

Research Article

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Political Trust and Russian Media in Latvia

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Abstract: Russia's attempts to influence public opinion outside its borders attracted increased interest in the context of its involvement in the war in Ukraine, Brexit referendum, the elections in the US and other political processes in the West. This article focuses on the assumption that Russian activities in the information environment of NATO and the EU member states among other things are aimed at undermining public trust in democratic governance institutions. Russian state-owned media is one of the tools about how Kremlin disseminates and promotes its worldview within and outside Russia's borders; therefore, the research questions being addressed in this paper are related to the relationship between political trust and consumption of Russian media. To study this issue, Latvia was chosen as an outstanding case due to the relatively large presence of Russian media content in its information environment. The paper examines the trends of Russian media consumption and political trust in Latvia to assess if this is a fruitful further research area since linking political trust and Russia's information activities is a new perspective on the issue. The theoretical part of the paper outlines the concept of political trust and the factors affecting it as they are identified in previous research, with a specific focus on the impact of media on political trust. The empirical part of the paper examines the trends in the growth of the audience of the TV channels retranslating Russian media content and political trust in Latvia in the period from 2007 to 2017. Considering that political trust in Latvia is increasing alongside with an increase in Russian media consumption, this paper suggests several further research directions with a focus on political and economic performance indicators and the impact of domestic media.

Keywords: political trust; Russian media; Latvia.

1 Introduction

The European Parliament resolution on third-party propaganda notes that one of the possible impacts of Russian propaganda in the EU is “the undermining of public trust, openness, and democracy” (European Parliament 2016). Weisburd, Watts and Berger (2016) mentioned that some of the Russia's social media campaign's objectives are “undermining citizen confidence in democratic governance” and “eroding trust between citizens and elected officials and democratic institutions”. RAND study on Russian social media is also based on the assumption that “the Kremlin attempts to achieve policy paralysis by sowing confusion, stoking fears, and eroding trust in Western and democratic institutions” (Helmus, Bodine-Baron, Radin, Magnuson, Mendelsohn, Marcellino, Bega and Winkelman 2018, 7). Bershidsky (2017) is of the opinion that the main goal of Russia's influence campaign in the US presidential election was “to amplify America's organic discord and undermine trust in institutions”. Potapova (2017, 6) pointed out that “to undermine trust and destabilize civil society” is Kremlin's disinformation aim in relation to international audiences. These assertions are mostly being made based on the analysis of the content of Russia's activities in the information environment. However, the question about the actual impact of Kremlin's overt and covert communication campaigns on political trust in the West still remains to be answered.

Political trust is a complex and longstanding concept. Issues such as the essence of the concept and its relation to democracy, the factors affecting political trust and the decline of political trust and others have been analysed in

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TV channel	Consolidated viewing timeshare %
LTV1	9.2
TV3	8.1
LNT	7.7
RTR Planeta Baltija	6.6
PBK	6.3
LTV7	5.9
NTV Mir Baltic	5.8
REN TV Baltic	3
Dom Kino	2.7
3+	2.3
TV6	2.1

Figure 1. Top 10 TV channels in Latvia, June 2018. Source: Kantar TNS. TV channels that largely retranslate media content produced in Russia, including entertainment, are given in bold.

numerous studies since the 1960s (Levi and Stoker 2000, 476–485). Linking political trust and Russian information activities is a new perspective on the issue. It is largely determined by the information warfare between the West and Russia that escalated due to Russia’s involvement in the war in the Eastern Ukraine, the Brexit referendum, the US presidential elections and other political processes in the West. However, the fact that the decline in political trust is a long-term trend in the Western countries (Hetherington 2006, 18; Whiteley, Clarke, Sanders and Stewart 2016, 239) raises the question about the determinant role of Russia’s information activities of recent years on political trust in democratic countries.

Russia uses a variety of information tools to achieve its political and military goals. Russian state-owned media is one of the important elements in this toolbox. During the 2016 meeting of the Russian Federation ambassadors and permanent envoys, Russia’s president Vladimir Putin stated: “We must put up strong resistance to the Western media’s information monopoly, including by using all available methods to support Russian media outlets operating abroad” (Kremlin 2016a). During the Valdai Club’s discussion, he compared the impact of Russian and the Western global media: “I would like to have such a propaganda machine here in Russia, but regrettably, this is not the case. We have not even global mass media outlets of the likes of CNN, BBC and others. We simply do not have this kind of capability yet” (Kremlin 2016b). This gives evidence that from Kremlin’s perspective, Russia is lagging behind the Western media in the global information environment; therefore, it is putting efforts to reduce the gap. In addition, this way of thinking means that Russian media outside its borders can reasonably be considered a tool for challenging the West and promoting Russia’s worldview. At the same time, the consumption of Russian global media outlets such as RT and Sputnik is indeed limited. This is a case in some of the Northern Europe countries as indicates the study of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (Berzina 2018, 82-89). There is evidence that these media have limited audiences also in the US and the UK (The Economist 2017).

