) or hybrid and suffering from the lack of dominant paradigm (Skudra, Šulmane, Dreijere, 2015, 214-215). Elements of liberal (free market as primarily regulating force), democratic corporate (weak media professionalisation, attempts to strengthen PSM) and polarised pluralistic model (researchers especially stress the relatively strong political parallelism (Rožukalne, 2012) are characteristic for the Latvian media environment. The role of language in preferences for channel choice and media discourse is rather important since the Latvian audience is mainly divided between two language groups - mother tongue 60.8%, and Russian, 36% of the population. (CSP, 2019).

In 2016, the introduction of Mass Media Policy Guidelines (Cabinet of Ministers of LR, 2016) – the country's first general media policy document – following the directions in the development of media field are emphasised – diversity of media environment, quality of media and responsibility, importance of the education of media professionals, media literacy and reliability and is strongly orientated to fight political influence, especially in regional and local media. The policy paper was created in close collaboration with media experts and based on conclusions from their research of the field and possible trends of future development.

However, the analysis of the bibliographic data collected and analysed within the framework of Mediadelcom research shows that the media and journalism landscape in Latvia has only been studied in a fragmented manner. Thus, the most risks for deliberative communication are related to the low level of research and subsequent understanding of the field and its changes, the small number of experts, sporadic and non-continuity of data, lack of original and creative approaches in the research field, weak international networking, and exchange. Here the recent developments in the field (media policy, more structured science funding system, increasing level of requirements for scientific publications, increasing participation in the international projects, young doctors in the field) are indicating the opportunities.

Further analysis is based on the evaluation of the bibliographic content compiled for the study.

An evaluation of the most important events and processes during the years since the Republic of Latvia regained its independence in terms of how the Latvian media developed can be divided into the following segments of time:

- (1) The period from 1991 to 2003 can be divided into two major sub-periods. The first sub-period is characterised by the process of transformation of the former Soviet media system into the free market and lasted right up until the late 1990s. The new millennium marked the start of the second sub-period when the media environment achieved stability and development.
- (2) Next period from 2004 to 2008 begins with Latvia's accession to the European Union, but it was also a time of a rapid development in the media environment - international contacts, journalist education and re-organisation of media business. This was also a time when the internet increasingly changed the media market and its contents.
- (3) Period from 2009 to 2013 is marked by a deep economic recession that led to shrinkage in advertising resources by nearly 50%. The deep economic crisis that started in 2008 and 2009, when Latvia's GDP decreased by 25%, unemployment increased (17%), a big wave of emigration began. These processes affected the media market, increasing the level of concentration (Jastramskis et al., 2016) and commercialisation trends (Rožukalne, 2013) in media activity.

In 2010, the new law on the broadcasting media was adopted and the digitalisation process of TV finalised with all the terrestrial analogue stations stopping broadcasting. The same year, the second NGO for journalists - the Latvian Association of Journalists was established along with the Latvian Society of Journalists, which dates to the Soviet era.

A new period in the Latvian media environment started when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014; geopolitical crises occurred in Latvia and the region, which affected the development of public communication and media policy. Geopolitical events fuelled concerns about hostilities in the region and the potential threat to Latvia's security. These processes determined the faster establishment of the first Latvian media policy, which was adopted at the end of 2016. These events affected the development of the Latvian media environment as follows: The Media Support Fund was established, with the help of which projects provide support to commercial media for the creation of high-quality journalism content, media literacy education activities were developed, and public media were strengthened. In 2020, the Latvian PSM exited the advertising market, and a new Law on Public Electronic Mass Media and Administration Thereof was adopted, which entered into force in 2021.

Social and Political Change

After the Soviet regime collapsed in 1991, the newly born state of Latvia was in a great need of legitimisation - the discourse battle of different ideologies and values played a crucial role. The more stable the new regime became - the less important discourse type legitimisation of author-

ity decisions became. Masses became de-politicised, but it was not at the price of increasing welfare as it was in the core industrial countries.

In the 1990s, Latvia made progress in stabilising its economy and pursuing market-orientated reforms. Its currency was strong enough to appreciate steadily in a free foreign currency market. But with the slowing of re-industrialisation the growing labour market relationships and unemployment of wage-laboured population, the social tensions increase, overplayed by political players into an ethnic gap between Latvian Latvians and the so-called Russian speaking population. Social responsibility and activity were not encouraged in discourses of the elites (Ījābs, Kruks, 2008).

The new millennium came with the need to harmonise all areas of social life with European standards as joining the European Union became the state's primal foreign policy. But society lacked the experience and legally established and socially adopted procedures to influence the decision-making process. This caused widespread corruption (Karklins, 2005). Therefore, in almost every parliamentary election in the last 20 years, a new coming political party with a strong anti-corruption message broke through into parliament.

In general, Latvia's economic development (2000-2020) shows a positive development, during the time of which Latvia's GDP has increased by four times. The country's economic development was severely affected by the global economic crisis of 2008, when Latvia's GDP fell from 35.76 billion in 2008 to 26.32 billion in 2009. In 2009, the annual inflation rate was 18%, GDP had fallen by 20%, and unemployment rose to 23%, the highest in the EU. However, the strategy of internal devaluation used by the government was successful. The Latvian economy grew by 5.5% in 2011, by 5.6% in 2012, reaching the highest rate of growth in Europe. The Latvian economy has not yet recovered from this shock, as GDP in 2020 is lower than in 2008.

The level of inequality in Latvian society is characterised by a relatively high Gini index, which reached its highest level in 2005, but has not changed during the study period.

During the period of post-Communist transition, which began in the late 1980s and continued after the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991, the mass media were the most important social mechanism in facilitating changes and helping society to understand and discuss the new ideas that were appearing.

A media system that was based on market logic emerged in Latvia during the 1990s, and the public media could have played a role in harmonising the influence of the market. Latvia's public media, however, could not develop fully because of unstable and insufficient funding. Typical priorities of Latvia's political culture have included attempts to influence authority institution and the content of the public media, as well as low levels of financing (which reflect political decisions).

The development of Latvia's media market involved several major events and complicated processes. During the first half of the 1990s, immediately after the restoration of the country's independence, there was a boom in the establishment of new media outlets. Later, the development of the media market was influenced by the country's economic situation, particularly during two major economic crises - Russia's economic recession in 1988 and 1999, and then the crisis which erupted in late 2008 and continued until 2012. The global crisis coincided with the bursting of the real estate bubble in Latvia.

Regional newspapers in the early part of the 2010s (after the economic recession) have been among the healthiest papers in financial and qualitative terms in Latvia, because their revenue structure does not depend on advertising. Instead, revenues mostly come from subscriptions and classified ads. The best regional newspapers are not just businesses. They are democratic institutions which are vital in local political debate. The greatest threat against the development

of the regional media in Latvia relates to shrinking population numbers, with audiences literally dying off or emigrating from the country. Another problem is that many local governments have their own, free informative publications. These are financed by taxpayers and are aimed at providing information to all residents of the relevant local government territory.

The long-running struggle for municipal information to distort competition in 2020 was marked by changes in several laws. Amendments to the Law “On Local Governments” stipulate that local governments issue an informative publication not more than once a month. Municipalities will not have the right to establish and publish media, and municipal “newspapers” registered in the media register will have to be excluded from the register.

Media and democracy became an important part of civic and professional education in around 2000 when the media market stabilised, media outlets became modernised Western-style companies and the normative model of social responsibility was more and more inserted into relationships between actors inside the media environment. However, even after becoming a member of the EU, Latvia is characterised as a country with low performance in many aspects of deliberative communication.

Thus, despite the aligned legislation and diversity of media as the biggest risks for democracy in the field of public communication, researchers see two separate information spaces, the dependence of PSM on government funding, lack of a body defending journalism ethics, lack of transparency of media ownership, weakness of media providing quality, specialised, cultural and investigative/analytical journalism, lack of knowledge about the role of media in democratic society by audiences, whereas possible solutions include the introduction of subscription fees to PSM, guarantees of independence of the National Broadcasting Council of Latvia from political influence, creation of a self-regulatory body for journalists and a common ethical code as well as the creation of a civic organisation for reviewing individual complaints about the violation of an ethical code against a person. (Kruks, Šulmane, 2005, 147-148).

Assessment of monitoring capabilities

Based on Case 1 data evaluation, we can conclude that the media and journalism landscape in Latvia has been studied in a fragmented manner. The quality of media studies and communication research in Latvia is low. Due to a lack of resources, the number of studies is limited, and the scale of internationally referenced publications is small, studies cover a limited range of media and journalism problems.

The risks of deliberative communication are related to the gaps in knowledge and lack of impact of the research on both media policy and the public. This is a result of the low level of research, small number of experts, sporadic and non-continuity of data, lack of original and creative approaches in the research field, weak international networking, and exchange. The recent developments in the field (more structured science funding system, requirements for scientific publications, young doctors in the field) are indicating the opportunities to diminish risks. However, this is not possible without strengthening research in the areas of media law, media economy and management as well as new challenges for journalism caused by technological development.

