

# TELEVISION NEWS PREFERENCES AND A SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG THE RUSSIAN-SPEAKING MINORITY IN POST-COMMUNIST LATVIA: THE CASE OF PANORĀMA AND VREMYA

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## ABSTRACT

*Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative audience research and drawing on the case study of two long-running evening news television programmes – Latvian-language Panorāma, the flagship news programme of Latvian ex-state and current public television, and Russian-language Vremya, the main news programme of the former Soviet Central TV and today's Russian state channel, also available in Latvia – this article demonstrates the interplay between news media preferences and broader sentiments and identity formation processes among the large Russian-speaking minority in the post-Communist Baltic country of Latvia. The results show that what can be seen as immersion of the Russian-speaking viewers in transnational television from Russia is not evidence of their lack of interest in the national life of Latvia, nor absence of their national allegiance to Latvia. The paper is part of a larger doctoral research investigation into responses of publics towards public service television as a nation-building project in Latvia.*

## KEY WORDS

*news audiences – Russian-speaking minority – national integration – nation-building – public service broadcasting – post-Communist transformation – Latvia*

This article is part of a larger audience research project exploring attitudes towards and experiences with public service television as a nation-building project among the ethnic majority of Latvians and the Russian-speaking minority in the ex-Soviet Baltic country of Latvia. The deep crisis in the relationship between the public broadcaster Latvian Television (LTV) and its publics, most vividly manifested in poor and declining audience figures, not only reflects a similarly turbulent relationship between public broadcasters and their publics as in the other former Communist bloc countries in Central and Eastern Europe; it also reveals an uneasy nation-building process and ethno-linguistic divisions in this post-Communist country. On one hand, public television reflects the ethno-linguistic split in the society; on the other hand, it plays a pivotal role in the construction and maintenance of these divisions. The focus here is on the interplay between news media preferences and broader sentiments and identity formation processes among the large Russian-speaking community (Russians and other ethnic minorities with Russian as a dominant language in the family) that according to the 2011 census data published by the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia forms 37.2 % of the total population of Latvia.

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The fact that ethnic Latvians and Russian-speakers differ in their news media habits has been often used by media researchers, and local media policy makers and politicians alike, as one of the core arguments in favour of an idea of the existence of two parallel information spaces in the country that, in turn, has often been seen as a threat to social cohesion. The study argues that this view is a simplification of a far more complex reality. While news preferences of ethnic Latvians and Russian-speakers are, indeed, divided along ethno-linguistic lines, it should not necessarily be interpreted as threatening national integration.

Drawing on the case study of two long running prime-time news programmes – Latvian-language *Panorāma* (*Panorama*) and Russian-language *Vremya* (*Время/ Time*) – the paper demonstrates that more than 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the footprint of the Soviet era divisions in television news consumption practices among the Latvian ethnic majority and the Russian-speaking minority are still in place. Nevertheless, the Russian-speaking community is neither homogeneous, nor are they passive media users. Instead, diverse news consumption patterns, as well as diverse readings of news messages can be found among different Russian-speaking generations. Rejection of news offerings on public service television and the popularity of Russian channels does not automatically lead to lack of interest in national news flow among Russian-speaking audiences and alienation of the Russophones from Latvia, nor to uncritical acceptance of news discourse as offered by Russian television. While older Russian-speakers combine their interest in both national and Russian news flow, young Russian-speakers not only have little interest in life in Russia but also are critical about it and its representations on Russian television.

The Latvian experience shows that against a backdrop of weak public broadcasting institutions struggling to gain public support and demand, especially among the ethnic minority viewers, popular commercial broadcasting can play a more positive role in multi-ethnic societies as a national integrator than public broadcasting organizations with their official mission of national unity. It is national Latvian-language commercial channels that are more successful in bringing the nation together around the evening news and providing a sense of belonging to the national community for those who feel left out from the national “we” as constructed by public television.

### **1. Broadcasting as a nation-building resource**

Referring to Benedict Anderson’s influential notion of nations as imagined communities (see Anderson 1983) as a point of departure, this paper sees national identity, as well as the nation itself, as a social construct, the product of social imagination; and public service broadcasting as playing (or at least expected to play) one of the central roles in the project of national imagination, establishing and maintaining a particular image of the national community.

From its early days public service broadcasting in Western Europe has been intended as a national project having close links with an idea of a nation state. As Roosvall and Salovaara-Moring have summarised, “the public service remit had an inherent mission to construct, protect, inform and entertain the nation.” (2010: 13). Reflecting on the introduction of public broadcasting in Europe, Ellis notes that the European governments “realized the potential of broadcasting as a unifying force, pulling together individuals, families and

groups into a national whole. Through the ideal of public service broadcasting, broadcasting became another tool in the construction of the nation state.” (2000: 49). For instance, Cardiff and Scannell in their analysis of the early years of public service radio and television in Britain have demonstrated how enthusiastically the BBC utilized royal rituals and other public events to provide audiences with “symbolic images of national unity and identity” (1987: 169). Radio and, later, television, they argue, “made the nation real and tangible through a whole range of images and symbols, events and ceremonies, relayed to audiences direct and live.” (Scannell and Cardiff 1991: 277). Morley and Robins argue that “broadcasting has been one of the key institutions through which listeners and viewers have come to imagine themselves as members of the national community” (1995: 10–11), and provide a highly relevant example for the purposes of this study of a ritual of watching the evening news as an act of national imagination: “the fact of watching, and engaging in a joint ritual with millions of others, can be argued to be at least as important as any informational content gained from the broadcast.” (1995: 68).

