

Political Communication Culture of Political Journalists Representing the Press in Unstable Democracy of Latvia. 2021–2022

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Abstract. As a state of democratic parties and a flawed democracy, the Republic of Latvia is characterized by political communication processes that do not contribute to the process of constructing a participatory political culture. The current paper offers the analysis of publications of the political journalists of the private printed weekly magazines “*Ir*” and “*Sestdiena*” about the work of political parties, the government and the parliament in 2021 and the beginning of 2022 in order to understand the meaning of the publications and the connections between the meanings with the help of hermeneutic analysis as a qualitative research method of communication science, as well as explain the participation of political journalists in political communication by constructing or reconstructing subcultures of Latvian political culture. Journalists of both aforementioned legacy or traditional media criticize the work of the government and parties as ineffective, but do not appeal to representatives of civic citizens and political subcultures of critical citizens, calling for civil and political activity, reducing everything to the behind-the-scenes and open activities of political parties and members of parliament as they prepare for the next parliamentary elections. The editorial lines of both periodicals differ; however, their political journalists accept the model of elite democracy prevailing in RL and the traditional role of private media in it, without serious objections. Both “*Ir*”, representing the pro-European, pro-Atlantic orientation, and “*Sestdiena*”, whose editorial line mainly has centrist populist, pro-business accents, are unable to satisfy the demand of some of their readers, as evidenced by the rather steady trend of decrease in their readership. There are no publications in these periodicals that would attempt to analyse the causes of the decrease in the number of readers and subscribers, not to mention the concretization of this process in connection with the four subcultures of Latvian political culture.

Keywords: hermeneutics, communication, parties, political communication culture, system, magazines

Introduction

In the “Democracy Index 2021. The China challenge” created by the British research and analytical “The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited” (EIU), the democratic state system of the Republic of Latvia along with the political systems of Estonia and Lithuania is ranked in the group of unstable (flawed) democracies consisting of 53 countries of the world. The Baltic states are included in the group of 28 Eastern European countries, which “as a whole continues to be held back by a weak political culture, difficulties in creating institutions aimed at safeguarding the rule of law and persistent issues with corruption” (DI 2021, 11). Estonia, Czech Republic and Slovenia “come closest to qualifying as a “full democracy”,” however “the absence of a single “full democracy” in eastern Europe is striking and demands an explanation that takes account of the region’s unique experience under the domination of the Soviet Union after 1945 and during its post-Communist transition after 1989”, furthermore, “the region continues to struggle with core weaknesses in institutions and political culture” (DI 2021, 38). In addition to the 16 unstable democracies, the group of Eastern European countries, according to the EIU classification, in 2021 included four more hybrid and eight authoritarian regimes.

The diversity of measurements of democracy (Pickel, Pickel 2022, 128–129) suggests that “democracy is not, and has never been a single, coherent ideal” and therefore “consequently the roles assigned to the media, and the particular demands placed on them, vary according to the democratic ideal at hand”, which, in turn, prompted Håkansson and Mayerhöffer to seek solution to this normative problem in media research using “three broad democratic ideals that share core values”, which includes attachment “to three specific functions of the media in a democratic society: 1) an elitist model of democracy in which the power is delegated to the elites and in which the most important function of the media is transparency; 2) an electoral-representative model of a pluralist democracy that corresponds to the media function of group representation; 3) a democracy that favours the participatory ideal, in which the empowerment of the citizens is the prime function” (Håkansson, Mayerhöffer 2014, 128).

No less diversity characterises the range of theoretical explanations and approaches of political communication and political culture. Donges and Jarren (Donges, Jarren 2022, 57), for instance, point out that the political system, according to “the theory of self-referential systems, is not the centre of society”, but exists alongside other systems, therefore “politics cannot “lead” society as a whole and even individual subsystems, because for this purpose it would have to interfere with the self-referentiality of other systems and thus be destroyed.”