The limited consumption of Russian global media in the Western countries makes it difficult and even useless to study its impact on political trust. Therefore, Latvia stands out as a specific case for understanding if there is any relation between consumption of Russian media and political trust because Latvian media audience widely consumes Russia’s internal media. Several TV channels that largely retranslate media content being produced in Russia are among the top 10 most viewed TV channels in Latvia (see Figure 1). According to June 2018 data of Kantar TNS, the consolidated TV viewing timeshare of RTR Planeta Baltija was 6.6%, First Baltic Channel (PBK) was 6.3% and NTV Mir Baltic was 5.8%. In comparison, the consolidated TV viewing timeshare of Latvian public television LTV1 was 9.2%, making it the most viewed TV channel in Latvia in June 2018 (Kantar TNS 2018). Russian media content in Latvia is also available through other media channels such as the Internet, radio and press. To understand trends in the Latvian society, this article

takes a look at the dynamics of consumption of Russian media content in the television and political trust in Latvia in the period from 2007 to 2017.

2 The Concept of Political Trust

In short, the concept of political trust is related to public trust in political institutions, although there is no single authoritative definition. Easton (1975) discussed the issue of political trust in the context of political support. He differentiated between specific and diffuse political support, the former being related to authorities in power, whereas the latter being related to the political system in general (Easton 1975). In Easton's concept, trust is being identified as a dimension of diffuse support (Easton 1975, 450), which is the feeling of the one who trusts that his or her interests will be respected by authorities even with little supervision (Easton 1975, 447). Trust is a precondition for the system's ability to function (Easton 1975, 448). Hetherington (1998, 791) summarised that academic literature defines "political trust as a basic evaluative orientation towards the government founded on how well the government is operating according to people's normative expectations". Van der Meer (2017) defined political trust as "citizens' support for political institutions such as government and parliament in the face of uncertainty about or vulnerability to the actions of these institutions". Catterberg et al (2006, 34) "refer to political trust as citizen's confidence in political institutions" such as "legislative bodies and governmental structures". For the purpose of this article, political trust is being understood as public trust in political institutions such as the government and parliament.

Factors influencing political trust are widely studied in the academic literature. Catterberg et al (2006) examined several independent variables in four groups of countries – established democracies, former Soviet Republics, new democracies in Eastern Europe and Latin America. Within this study, Latvia is included in the group of the former Soviet Republics, and the study indicates that within this group, political trust is being increased by factors such as financial satisfaction, governmental responsiveness, political interest and interpersonal trust and decreased by factors such as political radicalism, corruption and education (Catterberg and Moreno 2006, 44). Rose et al (2010) also examined political trust in post-authoritarian contexts, including Latvia. They concluded that "trust or distrust in political institutions is principally determined by the political and economic performance of new democracies"; however, it is not primarily determined by macro-level indicators, but by "the micro-level [...] value-laden attitudes and perceptions of individuals" (Rose et al 2010, 24). These authors suggested that public trust can be increased by reducing corruption, protecting freedoms and improving the economy (Rose et al 2010, 25). Studies on political trust in other countries show similar trends. Whiteley, Clarke, Sanders and Stewart (2016, 250) concluded that in Britain in the period from 2000 to 2013, trust in government was strongly related to economic performance, leadership and partisanship. They specifically pointed out to the great recession of 2007–2009 and following austerity policy as a factor undermining trust in the government (Whiteley, Clarke, Sanders and Stewart 2016, 250).

In the context of this paper of special interest are the studies on the relationship between political trust and media. One of the seminal studies in this area is Robinson's (1976) paper where he developed the theory of "videomalaise". This concept describes the assumption that television journalism results in increasing cynicism, frustration and despair within television audience in relation to political institutions in the US (Robinson 1976, 426). Robinson (1976, 426) named six interrelated factors that determine these negative trends: the large size and insufficient political sophistication of the television audience, the perception that television is a credible information source, the interpretative character of news reporting, the emphasis on the negative, the emphasis on conflict and violence and the anti-institutional themes. On the contrary, Norris (2000) proposed the concept of "virtuous cycle" and argued that consumption of the news media increases knowledge, political trust and civic engagement. These two theories indicate opposite perspectives on the relationship between media and political trust in the academic literature; however, Avery (2009, 424) came to the conclusion that they rather complement each other than contradict. His study revealed that factors such as already established beliefs (exposure to news media increases trust among those who already trust political institutions) and types of media channels (television leading to more distrust than newspapers) determine whether the effects of media on political trust will be positive or negative (Avery 2009).