Until the turn of the millennium, the only institution that offered communication and journalism studies and research in these fields was the University of Latvia. At the beginning of the 21st century, there were no doctoral level communication study programmes in Latvia and no doctoral level researchers with a Latvian degree in this specific field – first, communication science doctors had to defend their theses in other countries and universities. Nevertheless, starting from the last years of the 1990s, study programmes and departments of communication emerged at four other universities in Latvia.

However, even if the number of institutions and persons involved in the research on media and journalism may seem significant for a small country like Latvia, the lack of proper and continuous funding did not allow one to cover all areas of the media field and build up a network of expertise centres specialising in each different area. National Network of Science at the Academy of Science that is issuing expert rights of the Latvian Council of Science to researchers based on their applications is currently counting 13 experts in the field of media and communication (LZP, 2022).

Rather sporadic research is a result of both short-term grant provision and a lack of proper strategy in organisation and planning in the media research field. The fact that there was never funding for an academic journal for media and communication studies in Latvia, and the publishing opportunities that are rather poor is an important factor influencing both national and international competitiveness of media scholars of Latvia. Even if some government funded research programmes allowed one to include media and journalism study, this field of research virtually “disappears” between humanities and political science/sociology on the landscape of science in Latvia.

Among the domains of Medielcom, media regulation is the least studied, and also the domain of journalism, especially the professional environment and working conditions of journalism, have been studied fragmentarily, mostly as part of individual projects and within the framework of EU-level international studies. The domain of media competences includes a small number of studies, since the field is very new and it is mostly studied in the context of pedagogy in Latvia.

More regular is the research of media usage patterns. Here, the main players are commercial companies mainly creating data for the commercial interests of media outlets and advertisers. However, parts of the quantitative surveys relevant for audience research are done on a regular basis by both domestic and European statistical data providers and public opinion monitoring bodies (CBS, Eurostat, Eurobarometer).

Other areas of media and journalism research and, especially, if the research involves qualitative methodology, are mainly studied on the bases of particular projects funded by the EU, Open Society Foundations and several other NGOs, with sporadic support by state institutions universities and with no additional support. The existing funding system implies a lack of a targeted, regular and well-organised funding for the monitoring and research of all main important domains of communication, media and journalism in the context of deliberative communication and democracy. All areas are not sufficiently covered. The gaps in the research scope(s) are based on no or insufficient project funding or no (or lack of) researcher availability, because particular project calls and individual research experiences and interests are main factors having an impact on project-based fundraising and following this - developing research areas.

The main **risks** in the context of media for deliberative democracy are connected to the aspects as follows:

- relative economic instability,
- low effectiveness of media in investigation, analysis and critical evaluation of government and authorities in general,
- mediocre level of lack of support for a diversity of opinions and standpoints of society in media,
- lack of proper understanding of the role of mass media in contemporary society,
- lowering levels of value for press freedom,
- consumerism tendencies.

The main **opportunities** include reforms introduced, PSM regulation reform, media policy development, support to media literacy.

2. Risks and opportunities of legal and ethical regulation

2.1. Development and agency of change

In the field of media regulation, two time periods are significant in Latvia. First, the beginning of the 1990s after regaining independence, because the Constitution of Latvia (adopted during the first independence in 1922) was renewed and the Law on the Press and other mass media adopted in December 1990 still forms the basis of media regulation. The second period refers to Latvia's preparation to join the EU (from 2004), during which the Latvian regulatory system was harmonised with the EU's requirements; Latvia accepted important international agreements that refer to human rights, thus also addressing issues of freedom of expression and freedom of the media. In both periods, the main agents of change were the Parliament of Latvia and the national government, as well as legal experts (who mostly represented the University of Latvia); at the international level it was the EU and the EC, as well as the International Court of Human Rights.

During this time, the foundations of Latvian media regulation were created, which meet international standards and in general create a liberal regulatory environment, where there are no serious barriers to entry to the media market and thresholds for working in journalism. Important media regulation acts deal with strict concentration limits in the field of electronic media and the criminalisation of defamation.

Latvian media regulation structure is based on the Law on the Press and Other Media (1990) and the Law on Electronic Mass Media (2010). Unfortunately, these laws are outdated because their norms and definitions do not match the diversity and complexity of today's media and public communications environment.

An important turning point in media regulation was the adoption of the Latvian Media Policy in 2016. The objective of the mass media policy of Latvia is a strong, diverse, professional, transparent, sustainable, and stable mass media environment. The objective of the Guidelines and the action directions arising therefrom are based on five main fundamental principles of the mass media policy of Latvia: diversity of mass media environment; quality and responsibility of mass media environment, education of professionals of the mass media sector; mass media literacy, security of the mass media environment.

There is very little research on Latvian media regulation and ethics; thus, further analysis is based on information evaluated in the EC Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) project's reports, an unpublished analysis of media regulation prepared for the Latvian Media Ethics Council by Sorainen Law Office (Tauriņš et.al., 2020), as well as media publications on individual cases of media regulation.

2.1.1. Most important issues of media regulation

Media regulatory acts in Latvia are characterised by inconsistencies in terminology. For example, the Criminal Law includes the term "mass media", referring to the media as internet sites, radio, television, the press, etc. In turn, in the Law on the Press and Other Mass Media, the term 'information means' has been used. The law explains that the mass media are newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and other periodicals (published at least once every three months, a single circulation of more than 100 copies), as well as electronic media, cinema chronicles, news agency announcements, audio-visual recordings for public distribution. The website can also be registered as a media outlet.

In the Electronic Mass Media Law (EMML), the term "electronic media" is interpreted as an individual agent to whom a broadcasting permit or a retransmission permit has been issued in accordance with the procedures prescribed by law or who has submitted the National Electron-

ic Media a notice to the Media Council (NEMMC) regarding the provision of on-demand electronic media services. Consequently, electronic media are media that provide audio and audiovisual electronic media services, such as television and radio.

The law does not impose the same obligations and rights on all segments of the media, and it does not include a duty to register internet media. The amendments introducing the right of a website portal to register in the Media Register were adopted in 2011 to ensure the rights and protection of journalists for news sites that operated as a media outlet for professional journalistic work. However, there are still websites in Latvia that have chosen not to register, but in fact operate as mass media. According to the Sorainen analysis, the Supreme Court has ruled that the fact of registration is not a mandatory feature of the media. Consequently, the Law on the Press and Other Mass Media also applies to news portals that are not registered but are identical to registered news portals. This means that unregistered media have the same responsibilities as registered media but have fewer rights.

2.2. Freedom of expression (FoE)

FoE is included in Constitutional Law in Latvia; it is clearly defined in accordance with international human rights standards. The restrictions to freedom of expression, which address privacy protection issues, are proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued, as per MPM analysis.

The Law on Press and the other mass media defines the limitation of information not for publishing. It is prohibited to publish information which is an official secret or other secret especially protected by law, information that promotes violence and the overthrow of the prevailing order, advocates war, cruelty, racial, national, or religious superiority and intolerance, and incites the commission of some other crime, materials from pre-trial investigations without the written permission of the prosecutor or the investigator, and materials that violate the presumption of innocence.

The Law on The Press and Other Mass Media defines freedom of the press as the main basis for the activities of the media, includes the basic principles of the establishment and operation of the media organisations, the rights, and obligations of journalists, protecting sources of information of journalists. In mid-2011, Section 16 of the Law on The Press and Other Mass Media was amended with the following norm to ensure the need to emphasise media freedom: “An editor (editor-in-chief), when performing his or her duties, shall be editorially independent.”

Journalist’s legal status. The Sorainen analysis points out that in the Latvian legal framework, the interpretation of the concept of a journalist corresponds to the institutional approach rather than the functional one, thus unreasonably narrowing and simplifying the scope of the concept, i.e., any person who collects, compiles, edits or otherwise prepares materials for the media and who has thereby entered into an employment contract or performs this work on behalf of the mass media, as well as a member of a journalists' association. As a functional approach is more appropriate in today's media environment and case law, the definition of journalist should be based on the definition of a journalist as a person who collects, compiles, edits or otherwise produces material in any format at regular intervals to inform or promote the public debate in accordance with the professional standards of ethics and responsibility recognised in the media industry, as per Sorainen.

Individual content creators (influencers, bloggers, bloggers). According to the current definition of journalists contained in Latvian legislation, individual content creators are not considered journalists. They are therefore not directly subject to the rights and obligations of journalists. However, individual content creators often perform the same functions as journalists in the classical sense, thus contributing to the availability and protection of the right to freedom of

expression, as well as to strengthening freedom and diversity of information, as per the Sorainen legal experts.

