

The Ambiguity of Public Cynicism in Democracy

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Abstract. In terms of the media, there are various means of influencing the audience by informing and conditioning its attitude or forming its mood. Amongst these means, attention should be paid to scepticism and cynicism, leading to destructive, critical attitude, doubt or denial. Cynicism is the questioning or denial of what is generally accepted or accepted by the majority and some particular group. The text emphasizes the dual possible moral evaluation of cynicism: on the one hand, the justifiability and usefulness of cynicism in one situation, on the other hand, its destructive and misleading effect in another, weakening support for social and moral order. The representation of the unveiling of the monument of Gunārs Astra in the media on 20 January 2022 is analysed here as a case of misleading strategic communication.

Keywords: cynicism, ethics, Gunārs Astra, strategic communication, deception

Introduction

The influence of the media extends far beyond neutrally informing the audience about a particular current event. Depending on how the event or process is strategically represented, it resonates reflexively, emotionally, and analytically in the audience. This is how the respective mood of society or its part is formed, both by expressing support, recognition, promoting participation and cooperation in a democratic society, and by instigating non-acceptance, denial, disfavour, doubt and disbelief. Cynicism is one of the means of instigating criticism, disbelief, denial, expressing a destructive attitude towards a topical event or towards the generally accepted social or moral order. Its assessment can be recognized as situationally ambivalent. In certain cases, cynicism is morally justified – when it is used for weakening a dogmatic or outdated assumption, habit, unfounded belief, when the time has come for replacement and “reevaluation of values” (Nietzsche). At times, cynical attitude helps to effectively reveal the true nature of hidden political interests. The destructive role of cynicism, which manifests itself in

particular situations of risk, crisis or threat to democratic and reasonable values, where consensus, unity and joint action is needed, should be evaluated differently. A cynical attitude can then mislead and cause harm by discouraging participation, strong shared beliefs and action, thereby unjustifiably dividing society. The current article considers a particular case – the unveiling of the monument to the freedom fighter of Soviet-era Gunārs Astra, which took place in the crisis situation of the pandemic caused by Covid-19 on 20 January 2022.

The study employs case analysis, as well as direct observation of the event and its interpretation.

Results

Although the concept of cynicism has been known since ancient culture, the attention dedicated to its manifestations in the media and its research has increased since the end of the 20th century, when the research conducted by Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen H. Jamieson on the spiral of cynicism was published in 1996–1997. The authors considered this phenomenon in the field of media in connection with the US election campaign, evaluation of the performance of Congress, and media cynicism in the attitude towards politicians, political advertising, as well as health care reform (Capella, Jamieson 1997). The authors describe a spiral of cynicism that starts in the media and affects the audience in its attitude towards politics and the media. Attention is drawn to the media's strategic framings of politics, which are mainly directed against the selfish interests of politicians, critically evaluating them: "When the motivations of each side in a campaign or debate are coloured by accusations of self-interested action, one response may be to dismiss both sides and eventually to dis-miss the process itself. Cynicism may be a rational response to the flow of strategic message" (Capella, Jamieson 1996, 81). Cynicism spreads and appears in the attitude of the audience towards politics and is also directed towards the media themselves, fostering distrust of the audience in state institutes and their decisions as such.

Mediated cynicism challenges and aggressively insults what is recognized as valuable by society or any of its groups, hence, its diagnosis is important for investigating the public mood, and especially in studies of audience trust. The reference to and connection with cynicism clarifies the reasons for mistrust in politics, law, morality, art and other social spheres. A distinction is made between reasonable and unreasonable reliability. Unreasonable and unsubstantiated trust, which frequently, especially in politics, is the result of misleading campaigns and political advertising, is characteristic of credulity and gullibility, while democracy without support, positive attitude and trust is unthinkable. A cynical attitude undermines reliability and trust, alienates, distances, – by protecting against credulity, and in other cases, by discouraging from supporting

joint and solidary solutions. Irony, ridicule, farce, sarcasm, comism are rhetorical tools of a cynical attitude.

Manifestations of cynicism can be observed in the Latvian media and these can be evaluated in different ways. During election campaigns, when the public space is flooded with excesses of political advertising, irony and sarcasm regarding the populist promises of certain parties or the praise and self-aggrandizement of candidates is an effective way to discourage potential voters from misleading positivity. The popular comments of Aivars Ozoliņš of the periodical “*Ir*” or the programmes of the Latvian public television channel “*Aizliegtais paņēmieni*” (“Forbidden Method”), “*Kas notiek Latvijā*” (“What is Happening in Latvia”) and others help the audience to perceive the true interests of some political or business players, which are hidden from the public, and this is achieved most effectively through the means of cynical rhetoric. Cynicism can be recognized as a particularly effective way to reveal lies, deception and falsehood in the environment perpetrated by the supporters of contemporary Russia’s imperial goals and the unjust war in Ukraine, and present these revelations to the audience. The exposure of bureaucratic thinking, stupid decisions, exaggeration, credulity and other inappropriate and harmful activities in democracy should be recognized as worthy of a clearly cynical attitude.