The study of Mutz and Reeves (2005) provided a deeper insight as to why television tends to erode political trust. They proposed the idea of "televised incivility", which describes a phenomenon that televised political debates violate

the norms of civilized discourse and concluded that “uncivil political discourse has detrimental effects on political trust” (Mutz and Reeves 2005, 13). To study the media impact, Moy et al (2000) differentiated political and social trust and found that media use had no effect on political trust; however, the use of newspapers and entertainment television had a positive effect on social trust. The longitudinal analysis of survey data conducted by Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, and Shehata (2016, 105) led to the conclusion that “there is a positive relationship between news media use and political trust, although the effect is quite weak”. This study also confirms that media effects on political trust vary across media (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre and Shehata 2016, 105). The study of Ceron and Memoli (2015, 13) leads to “the idea of media as “echo-chambers” that reinforce pre-existing attitudes”, giving additional evidence that media effects on public opinion are largely determined by previously established beliefs.

A brief overview of some of the academic studies on political trust and the factors affecting it, including the media, gives evidence that it is a complex issue; therefore, the possible impact of Russian information activities on political trust in other countries should be viewed in the context of domestic issues and long-term perspective. The existing literature on media effects also gives evidence that the issue of the interaction of political trust and information environment should not be limited only to the context of external influence since domestic media also play a role. However, there is no consensus as to the strength and effects of this role because different studies lead to different conclusions.

3 The trends of Russian media consumption and political trust

Owing to Latvia’s specific ethnic structure with 37% of its population using the Russian language at home (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2011), its media environment is complex as well. There are available media in the Latvian and the Russian languages in Latvia. As the Center for Security and Strategic Research study shows, 96.6% of those using the Russian language at home consume media in the Russian language and only 51.8% of them also use media in the Latvian language (Berzina et al. 2016). The Russian language media being used by Latvia’s media audiences generally have content being produced in Latvia and/or Russia. In all, 59.2% of those who use the Russian language at home admit using Russian media in their own perception of the origin of media, whereas only 15.7% of those who use the Latvian language at home admit being the audience of Russian media (Berzina et al. 2016). The peculiarity of Latvia is that large part of its society is the audience of Russia’s internal media due to widely available Russian media content (see Figure 1). For example, the First Baltic Channel largely retranslate the content from Russia’s Perviy Kanal, RTR Planeta Baltija from Rossiya 1 and NTV Mir Baltic from NTV – all three being Russia’s top three TV channels (Mediascope, n.d.). However, Russia’s global media RT and Sputnik are used by only 12% and 4% of the Latvian society, respectively (Berzina 2018, 83, 85).

In this paper, the analysis of Russian media in Latvia is narrowed down to television because it has the most potential to decrease political trust, as per the evidences of previous studies. Another consideration to focus on television is the fact that among the most often used media to obtain information about politics in Latvia, the First Baltic Channel is the most popular source with the content in the Russian language (Latvijas Fakti 2017, 46). In general – despite the growing importance of the Internet and social media – television still reaches the largest audience in Latvia, which has not decreased during the last four years (Rumpeters, 2017). Owing to Latvia’s complex media structure with a large number of TV channels retranslating Russian media content, this paper also is limited to the analysis of the three most popular TV channels retranslating Russian media content – the First Baltic Channel (PBK), NTV Mir Baltic (NTV) and RTR Planeta Baltija (RTR).

These media have been present in Latvia’s information environment for around ten years. PBK started its operations in Latvia in 2002 (Baltijas mediju alianse n.d.), but RTR and NTV later – in 2008 and 2011, respectively (see Figure 2). As it can be seen from Figure 2, the viewing timeshare of PBK has a tendency to decrease, whereas the timeshare of NTV and RTR is increasing, meaning that the total use of Russian media content in TV in Latvia has increased in recent years. It also must be clarified that the use of the term “Russian media” in relation to two of these TV channels is conditional because the state of the jurisdiction of PBK is Latvia, NTV is licenced in Great Britain and only RTR is licenced in Russia (NEPLP 2016). The status of PBK creates the most methodological difficulties because it is registered in Latvia and also produces local news, but at the same time, the largest part of its content originates from Russia’s Perviy Kanal. Formally, it is “Latvian media”, but in fact, this is a way how the content of Russia’s Perviy Kanal is being broadcasted in Latvia.