Journalist's responsibility. According to the Sorainen analysis, for example, for published information defamatory of a person, action may be brought against both the mass media and the editor at the same time, without the journalist being held liable. The media is primarily responsible for publication and damages, the editor is responsible for the content of the material to be published in the media and the journalist is responsible for providing truthful information and respecting the rights and legitimate interests of individuals and companies.

Separation of editorial and individual responsibility. The Law on the Press and Other Mass Media stipulates that the editor is responsible for the content of materials published in the media. At the same time, the law imposes a duty on journalists to provide truthful information and respect the rights and legitimate interests of the state and stipulates that a journalist is responsible for information provided by him or her that is published and insults the honour and dignity of a person or the privacy of a person. Natural or legal persons have the right to request the media to withdraw false information, with the medium obliged to compensate the person for the damage caused. A journalist is obliged to comply with the prohibitions specified in the Criminal Law. Journalists are prohibited from publishing information that is a state secret or other secret specially protected by law.

Protection of journalistic sources. Article 22 of the Law on the Press and Other Mass Media regulates the secrecy of the source of information.

The right not to disclose the source of the information is not absolute and is subject to restrictions. To protect the essential interests of an individual or society, only a court may instruct a media journalist or editor to indicate the source of the information published.

Legal protection of journalists (against disruption of work, attacks, harassment). The Sorainen analysis shows that, in Latvia, law enforcement authorities do not pay enough attention to the special status of victims of persecution - journalists, unable to react effectively and insufficiently assessing the factual circumstances of the case.

Restrictions on freedom of expression and journalists' rights, their justification (prohibition of discrimination, hate speech, importance of published content in society, observance of personal rights). Freedom of expression may be restricted, given that freedom of expression may conflict with defamation and hate speech, but restrictions must be such so as not to unduly restrict or jeopardise journalists' right to freedom of expression and the public's right to information. Article 96 of the Constitution envisages a significant restriction, namely, everyone has the right to the inviolability of private life, home, and correspondence.

Sorainen legal experts' analysis suggest that the rights of journalists are also restricted by the increased aggression of public space and hate speech today. In this regard, the media must be able to simultaneously respect the principle of freedom of expression and limit the emergence of all forms of discriminatory content as far as possible (based on international agreements binding on Latvia prohibiting discrimination and incitement to hatred against, disability, racial or ethnic origin, nationality, or other circumstances).

Sorainen specialists concluded that the rights of journalists are not disproportionately or excessively restricted, considering the fact that the restrictions on the rights of journalists mainly result from the fundamental human rights included in the Constitution.

According to the Electronic Mass Media Law (2010), the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEMMC) was at the same time a regulator of commercial media and performing the functions of supervision of public media and holder of capital shares of Latvian Radio and Latvian Television. This conflict of interest was only resolved in 2021, when the Law on Public Electronic Mass

Media and Administration Thereof was enacted and the Public Media Council was established. The EMMML does not, however, address the long-lasting problem of financing for Latvia's public media. It still depends on decisions by politicians because financing for the public media comes from the national budget.

Latvia has still not decriminalised defamation in mass media. Under Article 157 of the Latvian Criminal Code, defamation is defined as [knowingly committing] the intentional distribution of fictions, knowing them to be untrue and defamatory of another person, in printed or otherwise reproduced material, as well as orally, if such has been committed publicly. Law on the Press and Other Mass Media states that media are prohibited from publishing information that injures the honour and dignity of natural persons and legal persons. Art. 27 specifies that media that disseminate information which injures human honour and dignity shall be held liable in accordance with the laws of the Republic of Latvia. Article No. 21 provides detailed procedures for media organisations in the case of defamation. The Criminal Law makes a distinction between defamation and degrading harm, that is, between cases, when it is not defamation, which is resolved through Civil Law, and cases, when deliberate and public defamation occurs. It can be concluded that defamation is qualified in relation to the expressed facts.

Data and publications on defamation in Latvia are available in separate international databases, the purpose of which is to monitor cases of defamation or to analyse the compliance of Latvian regulations with international standards. As already mentioned, there is a lack of academic research on this issue. For example, several cases of defamation have been recorded in the International Press Institute database²⁸¹. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) fifth monitoring report on Latvia (the first conducted in 1997) was available during the study period. The report praises the work on the recognition and investigation of hate crimes, the authors of reports admit that the integration of refugees and asylum seekers has been carried out, but the report highlights serious shortcomings, pointing to the following (ECRI, 2018): Latvia's criminal, civil and administrative law is not yet fully in line with ECRI's General Policy Recommendation No. 7 on national legislation to combat racism and racial discrimination; despite previous recommendations to this effect ECRI notes that the State Police does not have a dedicated team tasked with reaching out to vulnerable groups in the context of combatting hate crime. There is also a lack of promotion of counter-speech among high-level political representatives and other public figures in response to racist and homo-/transphobic hate speech. ECRI also notes that the support activities for refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection (alternative status) are not sufficient, especially in the areas of language training and integration into the labour market. Furthermore, ECRI is seriously concerned about incidents of alleged discrimination against refugees/persons with alternative status when trying to access health care services.

No academic research on the SLAPP problem in Latvia was found during the research.

2.3. Freedom of information

Similarly to FoE, regulation of the **protection of the right to information** in Latvia is guaranteed by a legal framework, which generally is in line with international standards. A new regulation has been developed for the adaptation of personal data protection and GDPR in Latvia (White & Case, 13 November 2019); however, there is a lack of academic research on these issues. Educational information on data protection and GDPR is offered to the public by news media and several state institutions, as well as in-depth analysis of those issues is provided by the Ombudsman on its website (Tiesībsargs, n.d.).

²⁸¹ See example here: <http://legaldb.freemedia.at/2014/09/30/latvian-journalist-fights-off-criminal-libel-charges-with-help->

Freedom of Information Law defines all the aspects of information access. The Latvian Administrative Violations Code regulates appeal mechanisms and the other citizen and state institution related conflicts, including, information accessibility issues.

The regulation of transparency of media owners in Latvia differs depending on the media segment. There is no specific regulation for digital native media companies in terms of publicly accessible data on the beneficial and ultimate owners. All media must disclose the owners and beneficial owners for the Register of Companies and public authority (audio-visual media), but this does not have to be disclosed to the public. Electronic media must provide ownership information when receiving a licence. This information is available on the authority National Electronic Mass Media Council website. If the title of the media outlet is known, since 2020 the basic data, including information on the owners, can be found in the Register of Companies database Lursoft without payment. Obtaining detailed information (for example, historical data on former owners and managers) is a paid service.

According to MPM 2022 data, at the beginning of 2022, a new whistleblowing law to transpose the EU Directive on Whistleblowing has been adopted in Latvia. The annual report on whistleblowing statistics in Latvia shows that out of the 517 applications processed as whistle-blower reports, 122 applications were identified as whistle-blower reports.

2.4. Accountability system

2.4.1. Development and agency of change

Issues of professional ethics are not addressed in the regulation of Latvian media. The analysis of publications dedicated to professional ethics shows that ethical issues are interpreted generally, introducing the most important ethical principles of media and journalism. There is a lack of data-based publication or research projects in this domain. The literature in the bibliography compiled by the project covers media regulation and self-regulation at a very limited level, as, firstly, there are very few studies, and, secondly, publications are descriptive and there is a lack of data on media regulation or media ethics.

Since 2010, when the Association of Latvian Journalists was established, it is considered one of the most important agents in the field of media responsibility. The association has created and is developing a journalistic code of ethics, and its Ethics Commission examines submissions related to the work of individual journalists.

It should be clarified that the concept of media ethics does not appear in the regulatory enactments regulating media work, the EMMML only states that information must comply with “generally accepted ethical principles of journalism” (Article 24). Thus, in accordance with the media policy implementation plan, the Latvian Media Ethics Council (Latvian Media Ethics Council, 2022) was established in Latvia in 2018. It is a complaints body set up by media companies whose decisions concern its members, but it can express an opinion on media ethics issues that affect other players in the media environment and society.

2.4.2. Existing media accountability instruments and an evaluation of their effectiveness

In most of the Latvian media environment in the period covered by the study, self-regulation issues have been addressed liberally, without imposing an obligation on the media or journalists to observe the norms of professional ethics. Since 2000, or even before, some serious media companies have developed their own codes of ethics. The situation is different in the public media organisations Latvian Radio and Latvian Television. They both have codes of ethics and conduct that are regularly developed. Ethics commissions have been set up in the organisations to deal with complaints.

The two journalists' organisations in Latvia with their own codes of ethics. The problem is that only a small part of media professionals are members of one of the professional NGOs (see Journalism section in this report).

The situation in the discourse of media ethics changed in 2017, when the Media Support Fund was established in 2016, where regulations of the project competition developed by the Media Policy Division of the Ministry of Culture stipulated that the applicant must comply with basic professional principles and submit a code of ethics with their project or certify that the project's employees have adhered to a code of ethics of a professional organisation.