Nevertheless, as the history of Western public broadcasting institutions reveals, it has never been a smooth and unproblematic process as nation-building, just as any other construction of collective identities, inevitably involves a process of setting lines of demarcation defining who “we” are against “the others” and thus can reinforce “we”/ “they” divisions instead of creating any sense of national unity. Historical accounts of the early years of Western public radio and television organizations show that while some were invited to join and felt being part of a national “we” as imagined by broadcasters some were left out and felt excluded (see Cardiff and Scannell 1987; Löfgren 2001; Moores 1993, 2000; Morley 1992, 2000; Morley and Brunson 1999; Morley and Robins 1995; Raboy 1985; Scannell 1988, 1996; Scannell and Cardiff 1991).

As Schlesinger has pointed out, “to talk of national identity requires us to analyse processes of inclusion and exclusion” (1991: 173), and Morley puts this argument directly in the context of broadcasting:

If the national media constitute the public sphere which is most central in the mediation of the nation-state to the general public, then whatever is excluded from those media is in effect excluded from the symbolic culture of the nation. When the culture of that public sphere (and thus of the nation) is in effect ‘racialised’ by the naturalisation of one (largely unmarked and undeclared) form of ethnicity, then only some citizens of the nation find it a homely and welcoming place. The imagined community is, in fact, usually constructed in the language of some particular ethnos, membership of which then effectively becomes a prerequisite for the enjoyment of a political citizenship within the nation-state.

(Morley 2000: 118)

The collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1991 put an end to the union of fifteen republics, and Latvia, once one of the Soviet republics, was now an independent country with physical state borders being re-drawn and with a need to re-imagine a national community. The nation-building project in Latvia, as in other new nation-states born out of the fall of the Communist regimes in Europe, coincided with the overall societal transformations, inclu-

ding reformation of the media system with attempts, even if only on paper, to turn former state broadcasters into Western-style public service organizations.

As elsewhere in the region, in the Latvian nation-building project ethno-nationalistic ideas have been also championed, with the language and culture of the ethnic majority seen as the main raw material making national integrity possible. In the same spirit the mandate of the public broadcasting was written defining Latvian language and culture as the common denominator expected to hold both ethno-linguistic communities together around the public television. As we shall see in the sections that follow, against a backdrop of strong commercial broadcasting and a high presence of transnational television from Russia, such a strategy for national imagination has turned out to have very limited success.

## 2. The empire collapsed, but *Panorāma* and *Vremya* survived

During the Soviet era two prime-time TV news programmes were on offer in Latvia: the Latvian-language *Panorāma* on the Latvian state television and the Russian-language *Vremya* on the Soviet Central Television, available throughout the Soviet Union. Similar to its pan-Soviet “sister” *Vremya*, the tone of *Panorāma* was official and full of positivity and pathos that was in stark contrast with the bleak everyday realities people had to face. *Panorāma* regularly reported on the winners of socialistic competition and increases in labour productivity, announcing the successful completion of the five-year plan.

At the end of the 1980s along with the disappearance of the colours of Soviet Latvia’s flag in the ident of *Panorāma* and the address *Good evening, comrades!*, journalists started to read news instead of announcers. It was a time when *Vremya* continued to serve as a mouthpiece of Soviet rule while journalists of *Panorāma* became passionate supporters of the independence struggle. Both *Vremya* and *Panorāma* used the same propaganda tools of Soviet-style journalism, albeit for diametrically opposed purposes.

During the years of Awakening, the period of the political breakthrough at the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, radio and television journalists, including those working for *Panorāma*, enjoyed enormous popularity, trust and, as media scholars often indicate, even love from their audiences (Brikše, Skudra, Tjarve 2002). For older ethnic Latvian generations watching *Panorāma* is not only a deep-seated habit going back to the Soviet times (like for Russian-speaking elderly people watching *Vremya*) it is also a significant part of their memories of an important historical period in the country’s life creating strong emotional ties between *Panorāma* and its loyal audiences today – elderly ethnic Latvians that are also the core audiences of today’s LTV. As during one of the focus group discussions, that are fully analysed later in the text, 62-year-old retired Latvian Brigita<sup>1</sup> put it, *Panorāma* “is connected with all our past when we sat in front of a television set each evening 20 years ago”. This is not an experience shared by many Russian-speakers as then, instead of *Panorāma*, the majority of the Russophones preferred watching *Vremya* (Brikše, et al. 1993).

While in 1991 the Soviet Empire collapsed, both *Panorāma* and *Vremya* survived; it is their institutional framework that has changed. Today *Panorāma* continues its broadcasts on the former state channel that soon after the regaining of independence was de jure renamed as the public broadcaster. According to regular audience measurements

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1 All names of the participants are fictional.

provided by ratings company *TNS Latvia*<sup>2</sup>, during the last five years *Panorāma*, which for many years has been the most popular (and for a long time also the only) Latvian-language evening news programme in the country, has experienced a significant drop in its viewing figures, and today it is the prime-time news on the national Latvian-language commercial channels TV3 and LNT that gather the largest audiences (both also are the most watched channels in the country).