On the question of the place of political communication in the political system, Pfetsch represents “idea of political communication as a system”, corresponding

to Parsons' structural functionalism systems theory, because the system of political communication "emerges through the interaction, interdependences and continuous exchange between the media and politics" "vis-à-vis a common public audience", including political system's and media system's "structural contexts" and "cultural dimension" or "orientations, attitudes and norms of actors in political communication roles on both sides of the exchange", which in turn is a sufficient basis for "aggregated attitudinal patterns" to be "termed as "political communication culture" of a specific country" (Pfetsch 2014, 15). Pfetsch sees the picture of political culture as incomplete "unless it covers communication aspects", because "from a communication science perspective, it is key to know how political communication constructs and reconstructs political culture" (Pfetsch 2014, 19). "...journalists in leading positions of the national media and political actors at the national level" are to be studied according to this approach, however, political actors should be distinguished into "politicians in parties, parliament or government", on the one hand, and "their political spokespersons or communication advisors or pundits", on the other (Pfetsch 2014, 20).

Swedish researchers Duvold, Berglund and Ekman in the introduction of their book dedicated to the political culture of the Baltic conclude that "it is a moot question whether integrated national community can be established when the groups [linguistically cultural – O. S.] fail to agree on basic issues related to identity and belonging" (Duvold *et al.* 2020, 10–11). The authors use the definition of political culture in their study, which "seems to have gained common recognition" is based in publications by Almond and Verba: "Political culture is the set of attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about politics current in a nation at a given time. This political culture has been shaped by the nation's history and by the ongoing processes of social, economic, and political activity" (Duvold *et al.* 2020, 96). Accordingly, a typology of political subcultures is proposed, based on two more 'politically' formulated dimensions "satisfaction with politics (orientations related to the political system) and individual political competence (orientations related to role of the self within the political system", thus obtaining four political subcultures of Baltic respondents based on survey data: "informed and satisfied respondents [...] as civic citizens or civic-minded respondents" (8%); "combination of negative orientations towards the political system and high political competence [...] as critical citizens" (11%); "with critical orientations towards the political system and low political competence" or "group of respondents as disillusioned" (61%); "a combination of positive orientations towards the political system and low political competence", therefore "rather be close to political indifference" (21%) (Duvold *et al.* 2020, 117–118). The researchers note that "in Latvia, the civic citizen-oriented respondents are almost non-existent" (Duvold *et al.* 2020, 119). At the end of the book, its authors formulate a thesis that is no less relevant today "populists in the Baltic states", who "have more

often than not been centrist and compliant” and consequently “a new brand of populism is about to take a hold of the voters: anti-elitist, anti-liberal and anti-EU are some of the words that characterise the latest incarnation of Baltic populism” (Duvold *et al.* 2020, 211–212).

The German political scientist Heinemann-Grüder writes about the “erosion of democratic regimes” and finds that the paradigm of the global victory march of democracy is being questioned in a considerable number of countries, dissatisfaction with democracy is high in Eastern, Western and Southern Europe, – the exception are the Scandinavian countries like Sweden. Perceptions of the actual actions by governments are more important to satisfaction with democracy than election opportunities every four or five years (Heinemann-Grüder 2022, 125). In terms of academic and political discussions, the problem of regime erosion is also related to prejudices about the functioning of party democracy and the party state. The German political scientist Decker, for example, believes that although it “cannot not be precisely determined” from which point party democracy turns into a party state, it must be recognized that there are “four areas” in which to talk about the ‘intertwining’ of the party and the state, namely, 1) ‘personal intertwining’ (*personelle Verflechtung* – parliament, government, head of state, constitutional court); 2) “funding of parties by the state;” 3) ‘involvement of parties in the state by means of legislation’ (*rechtliche Einbindung*) and 4) in addition, ‘linking the party state with the idea of the formation of political cartels’ by some authors, which is happening, for instance, in Italy and Austria. Decker also points out that Leibholz, a judge of the Federal Constitutional Court and a teacher of state law in Göttingen, with his “party state theory” persistently attempted to ‘legitimize the claim of party-comprehensive rule,’ considering the party state as a ‘rationalized form of expression of plebiscitary democracy’ (Decker 2018, 89–96).

Methodology

In connection with hermeneutics as one of the basic methods of understanding in the qualitative studies of communication science, it should be emphasized that with its assistance, following the hermeneutic circle of understanding and explanation by Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) (Wagner 2021, 174) or cycles of spiral, based on the qualitative analysis of political journalists’ texts and the presented theoretical approaches to Latvia’s political democracy, political culture and political communication, one can try to understand or examine the symbols of meaning and contexts of meaning contained in the messages of political journalists, as well as aspire to explain the features of political communication culture offered or constructed in the messages of political journalists of the selected weekly magazines – “*Ir*” (“It is”) and “*Sestdiena*” (“Saturday”).