The Latvian Media Ethics Council was founded on 12 December 2018, by a total of fifteen media industry associations and companies. Members of the association represent all forms and types of media, media associations and organisations that are active in media research. The Media Ethics council's activities are based on a comprehensive media ethics code that protects media values such as freedom of expression, diversity of information and views, editorial independence, media credibility, autonomy, journalist rights, integrity (objectivity), human rights, in particular the rights of children and minors, equality and the prohibition of discrimination, audience education, media, and audiences' mutual trust.

In the system of Latvian non-governmental organisations, there is no serious agent whose focus would be media responsibility. The professional associations of journalists and the Media Ethics council has become a major agent of change over the years, particularly in commercial media accountability.

In Latvia, there is no discussion about the ethics of the media and journalism, because no format has been created in which such discussions could take place. There are also no regular formats in public media programmes that have discussed media ethics.

Critical junctures

In the field of media regulation, it is difficult to separate specific stages, because in general the regulatory process is very incomplete, and the norms of media regulation do not meet the requirements of today's media environment. One of the most important milestones in the regulation of electronic media was the development of EMMML between 2009 and 2010, which, firstly, did not prevent politicians from influencing the independence of the media authority and, secondly, did not adequately strengthen the independence of public service media, ensuring an appropriate funding model.

Similar processes took place between 2016 and 2020, when the Law on Public Electronic Mass Media and Administration Thereof was developed, which did not resolve the issue of independent financing of public media.

Risks and opportunities related to deliberative democracy are as follows:

The main risks are related to the insufficient development of media regulation, as the current regulation does not offer definitions of modern media and journalistic activities that emphasise their role in democracy. In the context of media regulation, the protection of journalists against attacks that could affect their autonomy and promote self-censorship is insufficiently addressed.

The main opportunities related to the adoption on the Law on Public Electronic Mass Media and Administration Thereof in 2020, which envisages the establishment of a Public Media Council and the Ombudsman.

Therefore, the following **risks and opportunities** can be defined.

- There is no effective public organisation for the protection of the media audience in Latvia, the system of media self-regulation is relatively new and fragmented. This

could be one of the reasons why some members of Latvian society do not understand the essence of the mission of independent media and the role of quality media in democracy.

- Superficial knowledge of the ethics of media and journalism in the professional environment, which does not allow one to integrate professional approaches such as balance, objectivity, neutrality into everyday practice at a high level, reflecting reality and striving to reveal the truth. It promotes a declarative approach to professional ethics.
- Distrust of self-regulatory mechanisms and their potential, underestimating the effectiveness of media ethics councils or media criticism, overestimating normative and more restrictive self-regulatory mechanisms such as organisational codes and regulations (laws).
- Commercialisation of the common media environment and prioritisation of media business interests over professional interests and tasks.
- Undeveloped tradition of professional discussion and lack of discussion format to discuss issues of professional ethics and get an opportunity for honest and open self-reflection on professional ethics dilemmas.
- Lack of detail in codes of professional ethics and conduct to address new ethical issues (stereotyping, attacks on journalists, impact of social media communication, coverage of vulnerable groups, science communication, disinformation etc.).
- Fragmented or non-existent communication with external audiences about media and journalism ethics.
- Detailed and high-quality codes of ethics and conduct have been developed in public media organisations, most of which are made up of professional ethics. An internal Ethics Commission (LTV) or a commission formed by the Board (LR) has been established to comply with them. Public media employees have a much higher understanding of professional ethics than their colleagues from commercial media environment. Professional ethics are generally respected, aimed at strengthening independence and promoting excellence.
- A comparison of Media Ethics and other codes of professional ethics shows that this Code is appropriate for the needs of media companies. It is not very detailed and defines the main ethical principles.

3. Risks and opportunities of journalism domain

3.1. Development and agency of change

The journalistic professional field has been studied in a fragmented manner in Latvia. There are few studies of journalists' professional environment during the period covered by the Mediadecom project. Further analysis is based on quantitative and qualitative studies conducted by Ilze Šulmane (2011) and Vita Zelče (2018), summarised in the monograph "Latvian Media Diversity", as well as research data of Worlds of Journalism Study and MPM analysis.

The data show that in the development of journalism and professional standards, as well as in the understanding of journalistic roles, media owners have had a significant agency influence, both in the field of commercial and public media. For example, until 2008, when the Swedish media company Bonnier AB sold Latvia's largest media company "Diena Mediji" to unknown owners, the newspaper "Diena" was the most important agent of change in the field of modern journalistic professional principles. At the same time, PSM forms a large part of the journalistic labour market and a platform for innovations in journalism. Thus, Latvian Radio and Latvian Television are considered important agents.

3.2. Market conditions

The liberal structure of Latvian media regulation allowed a diverse media system to develop. At the same time, the media environment is characterised by oligopolistic competition and a high level of concentration (Jastramskis et.al, 2017). The Latvian media environment is characterised as diverse both in terms of the number of players, the number of media available in each media segment, and the content and media language offered (Zelče, 2018). At the same time, there is a high degree of concentration in the media environment; some media (newspapers and commercial radio) are under direct or indirect political influence (CMPMF, 2021).

During the Mediadelcom research period, the Latvian media environment has experienced significant changes. First, the structure of media owners changed as a result of the economic crisis, and many national media companies were sold to foreign business representatives. Secondly, the digital media environment and digital journalism evolved. Thus, the duties of journalists and the labour market were restructured. Thirdly, the influence of newspapers decreased while the influence of news portals increased in daily news consumption.

3.3. Public service media (PSM)

PSM in Latvia have always been in the centre of political influence (Beitika, 2016). PSM regulation (the parliament's obligation to elect the media supervisory board) and the funding model (PSM are financed from the state budget) have determined that Latvian PSM is one of the lowest funded in the EU; its technological development has lagged behind the possibilities of commercial media. However, Latvian Television and Latvian Radio are the largest media organisations; they make up a significant part of the journalist labour market and influence the development of journalism in Latvia. The PSM of Latvia has been developing several investigative and analytical journalism projects since 2015. The programme based on the experiments of journalists, in the production of which hidden recordings and a hidden camera are used, "Forbidden technique", is one of the most popular formats of Latvian Television. Since 2019, an investigative journalism section has been established at Latvian Radio; it offers the programme "Open Files".

The attitude of the Latvian audience towards the PSM and PSM use can be explained by using the general tendencies of media consumption. Media choices in Latvia are mostly determined by ethnicity and the geographical location. According to a study by *Latvijas Fakti* (2018), more than two-thirds of the respondents consume media in Latvian. The study indicates the impact of Russia-originating (including all media platforms) media in Latvia, as 38% of the respondents consumed Russian media.

The data from 2018 shows that 58% of Latvians trust national news sources (LTV1, LR, LNT, TV3, TV24) (LF 2018). A sufficiently high level of trust (42%) is attributed to Western media (e.g., CNN, BBC, Euronews), with Russian media having the lowest trust level (22%). However, for different ethnic groups the trust ranking order is in reverse: 41% of Russian-speakers trust Russian media, 34% Latvian media and only 19% Western media.

As with media generally, the trust in PSM is also highly impacted by the differences in the attitudes of various ethnic groups. There are obvious differences in the trust evaluations of Latvian speakers and non-Latvian speakers regarding LTV. Among Latvian speakers 70% trust LTV, whereas a mere 35% of non-Latvian speakers do (GfK 2014-2016).

The situation has changed a great deal in five years. Data from 2020 (LF 2020) shows that 90% of Latvian speakers and 63% of non-Latvian speakers consume Latvian PSM. To a large extent, the respondents who consume PSM content trust it. 88% of Latvian speakers and 81% of non-Latvian speakers trust Latvian Television, 85% of Latvians and 77% of non-Latvian speakers trust Latvian Radio, and 80% of Latvians and 63% of non-Latvian speakers trust LSM.LV.

Although the data is fragmented and not always comparable, we can conclude that Latvian society's confidence in public media institutions is stable. The level of trust is related to two indicators – media use in general and the familiarity of the audience with the content of a specific medium or channel.

In summary, Latvian PSM has failed to attract two significant audience segments – young people and Russian-speakers. However, the small percentage of Russian viewers and listeners could result from political decisions that have prevented the production of more Russian-language content. Interestingly, recent data suggest that the LSM.LV news site, which offers content in Latvian, Russian and English, could change the attitudes of various generations and ethnic groups towards PSM. All the generations agree that PSM helps to strengthen democracy in Latvia and promotes the development of Latvian culture (Juzefovičs 2019). However, there are strong differences in the assessment of these factors among the various ethnic groups. The Russian speakers have less faith in the potential of the PSM as a democracy-reinforcing institution (73% Latvians, but only 47% Russian speakers, believe so). However, regardless of ethnicity, the population unanimously believes that PSM plays an important role in strengthening and advancing Latvian culture (88% of Latvian speakers and 70% of Russian speakers agree).