The successor of Soviet Central TV has changed its name several times and currently it is known as *Pervyi kanal* (*Первый канал/First Channel*), 51 percent owned by the Russian state, whose Baltic version – *Pervyi Baltiiskii kanal* (*Первый Балтийский канал/First Baltic Channel*) – is also available in Latvia via cable and satellite, and, according to the regular audience statistics, is the most watched channel among the Russophone audiences. As well as Moscow-based *Vremya*, *Pervyi Baltiiskii kanal* now also offers its national version *Latviiskoe Vremya* (*Латвийское Время/Latvia's Time*) produced by the Russian-language news desk in the Latvian capital Riga; it is aired at the same time as *Panorāma* and focuses on the national affairs of Latvia. According to the ratings data, *Latviiskoe Vremya* is the most popular evening news programme among the Russian-speaking viewers.

### 3. Methods

With regards to the methodological framework of the study, focus group discussions with members of both ethno-linguistic groups, ethnic Latvians and Russian-speakers, are combined with participant observations within everyday family environments. Alongside qualitative data, two large-scale surveys also form the empirical basis for the study.

There were 10 focus group discussions carried out during October and November 2011, each group containing on average 6–7 participants. Five discussion groups were held in Latvian and five were bilingual where Russian-speakers could choose whether to speak in Latvian or Russian. In Riga in total six discussion groups were organized: three in Latvian and three bilingual, and participants were split into three age groups (18–24, 25–54, 55 plus). In addition, four discussion groups were held outside the capital city – two in Latvian and two bilingual, and in these cases all generations were mixed together. Two places where ethnic Latvians are in the majority were selected and two where the Russophones constitute a large part or a majority of the total population.

In total (including three pilot discussions) 80 respondents aged 18–87 from diverse ethno-linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds took part in the focus groups; 47 of them were Latvians and 33 were Russian-speakers. All informants who indicated Russian as their main language in the family in the study are identified as the Russian-speakers, while I have identified as Latvians all those participants who have indicated that they mainly speak Latvian at home. The majority of those identified here as the Russian-speakers have reported that they are ethnic Russians, while the majority of the Latvians said that they are ethnic Latvians. The same applies for the family observations.<sup>3</sup>

Focus group discussions were semi-structured and open questions were used to ex-

2 TNS Latvia publishes monthly and annual viewing figures for the country's main TV channels. For this study they also provided data that are not publicly available.

3 I am well aware that such a distinction between Russian-speakers and Latvians is problematic as it misleadingly suggests an existence of some uniform linguistic community of Russian-speakers uniting members of all ethnic groups other than ethnic Latvians and which deprives members of this community of Latvianness. For the purposes of this study exploitation of such a categorization is merely a practical one and not intended to obscure the heterogeneity of the Russian-speaking community nor to deny its Latvianness.

plore television viewing experiences of the participants and their attitudes towards different television channels and their programming offerings. On average each discussion lasted 2 hours and 30 minutes. All 13 focus groups were audio recorded, fully transcribed and later analysed in line with a thematic coding method.

The second stage of the fieldwork involved participant observations with five families of both ethno-linguistic communities that were carried out in a period from November 2011 to April 2012. Two Russian-speaking and three Latvian families took part in the study, 22 members of the families were Latvians and 11 were Russian-speakers. Families were recruited from Riga, other cities and the countryside. Families where at least three generations are living together were selected in order to identify both ethno-linguistic and generational aspects in their everyday media consumption patterns.

In total, six visits were made to each family during which informal conversations were mixed with observations and participation in watching television. Families usually were observed during a prime-time television slot (6–10pm) both on weekdays and weekends. On average, I spent two to three hours in a family per session. Notes were made during and after the observations, and later all material was analysed using a thematic coding method. Quota sampling and snowball sampling methods were combined to recruit the participants for both focus group discussions and family observations.

In addition, in 2011 and 2012 for the purposes of this investigation the market research company *TNS Latvia* carried out two large-scale surveys with a representative sample of 500 respondents aged 15 to 74 addressing a wide range of questions on news media habits. The first survey was organized shortly before the focus group discussions and family observations, and its main aim was to inform the following fieldwork, while the key purpose of the second survey that was conducted shortly after the completion of the fieldwork was to obtain further statistical material in order to contextualize qualitative data.

#### **4. Not at home with the public broadcaster: “You have a feeling that there are no Russians in Latvia”**

In 2003 during the special programme devoted to the 45th anniversary of *Panorāma*, Gundars Rēders, then head of LTV news, idealized *Panorāma* as the national integrator holding the nation together:

That evening ritual – *Panorāma* – when we all come together is one of those moments of togetherness. You run all day, you are on your duties, but then you know that Latvia around half past eight comes together and starts to think the same thoughts about what is happening with us in this country.