Understanding is an act of insight, and the insight must be focused on forms of meaning (*Sinngebilde*) and contexts of meaning. Two axioms also apply to understanding: “interchangeability of opinions”, which means “the same experience in the common world” of fellow human beings, and “conformity of actuality systems” as the ‘empirically’ ‘identical’ interpretation of actual or potentially common objects and events. Therefore, concludes Wagner, “to understand therefore means to explain the meaning (*Sinn*) of something given as an expression of assigning a meaning on the part of the doer” (Wagner 2021, 158). The one who aims to understand the text must take into account the overcoming of the so-called hermeneutic difference that exists between the text and the interpreter, which can be overcome or reduced by the tendency of rapprochement, which is also called the “fusion of horizons.” Overcoming the hermeneutic difference, which takes place in the cycle of repeated cognitive recognition and acceptance of knowledge, has acquired the designation of the “hermeneutic circle”. There are different understandings of the nature of the hermeneutic circle. In the explanation of the hermeneutic circle proposed by Ricoeur, understanding is linked to explanation, which means that the analyst of texts explains them by attributing the meaning of texts to causes or reasons. The hermeneutic circle is then a condition of the structure of knowledge, “because in the field of meaningful action we can ultimately explain if we have previously understood”, but “adequate explanation therefore promotes further understanding as a basis for ever more precise explanation” (Wagner 2021, 175). A significant problem in working with journalists’ texts is the fact that the political journalists of “*Ir*” and “*Sestdiena*” practically do not write about the culture of political communication directly and unequivocally, – neither in connection with their professional work, nor in a broader perspective. Therefore, it is mainly about the attitudes, opinions and beliefs of political journalists, which are included in the process of constructing and reconstructing political culture through political communication.

Results

The ‘procedure’ of hermeneutic understanding and explanation will be subjected to the abundant range of publications of magazine “*Ir*” commentator Aivars Ozoliņš, trying to establish ‘forms of meaning’ (*Sinngebilde*) and ‘interconnections of meaning’ (*Sinnzusammenhänge*). The time period covered by the current study encompasses all the issues of 2021 and the first ten issues of 2022. The commentaries by Ozoliņš are contained practically in every issue of the magazine, and therefore the author can be considered a kind of ‘tuning-fork’ of the magazine’s political communication. As the first in terms of importance, the ‘forms of meaning’ of Ozoliņš should be formulated using the thesis regarding “the government of crises and crises in the government”. Ozoliņš began 2021

with the observation that “Kariņš’ government has two years and a **permanent political crisis** [this and the following emphases are mine – O. S.]” or “the usual aggregate state of instability”, in order to conclude that K. Kariņš’ government “does not really have an alternative” (Ozoliņš 2021a). In his commentaries, Ozoliņš quite regularly criticizes the activities of the party “Harmony” (*Saskaņa*) and “Union of Greens and Farmers” (*Zaļo un zemnieku savienība, ZZS*), which represent the parliamentary opposition, as well as the “National Union” (*Nacionālā apvienība, NA*) operating in the government, which is suspected of ousting “New Unity” (*Jaunā Vienotība, JV*) from the government.

In his commentary “Covid-19 test”, Pauls Raudseps expresses much sharper and more conceptual opinion about the Latvian political party system. In his opinion, “the **weakness of Latvian parties threatens the country’s ability** to overcome both this and other crises.” Raudseps described the manifestations of ‘party weakness’: firstly, “the desire of the actual leaders of the parties to avoid responsibility for any potentially unpopular decisions”, citing as an example NA ministers, “who fulfil the party’s task, but do not determine its course”; secondly, “the parties have a microscopic number of members and a habit of communicating with voters only through the lenses of TV cameras”; thirdly, “funding of parties from the budget has given an opportunity to get rid of the illegitimate interests of sponsors, but has not created any impetus for parties to take deeper roots in society”, and therefore, “mechanisms must be found to link funding with the number of active members”, because otherwise “in a parliamentary republic, **the weakness of parties can soon turn into the weakness of the state**” (Raudseps 2021a).