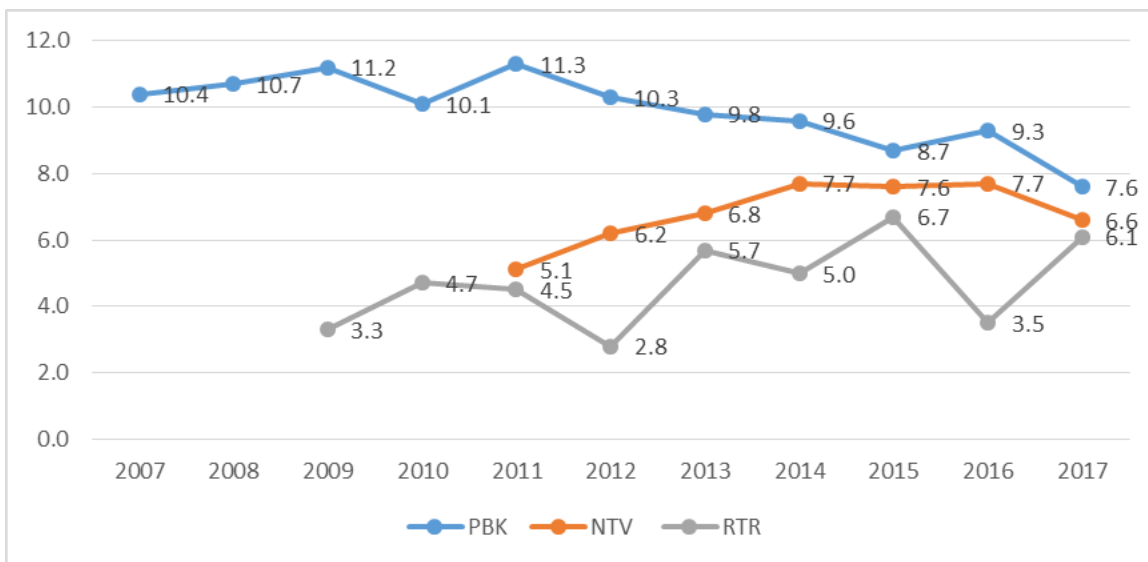


Figure 2: Linear viewing timeshare % of PBK, NTV, and RTR in Latvia from 2007 to 2017. Source: Kantar TNS. Notes on RTR Planeta Baltija: 1) it was included in the study from October 1, 2008, to December 29, 2010, and then again included in the study from February 11, 2011; 2) in 2012, not all operators broadcasted RTR Planeta Baltija version and 3) in 2016, it was not transmitted in Latvia for six months.

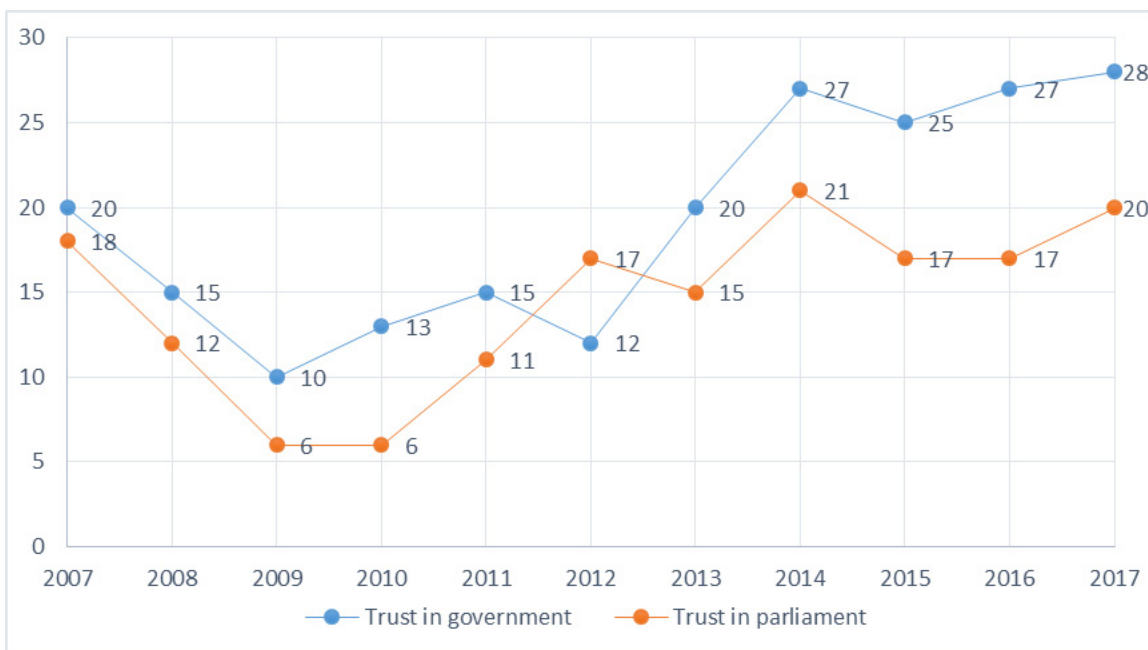


Figure 3: Political trust in Latvia from 2007 to 2017. Source: Standard Eurobarometer, spring wave, 2007–2017, the percentage of respondents tending to trust government and parliament.