3.4. Production conditions (multiplatform journalism, digital resources, investigative resources, and foreign correspondents) Professional autonomy, external and internal pressures on journalists

Latvian journalists assessed their own autonomy level as high (87% of respondents think so) (Ozolīna 2016); however, interviews revealed that, naming the most painful problems, and assessing the independence of journalists, the media professionals evaluated the political pressure as high. The discourses of the interviews conducted at the end of 2017 also reflect the journalists' and editors' concerns about the impact of sponsors and advertisers on editorial decisions and content (Zelče, 2018). Some of the interviewed journalists consider the service of political parties, contracts for information support for politicians to be acceptable practices for newspapers to improve their financial situation in the pre-election period. Representatives of the regional media also highlighted the existence of free municipal gazettes as a growing problem, which not only causes financial losses to regional media, but also affects public awareness about journalism in general. In recent years, journalists have acknowledged that political pressure is vague, but that commercialisation affects all aspects of media content creation, developing self-censorship (Rožukalne, 2020).

On other production conditions related issues there are no studies available.

3.5. Agency of journalists

Journalism population structure. The number of Latvian journalists is not really known. In the 2014 WJS study (Ozoliņa, 2016), 300 journalists were interviewed, suggesting that 600 journalists work in Latvia. In the 2017 study (Zelče, 2018), using the data of the State Revenue Service, a larger number of journalists, editors, TV and radio broadcasters and video operators were found, including 1114 people in the database (1152 people in 2015). The data of the media employee survey (Ozoliņa, 2016) in 2014 show that most journalists are full-time employees (87%), who have a permanent working relationship in one of the media organisations. Latvia's journalists are experienced, with an average working experience of 16.3 years. The education level of journalists can be assessed as relatively high. In 2014, 41% of journalists have had a college or bachelor's degree, and almost 38% of respondents have a master's degree. There is no need to obtain special licences in Latvia or to be educated in journalism, to get a job in the profession. This is why the openness of the profession in media pluralism research rated as high

(CMPF 2017, 17), but some countries noted that free and easy access profession can lead to low quality journalism. The 2014 study also confirms the historical situation that Latvian journalism is still dominated by women (Ozoliņa 2016; Zelče, 2018).

There are no mechanisms granting social protection to journalists in the case of changes of ownership or editorial line of media companies in Latvia. Even more there are no regulatory safeguards, including self-regulatory instruments, which seek to ensure that decisions regarding appointments and dismissals of editors-in-chief are not influenced by commercial interests. The same is true of other measures of journalist independence, there are no laws and/or self-regulatory measures to strengthen the obligation of journalists and/or media outlets not to be influenced by commercial interests. Although the codes of professional ethics of journalists' organisations clearly define that the profession of journalist is incompatible with operating in the advertising market, in some media journalists are involved in providing services to advertisers.

Professional organisations. The Latvian Union of Journalists (LUJ) was established in Latvia after the restoration of Latvia's independence. It was the heir to a Soviet organisation of journalists, and it operated both as a non-governmental organisation and as a trade union. After years of passivity, the union lost its influence, and it did not really pursue any of its supposed functions. A second organisation, the Latvian Association of Journalists (LAJ), was established in 2010. Both professional organisations of journalists have codes of ethics, but they only apply to their own members.

The existence of two organisations shows the fragmentation of the Latvian journalistic environment. LAJ has more than 120 members, but the LUJ does not disclose the number of its members. The effectiveness of professional associations and unions has been assessed as mediocre in most EU media pluralism studies, mainly because associations do not represent all journalists. A survey conducted by L. Ozoliņa in 2014 states that 73.4% of the surveyed journalists admitted that they are not involved in any professional organisation. Also in 2017, most journalists and editors surveyed (80%) admitted that they are not members of any journalistic organisation (Zelče, 2018). Several regional media journalists have acknowledged that media professionals are very alienated from each other, not only personally, but also in the pursuit of common goals.

3.6. Journalist's working conditions

The average salary of journalists has never been extremely high or low in comparison with other professions. However, there is a difference that includes a risk of losing qualified professionals from journalism to PR: according to 2016 data, the average salary of a professional working in the field evaluated on the level of EUR 700-800 (editors), and of EUR 600-700 (journalists) compared to 800-850 for specialists working in the field of public relations) (Zelče 2018). In 2017, there was not a significant change; however, while the salaries of public relations specialists have been slightly rising (EUR 815-950 per month), in 2017 the average salary of a journalist was EUR 627 (Zelče, 2018).

The main problem in the working environment of Latvian journalists is insufficient social protection, as many media organisations offer a salary consisting of two parts - basic wage, from which social insurance contributions are paid, and fees for publications that are not subject to social security taxes. This situation leads to a high level of social insecurity in the case of journalists' illness and maternity leave, and in the longer term low social security payments result in a low pension level and the potential risk of poverty.

3.7. Intra-organisational diversity of human resources

The tradition that journalism is a feminine field in Latvia has been preserved from the Soviet period; about 60% of those working in journalism are women, 40% are men (Rožukalne, 2016; Zelče, 2018). This situation could explain the relatively low salaries in the media field and the low prestige of the profession. With the development of digital media, a large number of men work in internet news portals. Although there are many women in leadership positions in media organisations, the management and ownership of media organisations are predominantly men.

3.8. Journalistic competencies, education, and training

There are no studies in Latvia that analyse the level of education and competence of journalists. However, WJS data show that Latvian journalists are relatively educated (Ozoliņa, 2016): two-thirds have higher education in journalism, and every sixth has a master's degree.

3.9. Professional culture and role perception

Studies on journalistic roles (Ozoliņa, 2016) show that the understanding and attitudes of Latvian journalists against freedom of expression, professional ethics, and other professional issues are in general similar to media professionals representing other Western or Eastern European countries. The majority of Latvian journalists consider their most important role to be a neutral observer; the roles of an informer and educator are important.

According to data by Worlds of Journalism (Wofj) research (Ozolina, 2016), journalists from Latvia are nearly unanimous in the opinion that they act as detached observers. Altogether, journalists are confident in the importance of professional ethics. However, a fraction of WoFJ data shows the presence of double standards. Nearly half of the interviewed journalists claim that ethical decisions depend on personal evaluation, whereas a third agrees that they could disregard moral standards if extraordinary circumstances were to require it (Ozolina, 2016). These data refer to conclusions made by Ilze Šulmane (2011), who elaborated on a longitudinal research project and concluded that the professional identity of journalists is unclear and lacking a shared universal set of professional values. Instead, journalists in Latvia are used to adapt to the political logic of media owners, as opposed to professional logic.

Recent research project on ethical decision-making process in newsrooms (Buholcs, 2020) concluded that the editors of Latvian media tend to believe that shared standards of ethics do exist. Most of them agreed on the relevance of basic and general principles, but only a minority of interviewees demonstrated awareness of the limitations of these abstract concepts or shared dilemmas they have faced. When discussing the factors of professional influence, the editors mention the business interests of their media companies and the influence of the audience on the decision-making process. Some of the editors involved in the study perceive professional ethics as rather unclear, as they consider professional ethics to be a continuation of the moral decision-making process, which is determined by family, education, and the surrounding society. This study is mirroring the findings of the WJS study that journalists' and editors' views on professional ethics differ from real practice and the ability to make ethical decisions. This research has shown that media editors do not recognise the difference between journalistic ethics and other considerations that influence their decision-making. They talk about ethics in relation to the professional ideals they seek to pursue, but their ethical considerations are closely linked to their need to balance the practical interests and power relations of the various parties involved.

The controversial development of Latvian journalism is characterised by the state of investigative journalism. At the beginning of the research period, there were only a few media organisa-

tions in Latvia (mostly daily newspapers or weekly magazines) that were able to develop investigative journalism projects. However, the subsequent development of investigative journalism is related to the characteristics of the media system. Gerli et al. (2018), studying examples of investigative journalism in several countries, including Latvia, identified two very specific functions that characterise pseudo-investigative journalism: on the one hand, the media is a tool in the hands of owners to attack their (political or economic) opponents, and on the other hand, those economic and political groups which are close to the interests of the owners. In this context, investigative journalism provides a process that the authors of the study define as a “mud machine” because it is used to damage the reputation of political (or other) opponents.

The aims and forms of such journalism can lead to a highly 'guerrilla-type' investigative journalism, which often depends on direct personal interests and has no connection with the public interest, important socio-political issues, and the principle of social responsibility. In Central and Eastern European countries, “pseudo-investigative journalism” is more prevalent (Stetka and Örnebring, 2013), in which journalists publish compromising news through illusory investigations. It has been described as a form of media instrumentalisation based on the needs of a small number of 'influential' individuals who have access to a wide range of financial and political resources and who use the media to achieve specific goals.

