

ATTITUDES TOWARDS MIGRANTS AND THE IMPACT OF THE MEDIA

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I understood my task as a kind of a case study of how the media reflects the problems of migration to and refugees in Latvia, and also how the media influence the situation of migrants and refugees because actually these two factors are closely interrelated. Before I consider the peculiar situation in Latvia, there are some questions that must be clarified.

First, who should be considered a migrant in Latvia? Latvia and the other Baltic states, Lithuania and Estonia, enjoyed the status of independent states before 1940. In 1940, they were annexed by the Soviet Union, and after the Second World War the migration process to these Baltic republics was considerable. Some major changes occurred in the ethnic composition of the population, mostly due to this migration process. In the late 1980s, during so-called perestroika, migration became one of the major issues, along with the language issue. A great many papers, comments and other materials devoted to this issue appeared in the mass media, and, of course, most of them were rather emotional.

Probably the main problem is: what do we mean when we talk about migrants and migration? In the first wave, newcomers were mostly of Slavic ethnic origin, Russians, Belarussians, Ukrainians; so this is not baseless. Yes, these people can be called migrants, but if we follow the letter of the law, they were internal migrants. They were just moving within a single power, the Soviet Union. So now if we write or apply the labels "external migrants," or even "legal migrants," this is a kind of a retroactive law, or an attempt to apply a law retroactively. These are legalistic details; what is important within this context is that as a consequence of all these processes, the word "migrant" has developed negative connotations; a migrant is something very bad.

Regarding freedom of the press, in Latvia all but one of the newspapers are mostly independent. There is only one official government publication, which is not very popular. Of the newspapers are not completely independent in terms of funding or political biases, inclinations and convictions. Some have, more or less, official links with this or that political or economic element. What has changed since the restoration of independence? We discovered that migrants are not just Russians, but also people from Africa and Asia. Before the restoration of independence, a visible minority barely existed in Latvia. This has now become a big test for the whole Latvian nation—not just ethnic Latvians, but the whole population of Latvia. I will come back to this issue at the end of this paper.

Legislation

Immigration legislation in Latvia is very tough. There are only three legal to enter Latvia; there is no such thing as a permanent residence permit in Latvia. The first of these criteria under which is family reunification, under which there are significant restrictions, particularly one regarding so-called permanent resident noncitizens, i.e. those who are permanent residents of Latvia but have not been granted Latvian citizenship. There is now a legal conflict according to one basic law on the status of former USSR citizens. Latvian law states they have the citizenship right to family reunification, and in particular, they have the right to host their elderly parents who need care or other assistance. However, the immigration laws are for residents and foreign citizens. They do not include any clauses for stateless people, the result of which is a legal conflict. Thus the law has limited possibilities for family reunification. The second one is repatriation, which is very important, but I believe my colleague who went this route herself can tell more about this. This is of course a very important problem in Latvia today. Another possibility for citizenship is to invest American dollars in Latvia.

This is the general context in which we deal with the problem of migrants and refugees. I would like also to mention some of the comments made in the mainstream media. (I do not include here some of the small newspapers published by political parties and public organizations, which can be very biased and politically extremist.) One of the articles I chose was written by a young journalist, who was appointed as the president's press secretary two months after the article appeared. Thus, to a great extent this article reflects an official point of view. It describes several hundred refugee claimants who tried to go to the Scandinavian countries through Latvia. What to do with these people was a big problem. Latvia has neither ratified nor signed any convention on refugees. So we have no provisions in our legislation which would relate to these type of refugee claimants. The only thing we could do, and had to do due to pressure from international bodies, was to put these refugees (who included Kurds and people from Afghanistan, Palestine, Vietnam) in a special camp. The physical conditions in the camp were very close to freezing. The point made by this journalist is that the refugees and refugee claimants is choosing Latvia as a way to get to the West. As a result it is implied that this type of problem then is not our particular problem; it is rather a Western European problem. Therefore Western European wealth bears a responsibility in bringing the problem to a successful resolution.

The second interesting point is that the article describes different categories of migrants: economic migrants, political refugees, and asylum seekers. The article goes on to say that according to our legislation, they are all considered illegal border-crossers; thus we do not care about their legal status. The essence of this article sends a clear message to readers, a message which was intended as a very pro-official point of view.

This is a serious problem and we should try to deal with it objectively rather than emotionally, because we are now part of Western Europe. Of course these people are not welcome in our country; they are primarily illegal cross-borders and we do not want them. However, we cannot just expel them. We will never send these people back to a country in which they are persecuted. However, since they came to Latvia from Russia, let Russia give them asylum. This is clearly the message and the strategy pursued in our country.

Refugees and Migration in Central and Eastern Europe

The second article to which I would like to draw your attention, also published in the most mainstream Latvian newspaper, concerns information about a very interesting secret protocol, allegedly signed between the secret services of Latvia and Russia. This protocol aims at the creation of a kind of corridor to smuggle refugees directly from their countries in Asia to Scandinavia. Allegedly, secret Latvian and Russian intelligence services participated in the implementation of this project, according to the evidence of one person who was accused in this illegal transportation of refugees to Latvia. However, the allegation has neither been proved nor refuted. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that this protocol suits our government. I know nothing about the attitudes of the Russian government, but it would be very interesting to learn more about them.

The last article I would like to mention appeared in the second biggest Latvian newspaper in June of this year. The essence of this article is very clear: we feel somehow offended by Europe, because Europe wants to make us a refugee state. Europe wants us to permit all these refugee claimants and asylum seekers to stay in Latvia, although at the present time we can't afford this due to our economic position. At the moment, this is probably the most urgent controversy between Latvia and Western Europe. It is quite clear the Scandinavian countries want us to adopt legislation on refugees as soon as possible. A working group was recently created in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia. There are some problems, but one may assume that a law regarding refugees will be adopted in the near future.

Finally what conclusions may we make about the role of the media in Latvia? First, in the present situation, the media reflect existing moods within the society, rather than creating them. Second, attitudes towards migrants are still very negative. To some extent this stems from a period when migrants were identified with the Russians, occupier. The third, very important point is that with the appearance of some visible minorities from the third world racism has begun to appear. This is a very disturbing factor and may indicate a low level of tolerance in our society.