At the end of October, in the commentary “Lists of culprits”, Ozoliņš, on the one hand, concludes that “the search for the culprits for the Covid-19 disaster is gaining momentum”, but on the other hand, he himself creates his own list, which includes “first of all, the government”, secondly, “the lobby machine of traders and businessmen, which pushed experts aside and began to dictate government decisions”, thirdly, “the local and Russian “political technologists”” who had started to structure the “chaos of the “information space”” for their own purposes with the usual basic message – Latvia is a failed country”, as well as NA, “which of all parties in the *Saeima* has the greatest merit in achieving the current crisis”. However, Ozoliņš concludes, “**the main reason for the current crisis is the inability of politicians to be leaders**” (Ozoliņš 2021b).

The interviews with the leader of the People’s Front and publicist Dainis Īvāns and journalist Jānis Domburs, working for LTV, published in the double issue of “*Ir*” on 18 November are considered to be the characterization of the context of the ‘forms of meaning’ of the activities of the Latvian government and political parties proposed by Ozoliņš. Īvāns “does not have a feeling of depression and hopelessness or aggressiveness regarding the events around him.” He is proud

of the fact that “Latvian nation” after the Third Awakening, irreversibly consolidates us as a part of Western civilization.” However, “each generation must vote anew for independence, for Latvianness and whether we want to live in a free and democratic country.” Īvāns concedes that it is possible that “all societies have a rather short memory if there is **an absence of spiritual elite** that urges and reminds us that “somehow we have lost touch with the power of Awakening.” The interview, which is permeated with a pronounced note of national romanticism, ends with Īvāns’ caution to everyone that “there are many people, authorities and systems that want to tell us that we are not worthy of our country and that we do not have a right to it” (Miķelsons 2021a).

Domburs, as a professional of analytical political journalism, asserts in a “brief answer” given within an interview, that his “goal has been democracy and remains democracy”, but with a significant remark about not holding “a high opinion about the level of development of our democracy.” The level follows from the question “why are we muddling along in the last places in Europe in all aspects?” Domburs himself offers several answers. As the first formulated thesis, – “it is important for **the public to understand** that the **political struggle is not amongst the politicians**. In that fight, everyone is together in the arena. Everyone is there.” This is in clear contradiction with the conclusion of Swedish researchers about the virtually non-existing political subculture of “civic citizens” in Latvia.

Domburs believes that “the critical mass of people is not 50% of the population, not even 5%, they comprise maybe 0.5% – a few hundred, a thousand. But they are **the elite who say** – we are aware that we are the ones who have to do something more here, apart from what we do professionally every day. And very importantly – we don’t know the right answer, but we have to think about it.” A model of elitist democracy, but with a weak elite. Domburs “is concerned that the party system moves in a circle, if not a downward spiral” because “overall, **parties have remained at the level of groups**.” Even after the 14th *Saeima* elections on 1 October 2022, it may be that “systemically, **the monopoly of power** is held in the hands of 2/3 of the parliament, which means that **there is no competition**. Because there is no other government, there is no alternative offer.” Therefore, “as a result – backwoods.” Normal backwoods of Europe.” Domburs does not see any guides to the “catch-up modernization” of Latvia.

And finally, “in general, it is historically an immense problem – that the media is not stronger”, hence, LTV and Latvian Radio should become “an incubator where, under better conditions, a greater number of people develop journalistically,” thus preserving the possibility of escaping “deep shit with the concept of the fourth power”. The interview concludes with Domburs’ appeal to the readers not only to realize “that we have a state”, but to think more about “where is the country going?” (Ločmele 2021).