(Rēders 2003)

According to regular audience statistics, ethnic Latvians (and older generations in particular) are mainly the ones who constitute the national collectivity in Rēders' quote – “Latvia” and “we”/“us”. For the Russian-speakers it is *Vremya*, and especially *Latviiskoe Vremya*, that brings the Russophone community together around the evening news on television. While many Russophones not only have little interest in *Panorāma* but also distrust it, as well as overall news flow on public television, ethnic Latvians have little interest in and are



critical about *Vremya* and *Latviiskoe Vremya*, as well as the overall news stream offered by Russian-language channels, including those transmitting from Moscow.

In our survey only 37.7 % of ethnic minority viewers said that they trust news on LTV1, the main channel of the public broadcaster LTV and also home of *Panorāma*, and an even smaller number – 33 % – agreed that LTV1 offers objective and politically neutral news. To compare, among ethnic Latvians 76.3 % of respondents expressed trust towards LTV1 news and 68% judged it as an objective and politically neutral news source. In the eyes of ethnic minority audiences *Pervyi Baltiiskii kanal* is the most objective and politically neutral news source; it is also a highly trusted news source. On the contrary, only a minority of ethnic Latvians trust news on *Pervyi Baltiiskii kanal* and see its news provision as objective and politically neutral.

Only a tiny fraction of ethnic minority audiences are among the regular viewers of *Panorāma*. In our survey 52.4 % of ethnic minority viewers reported that they do not watch *Panorāma* at all, while among ethnic Latvians such were only 19.3 %. For those Russian-speakers who watch *Panorāma* on a regular basis, being part of the national collectivity as made by *Panorāma* offers symbolic resources for sustaining interpersonal communication with their ethnic Latvian friends or colleagues at work. These quotes from a focus group discussion with Russian-speaking audiences illustrate this further:

*I watch this channel [LTV1] only in order to know and understand how [ethnic] Latvians live, what concerns them. Because it is very important, especially in our city, as members of both nationalities are here, they all have mixed together. I have friends both [ethnic] Latvians and Russians, and it is important for me [to know] what [ethnic] Latvians watch [on TV], as well. As we have a common bunch [of friends] we need something to talk about.*

(Mikhail, 36-year-old Russian-speaking municipality officer)

*Why exactly [Panorāma]... Well, because our [ethnic Latvian] colleagues also watch this first channel [LTV1] and, for this reason, I also watch [it] to know what they are talking about and how all this is reported there.*

(Irina, 52-year-old Russian-speaking accountant working in the public sector)

LTV has an image, among both ethnic Latvians and Russian-speakers, of being a state broadcaster disseminating the official agenda of the government, therefore some Russian-speakers watch it precisely for the reason to obtain what they see as the official information of the government. Deputy school director Boris, a 48-year-old Russian-speaker, explains why he watches *Panorāma*:

*Perhaps it has something to do with my job. Let's say if something happens in Latvia... what is going to happen, what to expect from the powerful. News from those in power... Let's say, who the new minister [of education] will be. In 20 years, [he is going to be] the twenty fifth, I think. What he is going to do in the education sector, what more we are going to reform, in which direction we are going to go, how much*

*more money will be cut down. It is important for us as well to know at least something.*

Very soon after the breakup of the USSR the former state channel LTV was granted the status of the public broadcaster; however LTV is still perceived by many viewers, and the political elite alike, as a state broadcaster whose main rationale is to serve as a communication channel for the government to address ordinary people. This is due to a complexity of reasons, because of the Soviet legacy of state owned, funded and controlled broadcasting, but also due to today's realities of politicized public broadcasting. For Russophones LTV is not simply a state broadcaster, it is also a channel offering an official worldview of what is seen among the Russian-speakers as the pro-Latvian government (the so called "Russian" political parties, popular among the Russian-speaking electorate, traditionally have been left outside the government).

As LTV broadcasts mainly in Latvian (while LTV1 broadcasts only in the Latvian language, the second channel of LTV provides some limited amount of Russian-language programming, including news bulletins on weekday evenings) and the overall visibility of Russian-speakers on it is low, many Russian-speakers do not recognize themselves as being part of that image of the national community as constructed by the public broadcaster and feel excluded from this version of the national "we", or to paraphrase Morley (2000), they do not find LTV a homely and welcoming place.

As 36-year-old Russian-speaking municipality officer Mikhail pointed out:

*[LTV1] aims at one part [of the society], and... when you watch it, you have a feeling that there are no Russians in Latvia, no Russian-speakers, they simply do not exist, you simply do not notice them.*

In a similar vein, Vyacheslav, a 32-year-old Russian-speaker working in the construction business, argued:

*It should be as when man switches [LTV] on [he does not] feel that... it is not for him at all but that he is welcomed there as a viewer. Programmes where people speak in their language, some in Russian, some in Latvian. It is enjoyable to watch that kind of programme; you feel that it unites. That is, it is meant for all. But when it is only [ethnic] Latvians about [ethnic] Latvians... [When watching LTV] you have a feeling that in Latvia only [ethnic] Latvians live, 100 percent [are ethnic Latvians], although it is not so. At least in [the capital city] Riga it is not so for sure.*

For him, it is a presence of both the Latvian and Russian languages that offers a sense of national unity and a feeling of being at home within national broadcasting, something he does not find on LTV. He as well as other Russian-speakers reject LTV and its news offerings, because of the hegemonic conception of the nation at the heart of the broadcaster's discourse that leads to a feeling of being an unwanted "other" who is left outside. For the same reasons it is common among the Russophones to call LTV, by its full name "Latvian Television", as "television for [ethnic] Latvians". Thus, for instance, Olga, a 31-year-old Russian-speaker working at the children and youth centre, described LTV



as “oriented towards [ethnic] Latvian audience only”. For her LTV is “extremely Latvian”. She says:

*It is always on LTV1 about the history, about grief. Full of lament, mournful programmes... very Latvian, something that [ethnic] Latvians like but Russians have an absolutely different view on it.*

Here, Olga’s quote shows the presence of contested and conflicting collective memories of the country’s 20th century history within the Latvian population, historical events differently perceived by ethnic Latvians and by Russian-speakers each having their own historical “truths”, yet this diversity is absent in LTV’s output. The channel is seen as representing an official version of the past only.