As party influence diminished and societal secularisation intensified, the links between the media and political ideologies gradually replaced forms of media “partisanism” that were less ideological and more related to potential interests (political but also increasingly economic) (Mancini, 2012). In Latvia, few hybrid media (pietiek.com; kompromat.lv; puaro.lv) were created, the operation of which reflects the demand for compromising information and communication with the aim of damaging the reputation of political opponents or economic competitors.

But in the last period of the research, there is also a trend in investigative journalism, when an independent investigative journalism centre Re: Baltica is established, which is involved in international investigative journalism networks and projects. In addition to the goal of exposing political corruption, investigative journalists focus on uncovering social and economic problems. PSM also develops investigative journalism projects and formats.

The following **critical junctures** can be taken in summarising the situation in journalism:

- In the early 2000s, the fields of public relations and digital communication developed rapidly, attracting many professionals and greater investment compared to media organisations. As a result of these processes, both the labour market and the structure of education in journalism gradually restructured (the demand for education in journalism decreased), and the relatively low salaries in media companies reduced the prestige of journalism as a profession.
- After the economic recession of 2008/2009, which severely affected the Latvian media environment, the number of employees in the editorial offices was reduced and journalists' salaries have been cut, and some journalists left the profession. This had an impact on the quality of journalism.
- The impact of platformisation, as a result of which the media industry has lost approximately 50% of the advertising market (CMPMF, 2021).

The main **risks**:

- low level of social insurance for journalism professionals;
- high level of commercialisation of media content, which affects the professional quality of journalists' work;
- low wages compared to the level of remuneration in other areas of public communication professions;

- low level of involvement of journalists in professional organisations, limited influence of these organisations;
- double standards in the understanding of professional ethics, relying on general moral considerations and ethical decisions on a case-by-case basis;

Key opportunities:

- relatively high educational level of journalists;
- opportunities offered by the Media Support Fund and other external donors to develop serious analytical and research journalism projects;
- the growing role of public service media in the journalism labour market.

4. Risks and opportunities of media usage domain

4.1. Development and agency of change

Latvia is a country with a small media market, linguistically divided audience, and a strong influence from neighbouring Russia's media. Official statistics state that at the end of second decade of the 21st century there are 1.92 million inhabitants (68% form the urban population in total, 33% - the inhabitants of the capital Riga) (Central Statistical Bureau, 2019). 62% of the population are Latvian, 25% Russian, 3.2% Belarusian, 2.2% Ukrainian, 2.1% Polish, 4% form other ethnic minorities. 61% of the Latvian population speak Latvian as the first language, 36% - Russian, 3% - other, with a clear difference between, from one side, the capital Riga (where a majority of 56% speak Russian at home) and Eastern region Latgale (60% speak Russian at home) and other rural areas and smaller cities of Latvia (where 75% - 91% speak Latvian at home) (Central Statistical Bureau, 2018).

Given the ethnic structure of the audience, one of the main tasks for researchers of media and communication during the time scope of the Mediadelcom research, but, especially, during the first phase before entering the EU in 2004, was connected to the social integration issues and inclusion of minority groups via media access and agenda. Even if the existence of two information spaces in the country was recorded as one of the main risks for democracy (Kruks, Šulmane, 2005), analysis of media content was showing that there were a lot of opportunities for the common agenda (Kruks, 2001). Diversity in media content was sized to support tolerance and dialogue in society supported by the media and serious attention was directed to it in the education of journalists, because even if in the year 2009, the percentage of people satisfied with diversity in media was more than half, it was still lower than in the EU in general (Zandovska – Odiņa, Petrenko, 2011, 7).

The researchers have identified the most important problems that potentially endanger the functionality of media, such as

- blurred line between political communication and journalism (journalists becoming politicians and politicians working as journalists);
- changes in the ownership structure that endanger the diversity of opinions (dropping internal and external diversity of Latvian daily newspapers, its influence and reputation, consolidation of Russian press);
- lack of quality social and political information due to decreased diversity, influence and audiences for quality content;
- influence of political public relations in journalism;
- influence of private and state controlled Russian media;
- hate speech and informative noise on social media hindering rational discussion;

- small market as a cause of the lack of quality media content and investigative and analytical journalism (Skudra, Šulmane, Dreijere, 2015, 216).

During the twenty year long period of time from 2000 to 2020, the most important critical turning points that contributed to the change of audience structure, media repertoires, uses and trust of news creating risks and opportunities for deliberative democracy are connected:

- (1) the technological development, digitisation and advent of social media gave wider access to and new forms of information and communication (for example, social media site “draugiem.lv” - the Latvian alternative to Facebook was created as early as 2004 and contributed to the relatively high usage of social media in all generational groups, especially, the younger generation); however, the usage of internet media is rather passive and piratic uses and tolerance towards usage of content without respecting copyrights in the country remain high (Zelče, 2018), and the introduction of new media rather stimulated attitudes of consumerism, entertainment seeking and depoliticisation of the public sphere,
- (2) entering into the EU and the social integration challenges that changed the normative framework of media usage, was also a factor in turning away part of the audience from traditional ways of using it,
- (3) economic crisis that influenced the ability of users to pay for media content, but was also followed by a decrease in the advertisement market and emigration of a significant part of the population²⁸²,
- (4) change of geopolitical context with the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 that started the discussion on propaganda in the context of usage of Russia’s media in Latvia and on media literacy of the audience, but also rather deepened the gap between two information spaces in Latvia - Russian media users and users of Latvian and Western media (Zelče, 2018) (followed by closing the distribution of Russian media representing state propaganda in 2022),
- (5) advent of populist politics (between parliamentary election campaigns in 2014 and 2018) that is connected with further segmentation of the audience and widening and deepening of the gap between different social groups according to the ideological divide and discourse,
- (6) introduction of media policy in 2016 (Cabinet of Ministers, 2016) that through various instruments provided strong support to diversity, access for minorities and cultural and journalistic quality, and encouraged the research and development of media literacy,
- (7) Covid-19 pandemic that changed lifestyles and media usage patterns of the Latvian population increasing the audience for news and analysis in media content, but also endorsing news avoidance and fatigue (Rožukalne, Strode, Murinska, 2022).

Media usage and audience data are mainly collected for commercial purposes, and there are two main directions of data gathering – opinion polls and uses of media. For quantitative research there are datasets on media usage and audience preferences available from both commercial and non-commercial providers covering both the national (CSB, 2020; Latvijas Fakti, 2017; 2018; TNS/ Kantar 1991-2020; Gemius, 1999-2020) and international comparative (Eurobarometer, Eurostat) level that are further used for commercial and academic research. More focused quantitative data are collected by social research companies like SKDS in Omnibus surveys and used for academic research projects (for example, Rožukalne & Skulte, 2016; Rožukalne et. al, 2020). Qualitative research is more irregular, done almost exclusively by individual academic and – to a lesser extent – non-academic (NGO based)

²⁸² The number of emigrants from Latvia in the period from 2000-2014 was 246700 (10.9% of the population in 2000) and it almost doubled in the years after 2008 (to compare: 22911 in 2000, 39651 in 2010) (CSP, 2022)

researchers and research groups and therefore depends on interests of researchers or goals of particular projects.

4.2. Agency of media-users and analysts

In general, the Latvian audience is not active in the usage of media (Zelče, 2018, 509); even internet and social media usage among the young doesn't show the habits of active, creative and deliberative communication (Rožukalne and Skulte, 2016, 177).

The gender aspect in media usage is rather neglected by researchers; the age factor is taken into account mostly to describe differences in media consumption of younger generations (less traditional media, more - 100% use of internet under 19, usage of the content of other media through internet access and archives) (Zelče, 2018). Researchers acknowledge that the lack of qualitative in-depth and critical analysis of audience exposure leads to non-critical use by the audience that mostly stick to conservative habits (Zelče, 2018).

Ethnic group, language preferences, geographical and age factors largely predict the choice of media channels. Latvians use the media in Latvian (over 90%, *Latvijas Fakti*, 2018), whereas the Russian-speaking audience – in Russian, less frequently (44% listen to the radio in Latvian, 38% watch TV, 35% use news portals on the internet, 34% read the press, and 24% use social media) in Latvian (*Latvijas Fakti*, 2018), preferring the TV channels controlled by the Russian government (*Latvijas Fakti*, 2017, 2018, *CMPMF*, 2020). The attitude towards both traditional forms of access to information - traditional (print, radio, television) media and internet (both news and social media) differs significantly among age groups. However, the last years of the two decades show the fast increase in the usage of internet media in the older generation (Zelče, 2018).

The perceived fact that Russian media exposure can create threats to national and social security was directing the capacity of research towards comparing Latvian and Russian speaking audiences as different; however, it might also be treated as a base for bias, since the generational and gender differences in media usage, especially, taking the advent of social media into account, are not well analysed and interpreted.