The first issue of “*Ir*” of 2022 contained an interview of Ločmele and Ozoliņš with the Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš, from which, in the aspect of ‘inter-connections of meaning’ of political communication and political culture, three thoughts expressed by Kariņš can be singled out: firstly, even though there is no “reliable data”, “most people, who end up in hospitals are Russian speakers” and “this roughly coincides with people who have not yet become citizens in our country and **do not believe in the state as such**”, which “is a **huge social problem**.” Covid brings this problem into light, but it is 50 years old, for 30 years little addressed. Our society is not homogenous”. Kariņš emphasizes that “we live in a country where the press and the public have the opportunity to change the course of the government, not the other way around. And the government is self-elected.” The third thought was about the elections and Europe or the EU: “Nothing much has changed in the elections over 30 years – there is always at least one force in the *Saeima*, and probably in the next one there will be several who **do not agree with the basic course oriented towards Europe, towards the open market**”, but for Latvia to be “part of the European Union”, “the state needs two things – time and peace” (Ločmele, Ozoliņš 2022).

The emphases are placed in a different way by Raudseps in a comment about ten years since the referendum on the national language, and poetess, writer, playwright Māra Zālīte in an interview with Laura Dumbere. Raudseps accuses the “**political elite** of Latvia” and politicians in general of fear, the inability to “predict the possible reaction of people to various decisions”, which is vitally important, because “if the citizens do not want to defend the state of Latvia and its values, neither the introduction nor the core of the Constitution will be able to protect it” (Raudseps 2022b).

Zālīte rejects criticism for “supporting Kariņš” on *Facebook* “a year ago” and condemns the “insistent defamation of the president” as a “deliberate campaign” with the aim of “leading the public to the position that everything is bad, the prime minister and the president are useless”, that Latvia is “a failed state”, because “it is to someone’s advantage that **our ethnic and national community** becomes weak.” When asked about the “threatening war in Ukraine” which was the case at that time, Zālīte answered without hesitation and very directly: “We clearly know who today’s Molotov is. But who will turn out to be today’s Ribbentrop – Macron, Scholz or someone else. Europe is in trouble because its material interests involving gas and oil, and moral values collide” (Dumbere 2022).

With the beginning of the Russia’s war in Ukraine, every issue of “*Ir*” carries the topics concerning war, both in materials from and about Ukraine, and in connection with the activities of Latvian political parties. Public media ombud Anda Rožukalne in an interview with Māra Miķelsone warns that “mutual lack of understanding and non-cooperation can contribute to what has taken place in

Latvia in the last seven years [2015–2022. – O.S.] – **deterioration of the quality of democracy**, because “if there is no conversation, then part of the media, which depends on gathering an audience of the moment, turns into **populist media** that very promptly labels the good ones and the bad ones.” Rožukalne implicitly agrees with Domburs’ idea about public media, saying that “we jump all the time in a short exchange of information and opinions, and do not go further” “promoting coverage of various political processes” because “**smart and analytical political journalism** is lacking” (Miķelsone 2022b). On the other hand, Swiss and German media researchers point out that the demand for high-quality journalism is decreasing in a part of the society, or it chooses not to consume its products.

The weekly magazine “*Sestdiena*” does not have an author who would systematically search for the ‘forms of meaning’ in the internal political activities of Latvian political parties, the government and the parliament with the same systematicity as Ozoliņš. According to the number of publications, Sarmīte Kolāte should be considered the leading political journalist, the author of newspaper “*Diena*” Atis Rozentāls also writes about the topics pertaining to *Saeima* election, while Egils Zirnis, “*Diena*” commentator Agnese Margēviča, Jolanta Plauka and editor-in-chief Lauma Spridzāne write about other current affairs of politics. A defining feature of the editorial line in 2021 was the survey data of the Internet survey panel “Snapshots” in almost every issue on political or politicized issues. Another typical feature is that all authors who write about topics of Latvian political life quite regularly refer to the co-owner and co-founder of the public relations company “*Mediju Tilts*”, political scientist and political sales or political marketing specialist in one person, Filips Rajeviskis. The interview of Zirnis with Rajeviskis in March 2021, on the one hand, provides the readers with the characterisation of the political parties and the state of the government, but on the other hand, outlines the editorial line of “*Sestdiena*”, which essentially means constructing political subcultures of indifference and disappointment in Latvia by means of political communication as the problem of the government and the parties forming it.

Rajeviskis’ scheme of the political situation is based on a series of conclusions about the “instability of the government” because “the signals from there are very chaotic.” The “prime minister’s personality” is to blame for the government’s “fidgeting” and therefore “of course, the prime minister’s party suffers the most.” Responding to Zirnis question about whether it would not be better to “allow only those who give one cent more to the state than they receive from it to vote”, which would mean a property qualification, Rajeviskis answered that “**elections should be made an obligation**” and “**people should be compelled to delve deeper** and exercise their voting rights” (Zirnis 2021a).