## **5. National news, a sense of belonging and the Russian-speaking generations**

Two media sub-systems, Latvian language and Russian language, in Latvia are by academics, and within the media policy and political discourses often interpreted as separate information spaces with no or little interaction between each other threatening social cohesion in the country. In their report Kruks and Šulmane have identified “opposition of two information spaces, lack of dialogue between them, which does not facilitate democratic discussion in the public sphere and the development of an integrated civic society” (2005: 147) as one of the most serious problems of the media ecology in Latvia. In a similar vein, a few years later Šulmane concluded that “the parallel media spaces do not promote the integration of various audiences and social groups” (2010: 252).

While the majority of the Russian-speakers (and ethnic Latvians, as well) prefer watching news in their mother tongue, for a significant number of the Russian-speakers (and also for many ethnic Latvians) their everyday television news consumption is bilingual. In our survey 41.6 % of ethnic minority viewers said that they usually also watch news on television in Latvian and, in turn, 29.5 % of ethnic Latvians claimed to do the same in Russian. It suggests that at some point both ethno-linguistic communities meet at their television news consumption and it is right to say that Latvian and Russian language media sub-systems (at least when it comes to news media habits) are not entirely isolated. What brings the ethnic Latvian and Russian-speaking news audiences together are news offerings on the national Latvian-language commercial channels.

As ethnic Latvians distrust *Vremya* and Russian-speakers are highly suspicious towards *Panorāma*, it is news on the commercial channels LNT and TV3 that serves as a kind of neutral zone. According to our survey, news programmes on these channels are trusted and seen as objective and politically neutral by a significant number of members of both ethno-linguistic communities. All the same, news programmes on LNT and TV3 are more trusted by ethnic Latvians than ethnic minority viewers and the number of ethnic minority viewers expressing trust in news on LNT and TV3 is not exceptionally high. Nevertheless, they trust news on LNT and TV3 more than news on the public broadcaster LTV, and the expressed trust is reflected also in their viewing preferences. Despite the vast majority of the news audiences of TV3 and LNT being ethnic Latvians, Russian-speaking viewers have higher interest in the news offerings on these channels, especially on LNT, if compared with LTV, and its main channel LTV1 in particular.

The media preferences of the Russian-speaking community (namely, their high exposure to transnational Russian television) and overall high volumes of inflow of Russian-origin television production in the country is often seen by the Latvian politicians as constituting a threat to a national unity. And what can be seen as immersion of Russian-speaking audiences in Russian television has often been interpreted within political discourse as evidence of the Russian-speaking community alienating themselves from their present home country Latvia, and instead identifying with Russia that for many is their country of origin. In the light of the 2012 language referendum, when the proposal of a Russian-speakers' movement to make Russian the country's second official language was rejected, some politicians even argued that many Russian-speakers, by watching Russian channels, live in Russia's information space, are more interested in life in Russia instead of national news, and therefore, are not loyal to Latvia.

While the Russian-speakers prefer watching news on the Russian-language channels, which they also trust more, including those transmitting from Moscow and offering news flow from Russia, it is not evidence of the Russophones identifying more with and having a stronger sense of belonging towards Russia instead of Latvia. Interest in life of Russia does not rule out their interest in national news flow. Our survey showed that ethnic minority audiences are interested in national news to the same degree as ethnic Latvians.

Researchers studying identities of the Russian-speakers in Latvia and in Estonia, another Baltic country with a large Russian-speaking minority, have previously suggested that the cultural and political allegiances of the Russophone population do not match. While many see themselves as belonging to the Russian cultural space their civic attachment tends to be oriented towards Latvia or Estonia respectively (Cheskin 2013; Vihalemm and Masso 2002, 2003). Therefore it was not surprising to find out from our survey that only 36.9 % of ethnic minority informants said that they have a high interest in the Russian news agenda. Similarly, regular audience measurements also show that viewing figures of the national news programme *Latviiskoe Vremya* are significantly higher than those of *Vremya* delivering news stories from Russia.<sup>4</sup>

According to the same survey, those who have high interest in the news flow coming from Moscow are mostly older ethnic minority audiences, who are also the most loyal viewers of *Vremya*. However, their great appetite for Russian news does not rule out their interest in the national life of Latvia. In the same manner as celebrating the arrival of New Year twice – first according to Moscow time and then also a few hours later in line with the local Latvian time, many older Russian-speakers also organize their quotidian television news consumption practices. It is the weekday hour of news on *Pervyi Baltiiskii kanal* starting at 8pm first with the transmission of *Vremya* from Moscow and followed by *Latviiskoe Vremya* from Riga that are both integral parts of their daily news watching ritual.