4.3. Access to news and other media content

At the end of the second decade of the 21st century, TV is the most popular medium among the Latvian population (*Latvijas Fakti*, 2017, 2018, 2020). It has a stable position with a slight oscillation of percentages under 90% (88% 2018, 90% 2019, 89% 2020). 84% of the population view television at least once a week, 60% - every or almost every day. The level of viewing time of a little over 4 hours a day was also relatively stable before – study comparing the 12-year period (2005, 2010, 2015, 2016, 2017) shows that there is no significant change (Zelče, 2018, 492).

Internet news portals and radio are next in the popularity ratings; they are used by an equal percentage of the audience – 80%, however, news portals are used more frequently (73% every week, 47% every or almost every day) than radio (67% every week, 45% every or almost every day) (*Latvijas Fakti*, 2020).

Internet was studied in several research works, but surveys state that the creative use of new digital tools even by young audiences is rather very limited (Skulte, 2014). Instead of implementing their own projects, the majority of people use the internet for the consumption of goods and entertainment (similar to TV and radio usage). In recent years, relative stable usage was achieved by online streaming services – video (31% in total, 19% weekly, 7% daily) and audio (30% in total, 19% weekly, 7% daily). The factor influencing media choice is the age of a

user, with younger audiences preferring internet news media, social media, and digital platforms (in the age group from 16 to 30 more than 90% use social media at least once a week, and more than half – one of the on-line streaming services) whereas older generations are traditional media users (TV and radio) (Latvijas Fakti, 2020).

The number of users of printed media is still decreasing (in total 73% in 2020, from 77% in 2019, 87% in 2017 and 98.2% in 2005). Now, almost half of the population reads press at least once a week (49%) and only 11% - every or almost every day, but instead of daily press tabloid media, women's magazines and entertaining papers with a strong stress on TV schedules (especially for the Russian speaking audience) are leading the rankings (Latvijas Fakti, 2020, CSP, Kantar, Zelče, 2018). The economic crisis has seriously damaged the newspaper industry in terms of a declining circulation and loss of trust (due to changes in ownership structure).

Public Service Media (PSM) are used by approximately the same percentage of media audience in Latvia as the news portals and radio – 80.5% (less in audiences such as young, non-Latvians and inhabitants of Latgale) recognise themselves as PSM users (Latvijas Fakti, 2020). Public TV is viewed by 68% of population with older viewers on a more regular basis. The Public Radio (6 stations including one, LR4, in Russian) is used by more than half of the population (54%, 4% less than in the year 2019) (Latvijas Fakti, 2020).

4.4. Relevance of news media

The audience is divided along the language and ethnical line - the majority of the population (87%) state that it is important for them to use media in their mother tongue, and from them 87% Latvians and 81% non-Latvians (Latvijas Fakti, 2020). But there is a lack of direct evidence about the relevance of news media. The general tendency of Latvian audience preferences shows commercialisation (top ratings have TV shows such as X factor and media rituals like big sport events or annual addresses by LR president, adult music formats with short news and women's/yellow magazines for the Latvian audience and weekly papers including TV programmes – for the Russian audience (Kantar, 2018-2020). However, the monthly research of television made by KANTAR shows that among the TOP 10 of the programmes, almost every month there are at least two evening news programmes, as well as a Sunday night PSM investigative journalism project (Kantar, 2018-2020).

The indicators for trust in media show that the Latvian population values news as a source of trustful information (see part 4.5 for detailed information).

Researchers analysing the attitude of the Latvian population towards news have identified risks connected to news avoidance and fatigue during the COVID-19 outbreak. The data show Latvian society as rather split into almost equal groups of those stating that they are following the latest information (55%) and those who feel tired and state the loss of interest for news (53%); another (32%) turns away and avoids the news on COVID-19. They conclude that the data show the danger of losing part of the audience who are not informed (about COVID-19 related issues) (Rožukalne, Strode, Murinska, 2022).

4.5. Trust in media

Traditionally levels of trust in Latvia are low for the political parties, the Saeima parliament and the government, high for the army and police, and rather high levels of trust are recorded towards the media (Zelče, 2018). As reported based on the Eurobarometer trust in media, at the end of the period included, Latvia along with the majority of European countries belongs to countries where radio is considered as the most trusted medium; people don't believe in social media and there is medium trust in national news (even if less are satisfied than the average in

the EU with democracy in the country, people in Latvia are slightly more satisfied with information provided by the national media). (Fernandez Quijada, 2019) In 2018, 58% of Latvians trust national news sources, 42% Western media (e.g., CNN, BBC, Euronews), 22% - Russian media. In the Russian speaking audience, 41% trust Russian media, 34% Latvian media and only 19% Western media. The most trusted content (TOP 5) in 2017 comes from two major news portals (Delfi (18%) and Tvnet (8%)) and PSM, especially television (LTV1 (11%). This is quite different for the non-Latvian population in Latvia – the TOP 5 trusted sources of news beside Delfi and Panorama include the Russian channels PBK (and its news programme) and RTR Rosija (Zelče, 2018, 513).

68% of the respondents believe in the reliability of the media they consume. But the level of trust is lower in younger audiences and non-Latvian audiences. The youngest people are critical to Latvian media (46% trust the media), as they are aged 25–34 (42%). In non-Latvian-speaking audiences, the level of trust is lower – 63% (Latvijas Fakti, 2018, Jõesaar, Rožukalne, Jastramskis, 2022).

The most trusted medium is radio, following by TV and the internet; however, the level of trust is sinking from 2007 to 2017 (Zelče, 2018, 511). Printed media are trusted the same as the EU average (approx. 41%). Latvia's respondents also state that they trust social media (21%-27%) more than the population of the EU on average (around 20%) (Standard Eurobarometer, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018; Statista 2019; CMPMF, 2020).

Most of the users of PSM are satisfied with the quality of content in different PSM channels (Latvijas Fakti, 2020). Users are mostly satisfied with news and cultural content, less – with programming for children and young people (Latvijas Fakti, 2020). The level of trust in PSM is stable and high (it is the leader comparing to other types of media) (Latvijas Fakti, 2020). However, compared to the situation in other Baltic countries, PMS in Latvia are less trusted (Jõesaar, Rožukalne, Jastramskis, 2022).

Analysing the Latvian audience and its media usage patterns at the end of the 2nd decade of the 21st century, researchers conclude that there are three main problems – presence and usage of Russian TV channels in the Latvian media market, piracy, and lack of media literacy. Professor Vita Zelče summarises that the most important good feature is a sufficient diversity in form, content and language of audience media repertoires, but dangers are connected to the above-mentioned problems and a lack of quality content and conservative (passive) habits of the population. She also notes that there is no analytical, high-quality and data-based research on the Latvian media audience. (Zelče, 2018). The COVID-19 related audience research showed that the audience is even more vulnerable in terms of strength of trust and ability to discern, analyse and properly use media.

The main **risks** from the side of audience research:

- the presence in the market, exposure, and trust in Russia's media, especially TV by the significant part of (mainly Russian speaking) the audience,
- divided audience and contradictory tendencies along divisions of language use and age,
- lack of strong products of information and analysis that would attract audiences,
- low level of media literacy,
- uncritical, conservative, and passive usage of social media (for consuming and entertainment only) that lead to exposure to populist messages,
- not sufficient quantity and level of quality of the research on media audiences.

The main **opportunities** include:

- the relative strength in terms of exposure and trust in PSM even if less expressed than in other Baltic countries (Jõesaar, Rožukalne, Jastramskis, 2022);
- media policy that is ensuring the development of quality content and media and encouraging initiatives for media literacy development.

5. Risks and opportunities of media related competencies domain

5.1. Development and agency of change

Since 2000, several equally important and interrelated critical junctures have been identified in the domain of media competence, mainly related to significant global geopolitical developments in the EU or in the neighbouring countries around Latvia, the emerging tendencies in the technology availability and development, as well as the political planning decisions binding on the Latvian education system and science.

5.2. Overview of media related competences in policy documents

Major and/or more frequently quoted documents in scientific publications and policy planning documents from 2000 to 2010 in the field of media competence indicate the need for media competence at all levels of education, with a particular emphasis on innovations that ought to be incorporated in teacher education (Grünwald Declaration on Media Education, 1982; Paris Agenda, 2007).