The activities of the Minister of Health, Daniels Pavļuts, attracted special attention of the editorial board and Kolāte. The topic of the minister is especially broached at the end of 2021, when on the eve of the 18 November, not only the cover of the magazine was adorned with the inscription “Pavļuts’ *salto mortale*” with the accompanying question whether the minister “has remained in his chair” and “the government crisis is also over”, but in the column of the editor-in-chief Spridzāne, bearing the title “*Zolīte* [a card game] *mortale* in the style of Latvian politicians” one could read a statement full of accusations that “currently instead of important and necessary decisions for the state, one’s own **career and political interests are being placed in the foreground**, the inability to admit mistakes and/or learn from them [in case of] the responsible **state leaders** is not only unforgivable, but downright **criminal**” (Spridzāne 2021).

The main contribution to the undermining of the reputation of Minister Pavļuts and by his own hand “carefully groomed public image and CV with a Harvard diploma” was made by “*Diena*” commentator Margēviča with the article “Tangled in the score”, which was based on “a dozen respondents’ and eight references to the statements of anonymous persons. The ‘forms of meaning’ of the article can be found in the statement of an anonymous “former colleague who is connected to the sphere of public relations” that Pavļuts was not a “successful manager of the process” because “the understanding possessed by **the entire elite in power for a long time** was lacking – the inability to understand how the people in the countryside live and think, how does the so-called common man think, and this is a very important point, which does not apply only to Pavļuts, but also to a great extent to **the prime minister, who does not understand at all how people live**” (Margēviča 2021).

Another important topic discussed by “*Sestdiena*” is the Latvian political party system and the role of political parties in the functioning of Latvian party democracy. Kolāte before the municipal elections tries to ascertain “what’s the point of the party” by questioning the professor of the University of Latvia, the dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences Jānis Ikstens and the director of SKDS Arnis Kaktiņš as experts. Kaktiņš believes that “historically in Latvia, due to their personal traits, a large number of politicians are rather petty and vengeful”, because “**the political culture**, which largely derives from the level of the culture of individuals, is rather harsh already” and this also manifests itself in the way that “the position tries to humiliate the opposition in every way – it is rather a norm.” Furthermore, “**Riga’s political culture**” is said to be such that “if you are in the opposition, then you are dung, no one will talk to you at all” and “since the nineties, at least in this sense, **degradation in the political culture is observed.**” Kolāte limits herself to hearing opinions without trying to establish whether there is also research that supports and explains these observations (Kolāte 2021a).

Cardiologist, Professor Andrejs Ērglis, in an interview with Zirnis, categorically declares – “I believe that **parties are impossible in Latvia** until there is a mixed electoral system in which people can carry out their functions without being subject to party discipline or group discipline in general”, even though, arriving at a certain contradiction with himself, he had previously established that “the language” in which politicians speak “is actually a foreign language”, therefore he “has slightly come to the point” that he does not pay any attention to politicians, but “it just should not be said that someone is to blame, because **the nation itself has created these politicians**” (Zirnis 2021b).

Surveys are a tool for influencing public opinion, as they offer observations of current reality constructions, or reactions to current reality constructions. “*Sestdiena*” regularly did this with the help of “Snapshots” in 2021. At the end of September, the magazine published the results of a survey, in which an unspecified number of respondents answered the question “how do you generally assess the current offer of political forces and the day-to-day functioning of parties?”

Table. Assessment of the offer of current political powers and the day-to-day activities of the parties ([Ed.] 2021)

Very good	I give a positive assessment to the activity of only one party	I give a positive assessment only to the work of certain politicians	Negatively, no one can offer what the country currently needs	Other	I have no opinion; I am not interested in politics
1%	3%	24%	52%	2%	18%

The editorial comment states that “it is about a year until the next *Saeima* elections, but it is already clear that the choice will not be easy for a large part of the public, because how can they vote if it seems that there is simply no suitable offer” ([Ed.] 2021). Broadly speaking, the results of the survey show the dominance of disappointed and indifferent representatives of the political subculture among the respondents, who are generally characterized by low political competence. The distinction between ‘political forces’ and ‘parties’ is misleading to readers, as is the assumption that respondents regularly and consistently follow the ‘day-to-day activities’ of parties.