## **6. Sustaining home ties: "In Latvia is my home, but Russia is my homeland"**

Among older Russian-speakers many are either citizens of Russia or the so-called non-citizens; they are neither citizens of Latvia nor any other country and thus are excluded from the political community and participation in the political life of the nation. "*I'm nothing,*" said Igor, a 57-year-old unemployed man who is neither a citizen of Latvia, nor a citizen of Russia, to stress his political status and a feeling of being disenfranchised that accompa-

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4 For similar findings from Estonia, see Loit and Siibak (2013).

nies it. His official status is a non-citizen of Latvia, and he has an Alien's passport. There are around 300 000 people in Latvia who have such a passport that is issued to them by the Latvian state. According to the official statistics, most of them are elderly Russians. Igor ironically uses the self-identification "negr" (*негр/negro*) that is a short form of "ne-grazhdanin" (*негражданин/non-citizen*), and has very negative connotations implying his feelings of being a stranger, the other, in Latvia.

Unlike other members of the family Igor uses only Russian-language channels (one of the reasons for his preference for news on the Russian-language channels is his poor command of Latvian; and his difficulty in passing the Latvian language exam is also his main obstacle to gaining citizenship). He is the only one in the family who carefully follows the news flow coming from Russia. During my visits to the family while watching *Vremya* together it was clear that he has an expert knowledge of Russia's political affairs.

The news flow coming from Russia helps Igor, like many other older Russian-speakers, to stay in touch with life in Russia and sustain what Basch et al. (1994) call "home ties" with his country of origin. While being geographically located in Latvia, sounds and images of the Russian news space that come to his living room via Russian transnational television allow him to make, metaphorically speaking, daily journeys back to his homeland. "*I am Russian,*" he said, referring to his Russian origins to explain his interest in Russian news. He was born in Russia, and at the age of 17 came to Latvia to study, got married here and stayed for living. "*Here [in Latvia] I live, but there [in Russia] is my former homeland,*" he explained.

Similarly, Tatyana, a 61-year-old Russian-speaking woman working with children at the school amateur theatre, explained her interest in the news flow from Russia: "*I do not lose ties with my fatherland. Here, [in Latvia] I live, here is my home, but there [in Russia] – my fatherland.*" She is a citizen of Russia and referred to herself as "originally from Russia."

Her husband, also born in Russia, graduated from the maritime school in Latvia in the early 1970s, and they both settled here. The life stories of Igor and Tatyana are typical of many Soviet era immigrants in Latvia. During the years of Soviet rule Latvia faced a large-scale influx of immigrants who moved to Latvia as a workforce from other republics of the Soviet Union and have stayed here after the collapse of the empire. Although they think of Russia, their country of origin, as their homeland, it is Latvia, their host country, that they call their home, and it is their strong affiliation to both Latvia and Russia that is at the heart of their "multi-local identities", to speak in the words of Rouse (1995).

Their attachment to Russia is not necessarily in conflict with their allegiance to Latvia, and their everyday news media consumption rituals are striking evidence of this process of negotiating (or we can also say harmonizing) their transnational identities of thinking of themselves as belonging simultaneously to two national communities. While daily use of news on Russian television provides older Russian-speakers with proximity to and synchronization with realities of everyday life and events in Russia, to use the vocabulary of Aksoy and Robins (2003) and Robins and Aksoy (2006), it is not evidence of older Russian-speakers estranging from Latvia. The great interest that many older Russophones have in the Russian news flow does not conflict with their interest in the national life of Latvia. To quote Alla, a 62-year-old retired Russian-speaker who moved to Latvia from Russia in the early 1980s:

*It is interesting what is happening both in Latvia and Russia, and*

*especially in Latvia as we live here, we are given a retirement pension here, we have to live here every day.*

Through the combination of elements of both transnational and national broadcasting *Pervyi Baltiiskii kanal* helps Russian-speakers to hold their multi-local identities together, and therefore it is very popular among these audiences. *Pervyi Baltiiskii kanal* is Russian television aimed at pan-Baltic audiences offering Russian-origin entertainment in combination with national news offerings.

### **7. The case of young Russian-speakers: “I am a citizen of Latvia, only Russian-speaking”**

Contrary to the older Russian-speaking generations the young Russian-speakers – many of them already the post-Soviet generation (born after 1991) – have little interest in the news flow from Russia. In our survey 15–24 year old ethnic minority youngsters were the least interested in Russian affairs if compared to other ethnic minority generations. “*My parents are oriented towards Russia completely, but I have a different view,*” said Lana, a 24-year-old Russian-speaking police officer, as she described generational changes in her family.