The UNESCO projects in teacher education significantly contributed to the incorporation of media competence in teacher education courses and to the growth of topical research on media competence in Latvia. The 12 recommendations developed by UNESCO for media education feature several references to teacher education, indicating that initial teacher training is a key element that should be based on theoretical dimensions and practical skills in media education and that teachers should be familiar with the strategies of media consumption used by the youth (Paris Agenda, 2007; European Parliament, 2008). Due to the fact that the media are more related to people's everyday life, entertainment, communication, etc., it is recommended that the teaching methods for learning media competence be changed, which would not only allow for teaching on the basis of ready-made approaches but would also encourage the involvement of students in the development of the study process, the use of group work, creative and critical thinking, inter-disciplinarity, research and problem-based approach as well as would improve teacher and student cooperation (Buckingham, 2001; Bokova, 2009; Paris Agenda, 2007). However, a comparative study on media competence in the EU concerning Latvian education established that "There is no media education as an official subject in the curriculum, and it is also not officially integrated in other subjects" (EMEDUS project, 2014).

It should be noted that since Latvia's accession to NATO and the EU, Russia's understanding of its national security has undergone significant changes. For instance, the Russian National Security Strategy and the Plan for the Development of Culture and Mass Communication (Министерство культуры Российской Федерации, 2006) call for the need to maintain and strengthen Russia's informative presence in the Baltic countries. However, the 2014 political crisis in Ukraine and the subsequent annexation of Crimea, which also brought cyber-security and disinformation issues into the limelight in Eastern Europe, should be considered an important critical stage for the research and implementation of media competence in basic and secondary education in Latvia. The Plan for Implementation of the Mass Media Policy Guidelines of Latvia 2016-2020 (hereinafter – the Plan) (Cabinet of Ministers, 2016) is focused on featuring

such content in the mass media that contributes to the development of media literacy, supporting the growth of the genre of mass media criticism and the ability of society to critically perceive and assess the content and quality of mass media.

The Plan also aims to develop pre-school children and elementary school pupils' media literacy and to organise events for pupils and youth promoting media literacy and educating them in media literacy by using the debate method. In line with the Plan, seminars for teachers on media literacy were organised and materials for teachers on media literacy issues were drafted. According to the report of the project "Mapping of media literacy practices and actions in EU-28" (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2016), the 20 major projects in Latvia focusing on the development of media competences since 2010 were mainly related to research (9 projects) and end user engagement (4 projects).

The projects mainly focused on strengthening the awareness of issues such as critical thinking and media usage, audio visual content creation, online security risks and the functioning of the media industry across different audiences (professionals – 4 projects, adolescents, and students – 2 projects, children – 2 projects, seniors – 1 project, parents – 1 project and society as a whole – 2 projects).

5.3. Information about media literacy programmes in formal and/or in non-formal education

The final critical phase in the domain of media competence began in 2016 when the National Centre for Education implemented the project entitled "Competency-based approach to education" (Skola2030), the overarching aim of which is to refocus the content of education and the approach to teaching in competence education across all levels of education from pre-school up to secondary school. As part of the project, for the first time in the history of Latvian education criteria, the acquisition of media competence in basic education and secondary education were formulated. Since 2018, media competence as a mandatory part of the curriculum has been included in the State General Secondary Education Standard (Cabinet of Ministers, 2019) and State Basic Education Standard (Cabinet of Ministers, 2018). The acquisition of media competence is integrated in the curricula of different subjects and is based on traditional interpretations of media competence, primarily related to critical thinking, protection of private data and the digital skills of content creation.

5.4. Actors and agents of media related competences: risks and opportunities

Risks: There are still no centralised criteria for the acquisition of media literacy in teacher education, which means that media literacy could be defined very differently in different teacher education programmes.

Opportunities: Media literacy is included in the standards of the state basic education and secondary education, integrating it into different subjects.

5.5. Assessment of media related competencies among citizens

Since 2016, the Plan (Cabinet of Ministers, 2016), has been developed, with specific activities focused on comparable and regular studies of the level of media literacy (Latvijas Fakti, 2017; Latvijas Fakti, 2020), establishing the UNESCO Chair on Media and Information and improving

the understanding of media literacy across different social groups, including mentors, librarians, youth and children, specialists in youth affairs of local governments.

6. Analytical conclusions

In the following table (1), the risks and opportunities identified by analysing separate domains are collected and compared along with main actors and agents identified to find out risk tendencies.

Table 1. Risk tendencies in the Latvian media environment (risks, opportunities, actors, and agents identified).

Risks	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ the context of changing political landscape and relative economic instability, ✦ the low critical, investigative and analytical attitude of media towards government and authorities in general, ✦ mediocre level or lack of support for diversity of opinions and standpoints of society in media, ✦ lack of proper understanding of the role of mass media and therefore, lower value for press freedom, ✦ insufficient development of media regulation, ✦ no effective public organisation for the protection of the media audience, ✦ weak system of media self-regulation, distrust of self-regulatory mechanisms, superficial knowledge of ethics in the professional environment and lack of detailed codes of ethics, ✦ consumerism and commercialisation of the media environment, ✦ undeveloped tradition of professional discussion and lack of discussion format to discuss issues of professional ethics, ✦ low level of wages and social insurance for journalism professionals, ✦ low level of involvement of journalists in professional organisations, limited influence of these organisations, ✦ presence in the market, exposure and trust in Russia's media, especially TV by the significant part of (mainly Russian speaking) the audience, lack of strong products of news and analysis that would attract audiences, especially for the younger audience, ✦ low level of media literacy, ✦ insufficient research on media audiences, ✦ overall concept of media literacy included in the standards of primary and secondary education is not clear, ✦ no centralised criteria for the acquisition of media literacy in teacher education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ reforms introduced (PSM reform, media policy, support to media literacy), ✦ adoption of the Law on Public Electronic Mass Media and Administration Thereof in 2020, which envisages the establishment of a Public Electronic Mass Media Council and Ombudsperson, ✦ detailed and high-quality codes of ethics and conduct in PSM, ✦ relatively high educational level of journalists, ✦ Media Support Fund and other external donors organised to develop serious analytical and research journalism projects, ✦ growing role of public service media in the journalism labour, ✦ relative strength in terms of exposure and trust to PSM, ✦ media policy is ensuring the development of quality content and media and encouraging initiatives for media literacy development, ✦ media literacy is included in the standard, integrating it into different subjects.
<p>Actors: parliament, government institutions (e.g., Ministries), National Electronic Mass Media Council of Latvia (NEPLP), courts, media organisations, advertisers, Centre of Educational Content, Public Media Council (+ PSM Ombudsperson from 2022)</p>	

Agents:

primary: individual journalists, politicians, media owners, educators, individual social media users (influencers)

corporate: LJA, various organisations in support of media literacy (libraries, archives, NGOs), political PR specialists, social media groups and platforms, e.g., manabalss.lv

Risk tendencies:

- ✦ the level of understanding and implementation of legal and ethical norms has until now been relatively low;
- ✦ media concentration and commercialisation, clientele-like relationship between journalists and their sources;
- ✦ civic engagement, consumerism and inter-passivity of the audience;
- ✦ low level and recognition of media role in social life and narrowed understanding of media literacy in front of populist strategic communication.

Opportunity tendencies:

- ✦ media policy supports
- ✦ Council of Media Ethics (2018);
- ✦ PSM ombudsperson (2022); support to media literacy in primary education.

It can be seen that, in the last 20 years, Latvia has finalised the democratic reforms in the media environment started after 1991 and has built up the formal structures needed to support deliberative communication as well as a network of actors involved (and observed) to ensure it includes parliament, government institutions, National Electronic Mass Media Council of Latvia, courts, media organisations, PR companies & advertisers, Centre of Educational Content, Public Media Council (last but not least, the position of PSM Ombudsperson was introduced in 2022). It is largely up to the implementation of this framework, e.g., acting of different agents revealed shortages and weaknesses resulting in risks arising. Primary agents such as individual journalists, politicians, media owners, educators, individual social media users (especially, more and more professionalised field of influencers) can be successful in supporting deliberative communication, but as the research of the field is limited it is difficult to conclude that this agency has used such properly to meet the goal (of deliberative communication). Even more, the context of commercialisation and clientelism in journalism, influence of political PR actively using social media and the low level of media literacy and understanding of its importance, don't allow primary agents to increase their capacity. Corporate agents such as, for example, journalist organisations LAJ and LUJ, various organisations in support of media literacy (libraries, archives, NGOs), PR industry, social media groups and platforms provide sporadic and mal-coordinated support in this situation.

Main three risk tendencies identified include:

1. In spite of formal elaboration of the legal and ethical system, the level of understanding and implementation of legal and ethical norms has until now been relatively low;
2. High level of media concentration and commercialisation, which leads to clientele-like relationship between journalists and their sources;
3. Low civic engagement, consumerism and inter-passivity of the audience connected to a low level and recognition of the media's role in social life (functionality of news is not very much studied, but related research shows a more consumerist attitude to both traditional and social media), and narrowed understanding of media literacy (as digital literacy only) with a risk of appeal of the global wave of populist engagement based on the usage of social media.
4. However, the positive developments are related to the development of media policy and establishment of the Council of Media Ethics (2018) and PSM ombudsperson (2022), as well as support to media literacy in primary education.

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