However, sometimes media cynicism represents a serious damage to democracy. To substantiate the aforementioned assumption, let us consider a recent case of the manifestation of cynicism. We will use a real and mediated event that enables us to observe open destructive negativity directed against the government and its decisions during the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and against positively unifying values, as manifested in the attitude towards the member of the Latvian resistance movement and freedom fighter under the Soviet occupation – Gunārs Astra (1931–1988) at his 90th birthday commemorations. As the pivotal event, this article views the unveiling of the monument designed by the artist Gļebs Panteļejevs in Riga on 20 January 2022 in front of the former Supreme Court of the Latvian SSR. In this building, on 15 December 1983, Gunārs Astra gave the momentous final statement in the trial, in which he was repeatedly sentenced to seven years of imprisonment in a strict regime correctional labour colony in the Perm region of Russia and five years of exile (Astra 2021, 8). The statement of Gunārs Astra given in the court is a document of international consequence, exposing the Soviet totalitarian regime. Its global importance is precisely described in the introductory words of Egils Levits, published in five languages (Latvian, English, German, French, Russian) in the book “*Pēdējais vārds*” (“Final Statement”) released at the end of 2021:

Today, Astra’s “Final statement” retains its significance. in Latvia as the eloquent allocution of a courageous patriot who was ready to sacrifice his life for his

country. From European and broader international perspective, Astra's impassioned defence of free speech, human rights, democracy and people's right to self determination will be sure to strike a resonant chord with freedom loving individuals all across the world, regardless of where they live and regardless of what language they speak (Astra 2021, 35).

The remarkable role of Gunārs Astra in bringing to light the fact of the occupation and russification of Latvia and in the open analytical substantiation revealing the totalitarian crimes is evidenced by the gratitude and appreciation of the people: on 19 April 1988, his grave was filled up by pouring the earth by hands (Astra 2021, 9). The media followed and reported on the commemorative events of Gunārs Astra in 2021–2022 which were organised to mark his 90th anniversary (Gunārs Astra was born on 22 October 1931). Among these were several events organized by the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, conferences, films, the publication of the book “*Pēdējais vārds*” (“Final Statement”) proposed by Arnis Šablovskis and other organized events. The film by Lauris Gundars “*Drosmes diena*” (“The Day of Courage”) was made about Gunārs Astra and his consequential and courageous speech in the Supreme Court Hall. The creator of the film, Lauris Gundars, has connected it with the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The media is also following the making of the next film, produced by Sandijs Semjonovs, about the importance of resistance to undemocratic power and its decisions.

The central event of the commemoration should have been unveiling of the already mentioned monument “*Nebaidies!*” (“Do Not Fear!”) created by sculptor Gļebs Panteļejevs. The unveiling had been repeatedly postponed and finally set to take place on the Remembrance Day of Barricades on 20 October 2022. However, there were brutal attempts to disrupt the solemn unveiling event by a group of politically recruited people, who whistled and shouted “Freedom!”, and with hostile shouts directed against the Latvian government burst into the monument's space at the moment of the unveiling, under the pretext of protesting against vaccination and the restrictions imposed due to the pandemic, loudly and furiously disturbing the speeches of the President Egils Levits and the Minister of Justice Jānis Bordāns. The group's destructive presence at the commemorative event can be seen as cynical brutality, to which the Minister of Justice Jānis Bordāns, trying hard to overcome the chaos caused by the protesters, responded with the words: “In a sense, I am ashamed and it is humiliating to stand here and hear that a part of the nation, which is obsessed, and evidently represents the minions of the occupiers, wants to disrupt this event, for which Gunārs Astra has fallen and died” (LSM.lv ziņu redakcija, Kozins 2022).

The cynical intrusion into the memorial event dedicated to Gunārs Astra did not receive unanimous condemnation from the wider media and society.

The destructive event attempting to undermine the unveiling of the monument was not covered up in the media, however, neither did it receive an appropriate emotional assessment or a deeper critical examination. Its connection with a similar political protest that took place in Lithuania at about the same time was noted only in the short article by “Re:Check”, which on the portal LSM.lv was combined under one heading with a fact check dedicated to the mayor of the city of Riga (Puriņa 2022). In the Latvian public television news programme “*Panorāma*”, which is available and given account of on LSM.lv, the chaos which was caused has been touched upon in few lines: “During the speeches of Egils Levits and Minister of Justice Jānis Bordāns (New Conservative Party), some anti-government protest participants and opponents of vaccination tried to disrupt the solemn event with loud whistling” (LSM.lv News editorial, Kozins 2022). The same news item also contains the ambiguous statement of an interviewee regarding freedom, which is more in line with the strategy of ‘whistlers’, as the media call it, rather than with the historical understanding of freedom in the context of Soviet totalitarianism and the struggle against oppression in the life of Gunārs Astra.