Kolāte, however, avoids excessive dramatization and at the beginning of November, in her first article of the series about “how does the political hippodrome look now less than a year before the grand horse race”, she again quotes Rajevskis, sociologist Kaktiņš and Ģirts Dimdiņš, a professor of political psychology at the University of Latvia. The survey data published by SKDS at the end of August showed that at that time 64% of the population were ready to vote “for

an entirely new political force”. However, at the end of the article, the opinion of the “spiritual “queen” Šmaragdu Magda”, better known to the “users of the social network *Twitter*”, about A. Gobzems and A. Šlesers as “interesting leaders”, her observations about the coalition and the inability to repeat the success of the KPV LV in the elections are presented in detail. Kolāte herself does emphasize that “**this is the era of populism in Western democracies**”, because, as Dimdiņš tells the author, “people are attracted to the antagonistic idea of populism: bad politicians as opposed to good, uncorrupted nation” (Kolāte 2021b).

In the national holiday issue of “*Sestdiena*”, Kolāte addresses the “eternal national question” in order to find out “what content domestic politicians bring to nationalism” and why “nationalism in Latvia”, which is “more often called by some other name”, unlike in Western Europe, “is perceived calmly”. Dainis Īvāns, UL Assistant Professor Valts Kalniņš, Minister of Foreign Affairs Edgars Rinkēvičs (JV), chairman of NA and member of the *Saeima* Raivis Dzintars, Riga City Council member Agnese Logina of the party “Progressives” (“*Progresīvie*”) give their explanations, which are different, but more or less revolve around language, education, culture, understanding of history and Latvian identity. Kalniņš points out that “**there are attempts to raise the language** from a classical cultural factor that integrates the nation and – in fact, this has already happened – **to declare it a political principle**”, including in the actions of the President. Kolāte also notes that “the Latvian language in Latvia is the language of democratic participation” (Kolāte 2021c). The topic of the political nation became relevant in 2022, mainly in connection with the war of Russia in Ukraine and the legislatively resolved removal of monuments glorifying the occupation regime of the USSR.

Amongst the publications of the first months of the year, the interview of Zirnīs with epidemiologist Nikita Trojanskis is worth to note. The epidemiologist says about “vaccine sceptics” that “most of them are disinformed”, even though “today there is too much information available (smiles) and people have not learned to distinguish quality information from that of a poor quality” (Zirnīs 2022c).

Discussion and conclusions

Taking into account the small number of members of Latvian political parties, as well as the low trust ratings, which are only slightly higher for the government and the parliament, it is clear that even the political journalists of the print media do not try to analyse most of these complex problems at all, moreover, they avoid doing so deliberately. Instead of analysis, descriptive findings and forecasts of invited experts are offered. The editorial line of “*Ir*” magazine can be described as supporting democracy, European values and Euro-Atlantic orientation, which

simultaneously includes a very large dose of criticism addressed to political parties, the government and the parliament.

A hermeneutic understanding of the texts of the political journalists of the magazines “*Ir*” and “*Sestdiena*” suggests that the journalists with their political communication mostly construct a political subculture of disappointment. “*Ir*” rather appeals to the politically competent and personally active, but very small portion of the electorate, which is becoming even smaller, as evidenced by the magazine’s consistent decline in circulation. It is important that the context of “*Sestdiena*” publications is formed as a story about the unsuccessful or even harmful activities of the government and the political parties and party associations constituting the government. The content of the publications gives the impression of a relatively large consensus based on populism in the condemnation of the “ruling political elite” and contrasting it against the “ordinary person”, especially in the publications of “*Sestdiena*”.

A democratic political culture is critical to the legitimacy, resilience and successful functioning of democracy. Passivity and apathy are not consistent with a democracy in which the electoral process periodically divides the population into winners and losers. The differences in the topics, analyses and conclusions of the journalists are not significant or fundamental. The characteristics of elite democracy and party state political communication culture unite rather than differentiate the texts published by the political journalists of the two magazines.

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