In a similar vein, 20-year-old Russian-speaking student Sofia reflected on the news media preferences in her family:

*When I, let's say, with mum or granny, grandpa, then – yes, [I watch] Vremya. But if I'm on my own then I skip it. I like more watching our [news]. If to speak about the older generation, let's say, granddad... I come home, and when they speak, they speak only about Russia. They are much more interested in it; they simply know all about politics in Russia, thoroughly, simply in detail. Surely, Latvia also interests them, but only about... for example, cuts in retirement pensions interest them.*

It was common for the young Russian-speaking informants to position their little interest in news on Russian television as an expression of their strong allegiance to Latvia. To quote Ilya, a 20-year-old Russian-speaking student:

*I'm not interested in Russia, Moscow at all, absolutely. I consider myself as a citizen of Latvia, only a Russian-speaking one. I am much more interested in what is happening in Latvia.*

It is his civic self-identification (together with a linguistic one as a marker of difference from the entire Latvian citizenry) that he stresses to explain his indifference to life in Russia. Similarly, Vyacheslav, a 32-year-old Russian-speaker working in the construction business, argued:

*When it comes to me, I don't care what is happening there [in Russia]. Nothing good has ever happened, and it's unlikely that in the near future will happen. But as I know from the people around me... I have a mixed family, that is, my mother is [ethnic] Latvian. Those who are completely pro-Russian, they all say that they are interested in what*

*is happening in Russia and that it is good there. But the bulk of them have never been there. All who have been there think differently.*

Young Russian-speakers are not only highly critical about life in Russia but also of its representations on Russian television. Thus, 36-year-old municipality officer Mikhail described *Pervyi Baltiiskii kanal* as the official channel of Russia: “To judge from the news it is the point of view of Medvedev and Putin [then president of Russia Dmitry Medvedev and the country’s prime minister Vladimir Putin]”. Similarly, for 20-year-old student Dmitry the *Pervyi Baltiiskii kanal* is the channel where “lies are being told in the news” and where “Putin is shown in the news”.

### **8. Russian news as an escape from Latvian reality: “At times you even feel great envy”**

In her family Nadezhda, a Russian-speaking retired school teacher, aged 68, is the only devoted viewer of the news on Russian channels. For her watching news on either *Pervyi kanal* or another state-controlled Russian channel *Rossiya (Россия/Russia)* is a daily practice. Younger members of the family, her 39-year-old daughter Diana, also a school teacher, and her husband, Nadezhda’s son-in-law, 37-year-old football coach Andrei, have little interest in Russian news. All members of the family were born in Latvia and are citizens of Latvia.

Since the switchover from analogue to digital terrestrial television broadcasting in 2010 the family does not have access to any of the national channels, including both public service channels. As they are more interested in transnational television from Russia instead of the offerings of the national broadcasters and already during the analogue era watched the national channels rarely, they decided not to spend extra money on the purchase of a digital set-top box. Instead, they have a satellite dish offering a plenitude of foreign channels, including the ones transmitted from Moscow. From the long list of satellite channels available to them, their favourite one is *Pervyi kanal*. However, instead of the Baltic version *Pervyi Baltiiskii kanal* they only have access to one of its international versions that does not offer the national news programme *Latviiskoe Vremya*, but only Moscow-based *Vremya*.

Nevertheless, while having opted out from national broadcasting, the family of Nadezhda has not lost interest in the national life of Latvia. Even though they have no access to any of the national channels, they have managed to find alternative ways of staying in touch with the national affairs of Latvia, be it Radio Latvia 4, the Russian-language service of the public broadcaster Radio Latvia, online news sites or word-of-mouth. When in November 2011 one of the Latvian banks went bankrupt, they learnt the news from their neighbours that let them know about it.

As in other Russian-speaking families, it was *Vremya*, instead of *Panorāma*, that they used to watch during the Soviet era, and today Nadezhda is still following political life in Russia with great enthusiasm. She has carefully followed debates on Russian channels prior to the 2012 presidential elections in Russia. “It’s a nightmare,” she commented on debates emotionally during one of my visits in the family. If she would have the right to vote she would support Vladimir Putin, the front-runner for the presidential post. “He uses his head”, Nadezhda commended Putin and criticized his opponents – the eccentric show-

man Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Gennady Zyuganov, leader of the Communist Party. *"Time of the Communists has passed,"* she added. *"Putin is in the right place,"* Nadezhda said another time when we all watched *Vremya* together a few weeks before the elections. The report on Putin's proposal for migration policy in Russia was on air. For her, the highly appreciated Putin serves as a role model, and a point of reference against which the government of Latvia can be criticized. *"Here in Latvia it has not happened,"* Nadezhda commented on another news report of *Vremya*; this time on Putin's plans to cope with the unjustified increase in tariffs of public utilities. Yet, to be able to criticize the Latvian government, she needs to be in touch with the country's political life, and not to lose her interest in the national life. It is the national news that feeds her attitude towards Latvia, and its power elite in particular, as "the territory of criticism", to quote Olga, a 31-year-old Russian-speaker working at the children and youth centre, commenting on her father's similar attitudes.