Very soon after, the public media portal LSM.lv published the text of the poet and journalist Rvīns Varde, written together with the portal’s journalist Māra Uzuliņa. The text is also available in an abbreviated reading by Guntis Suharevskis, accompanying the voice with visual animation. In the publication, in the form of a naive fairy tale purportedly addressed to children (the genre was named “*asaciņa*” by authors (this can be literally translated as “fishbone”) – in a word play with “*pasaciņa*”, meaning a little fairy tale), the details of the life of Gunārs Astra are ironically reproduced in nine sentences along with the story of the protracted and unsuccessful creation of the monument, its complicated unveiling process, while in passing mentioning the murder of the fighter’s brother in 2019. The text omits everything related to courage of Gunārs Astra which transcended the limits of prosaic everyday life, his belief in freedom and Latvia’s sovereignty, the power of righteous protest, everything that can be recognized as admirable and heroic, as it was confirmed in life, interrogation, court cases and two arrests. The freedom fighter was made into a simple prisoner who did not like the Soviet government, stating that the dislike was mutual, so what followed was an apparently random deportation ‘somewhere’. The relationship of mutual dislike with power has been emphasized, thus substantiating the ensuing punishment – isolation and passive ‘doing time’ in prisons. Ordinarity and commonplaceness are underlined not only by flower cultivation mentioned in the text as being done between arrests, but also by the naturalistic emphasis of corporeal and mortal existence, which concludes the short biography: “after his death, his entrails were taken out and they were hidden somewhere” (Varde, Uzuliņa 2022). As is known, the mention of entrails is one of the classic rhetorical manifestations of a comic attitude in the work “Gargantua and Pantagruel” by the French Renaissance writer

François Rabelais (Rabelais, 1483/4–1555). The vocabulary of the comic genre is chosen to render the outstanding and admirable as mundane and commonplace to the greatest possible extent, thus debasing and erasing any value, deconstructing the highly honourable stand, and mockingly or contemptuously abnegating it. The deconstruction ostensibly questions the construction of the monument, noting that it was done reluctantly and with extensive delays. Reading George Orwell's "1984", a book banned during the Soviet era, which has been put forward as a justification for the second arrest, draws a mundane analogy for the average reader, likening it to the availability of popular literature in Internet comments today. A very naturalistic expression of the corporeal existence of a mortal man by means of death in mysterious circumstances is given, ending with the phrase "his entrails were taken out" (Varde, Uzuliņa 2022). In the text, the verb 'disliked' is repeated six times in the past form, which fulfils the dominant structuring function of the short text. This is applied both to the aforementioned relations with power and to the monument's protracted creation, its postponement and to the setbacks besieging its unveiling, which is the second thematic strain of the little fairy tale. Thus, this piece ironically and cynically deconstructs a quality transcending the mundane, – the admirable, the positive, the honourable and the democratically valuable. The cynical downgrading and misleading deletion of the hero's consequence is accomplished in a narrative characterised by ridicule, depicting an ordinary, randomly chosen person with a failed monument, its unfortunate opening, a failed life and its equally accidental and unpleasant ending.

Conclusions

The attempt to cynically impede the positive impact of the heroic record in the situation of the Covid-19 pandemic epidemic, which was followed a month later by a new, much more severe crisis of the Ukrainian war caused by Russia, can be cited as an example where cynical attitude suppresses the opportunity to lead society to a unifying experience of courage, endurance and strength. The exceptional life story of Gunārs Astra helps to comprehend the inhuman and violent nature of Soviet totalitarianism, which still serves as an explanation of the imperial policy of the Russian Empire, which enables us to understand the causes of the Ukrainian war, its barbaric course and consequences. The cynical intervention against the restrictions of the pandemic and the government in the commemorative event and the publication by Rvīns Varde spread doubts, alienate, express indifference, which precludes contributing to the demand for positive emotions in society that is so acutely necessary and irreplaceable. This can be recognized as a deliberate misleading which prevents the formation of a positively cohesive social memory. At the same time, cynical misleading becomes a dangerous alienation, a deterrent from active involvement in the united participation of the whole society in a crisis process which involves risks.

Undoubtedly, laughter, irony, comedy, different opinions, criticism are suitable and supported in the democratic landscape of public space. All this serves the diversity of opinions involved in decision-making, balances them, forestalling pomposity, dogmatism, promotes critical thinking and pluralism, prevents one-sided thinking by using the democratic right to freedom of speech. However, ridicule and ironic, like freedom of speech, have limits. They are indicated in the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, Article 116, which allows restrictions on freedom of expression “in circumstances provided for by law in order to protect the rights of other people, the democratic structure of the State, and public safety, welfare and morals” (Latvijas Republikas Satversme). One does not even have to go as far as directly undermining security, prosperity and virtue, this can be effectuated by turning the worthy of genuine respect into something naively ridiculous and using it for amusement, responding to the demand for entertainment of the crisis-weary part of society.

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