Some Russian-speakers use the news flow from Russia to create an idealized image of life in Russia, which helps them to escape from the harsh day-to-day socio-economic realities in Latvia to what they see as a better life in Russia. Identification with this idealized version of life in Russia offers these viewers a feeling of pride and helps them to sustain a positive self-image. For instance, 48-year-old Russian-speaking municipality IT officer Viktor during one of focus group discussions explained his interest in news on Russian television as follows:

*Perhaps, you don't want to listen to our harsh reality. That what is happening in Russia... at times you even feel great envy. There [in Russia] something happens, something has been done, here [in Latvia]... actually nothing has changed. Here, what we only hear is that retirement pensions have been cut down, and so on.*

Contrary to Nadezhda, her daughter Diana and son-in-law Andrei devote little attention to political affairs – be they national or Russian. *"What will Medvedev [then president of Russia] do after [the elections]?"* Nadezhda asked when we were all watching *Vremya* during one of my visits. *"I don't care,"* replied Andrei strictly. Politics is not his favourite subject. For Diana, Russia is just *"a foreign country"*. The 39-year-old school teacher thinks that there is no need for her to be in touch with the political life of Russia and complains that news on Russian television is overloaded with reports on the activities of Putin and Medvedev.

With the exception of Nadezhda, for others in the teachers' family Russian television is first and foremost a source of grand scale entertainment and the news flow from Moscow is of secondary importance. It is various high-budget shows, films and series that they enjoy watching on Russian television more than news. As for other Russian-speakers, it is comfort (mother tongue) and pleasure (splendid entertainment offerings) that makes them keen viewers of Russian channels. The news programme *Vremya* is on air after their favourite scandalous talk show *Pust Govoryat* (*Пусть говорят/Let Them Speak*), something all women of three generations in the family, Nadezhda, Diana and her little daughter Aleksandra, like. Yet, when *Vremya* starts, Nadezhda usually goes to her room and watches it alone.



## 9. Conclusion

Although the news media preferences of ethnic Latvians and Russian-speakers are divided along ethno-linguistic lines, with ethnic Latvians preferring news programmes on Latvian-language channels, and the news on commercial broadcasters gathering the largest ethnic Latvian audiences, while Russian-speakers choose Russian-language channels, and their much loved *Pervyi Baltiiskii kanal* in particular, this is not evidence for the existence of two separate information spaces in Latvia as a threat to national integration understood here primarily as a shared sense of belonging to the national community of its members.

First, ethnic Latvian and Russian-speaking news audiences come together outside *Panorāma* and *Vremya/Latviiskoe Vremya*. Our survey revealed that for many ethnic minority viewers their quotidian television news consumption practices are bilingual and the interest the Russophone audiences have in the news on national Latvian-language commercial channels serves as evidence of it, even if Russian-speakers watch news on these channels less often than on their favourite Russian-language channels. Nevertheless, ethnic Latvian and Russian-speaking news audiences are not completely isolated.

Over the last 20 years the news flow as provided by the public broadcaster LTV has not been able to become a unifying force bringing ethnic Latvian and Russian-speaking news audiences together, and in this respect it is right to say that the public broadcaster has proved to be a failed nation-building project. Instead, the news on the national commercial channels has been more successful in providing imaginary links between members of both ethno-linguistic communities and holding ethnic Latvian and Russian-speaking news audiences together. These channels form a kind of neutral zone contrary to *Vremya/Latviiskoe Vremya* and *Panorāma* dividing the nation.

Second, while Russian-speakers ignore and distrust the news flow on public television and mainly rely on the Russian-language news offerings, including those on Russian channels, it is not evidence of the Russian-speaking community alienating themselves from Latvia and identifying more with Russia instead of Latvia. The popularity of Russian television among Russian-speaking audiences does not rule out their interest in the national life of Latvia. Russian-speakers are interested in and follow national news to the same extent as ethnic Latvians; and through the consumption of national news, even if it is part of the content localization plans of Russian television as in the case of *Latviiskoe Vremya* and even if its reality constructions on such issues as the country's citizenship and language policies or interpretations of Latvia's 20th century past may differ from those offered by the Latvian-language channels, they participate in the life of the nation no less than ethnic Latvians.

While the language divides ethnic Latvian and Russian-speaking news audiences, what unites them are common everyday socio-economic realities and the need to keep up to date with them. This is the reason why the public broadcaster LTV has made so little success with its project of national imagination, prioritizing a common (Latvian) language as a unifier of the nation at the expense of the idea of making the national "we" possible based on civic values, although, as the results of this study indicate, there is potential for such a conception of the national collectivity. The interest in national news that Russian-speakers have clearly signals their sense of civic belonging to the national communion of Latvia.

It is wrong to see Russian-speakers as a homogeneous community having unitary attitudes and experiences. Russian-speaking audiences are diverse as are their news preferences and news readings, and the generational shift serves as evidence of it. Among the older Russian-speakers, the majority of them Soviet era settlers calling Latvia their home but Russia their homeland, interest in life in Russia coexists with their interest in the national affairs of Latvia in the same way as their affiliation to Russia does not rule out their allegiance to Latvia. Even if thinking of life in Russia as better than in Latvia and watching news from Russia to escape from hard everyday living in Latvia, they still do not lose interest in the national life of Latvia. At the same time, the young Russian-speakers, the offspring of the Soviet period immigrants born in Latvia, are not only less interested in the Russian news agenda but also are highly critical about life in Russia and its representations on Russian television, and through distancing themselves from the Russian news stream they articulate their strong attachment to Latvia. Yet, they do not reject transnational television from Russia completely. Instead of news, they enjoy its entertainment offerings. With the exception of older Russian-speaking generations, for the majority of Russian-speaking viewers Russian channels are first and foremost a source of grand entertainment and only then, if at all, a source of Russian news.

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