Therefore, in the context of this study, all these media are labelled as “Russian media”, although in two, it is legally inaccurate.

Political trust in this study is expressed as a percentage of respondents tending to trust the national government and national parliament as measured by Standard Eurobarometer surveys (European Commission n.d.). As can be seen in Figure 3, political trust in Latvia decreased from 2007 and reached the lowest point in 2009, which coincides with the great recession of 2007–2009. However, since 2010, political trust tends to increase in Latvia despite slight fluctuations.

Nevertheless, the largest part of the Latvian society does not trust the government and parliament, meaning that insufficient political trust is a long-term problem for Latvia. However, the fact that both political trust and consumption of Russian media content is growing in Latvia suggests that relationship between political trust and Russia's activities in information environment indeed must be studied in comparison with political and economic performance evaluation variables. This idea is supported by other macro-level trends in the Latvian society, which also has improved in a ten-year period time.

For example, the Corruption Perceptions Index in Latvia gives evidence that in a ten-year period Latvian society tends to perceive Latvia as less corrupt. According to Transparency International (n.d.), in 2007, Latvia's corruption perception index was 4.8 (the index is expressed in a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "highly corrupt" and 10 "highly clean"), whereas in 2017, Latvia's corruption perceptions index was 58 (the index is expressed in a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 means "highly corrupt" and 100 "highly clean"). According to Freedom House's research project Nations in Transit, Latvia is a country with a high democratic progress. The democracy score is based on analysis of democratic change in a country in areas such as national democratic governance, the electoral process, civil society, independent media, local democratic governance, judicial framework and independence and corruption. It is an aggregate measure of all these trends being expressed in a "scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest level of democratic progress" (Freedom House n.d.). In 2017, Latvia's democracy score was 2.04 (Freedom House n.d.). The economic performance indicators are also improving. The GDP is increasing in Latvia since 2011 (Central Statistical Bureau, 2018a), but the unemployment is decreasing (Central Statistical Bureau, 2018b).

The idea that the influence of Russia's information activities should be measured in the context of domestic processes is in line with other study conducted to measure the influence of Russian media and other factors on the attitudes of the Latvian people in relation to national security issues. Ikstens (2018, 91) concluded that although the predisposition to various Russia's promoted narratives is identified among those groups that consume Russian media more, the satisfaction with the performance of the government often is more significant than the media consumption. The influence of Russian media on political trust also must be analysed in the context of the influence of domestic media as the theoretical literature gives evidence that it also plays a role.

4 Conclusions and further research directions

The brief review of the previous studies on political trust gives evidence that it is a complex concept, being affected by various factors. The studies conducted so far give an indication that political trust is related to political and economic performance indicators. The relationship between political trust and the media is even more complex because different studies lead to different conclusions. Nevertheless, the existing literature gives significant basis to argue that the relationship between political trust and Russia's activities in information environments outside its borders must be analysed in the context of domestic trends, such as political and economic development and local media.

The fact that political trust in Latvia is increasing alongside the increase in Russian media content presence indeed raises questions about the determinant role of Russian media on political trust in Latvia. However, this paper proposes to change the focus of the further research instead of casting aside the study of political trust and Russian information activities. One suggestion would be to use political trust as an independent variable and to test if low political trust predisposes to the positive perception of Russia's promoted narratives and pro-Russian behaviour. This proposition is grounded in the fact that albeit political trust in Latvia is increasing, the majority of the society still distrusts the government and parliament. This potentially may create vulnerability to Russia's influence activities. If it turns out to be true that people distrusting political institutions are more open to Russia's influence, it is yet another stimulus to focus on the improvement of political and economic processes to reduce Russia's possibilities to use non-military instruments against democratic countries.

Another important research area is the role of Russia's information activities on the perception of political and economic performance because as previous studies show, the evaluation of political and economic development is determined more by perceptions than macro-level indicators. Perhaps, Russia's information activities are primarily directed at undermining political and economic achievements of other countries, leading to a decrease in political trust. This could explain the paradox that, on the one hand, political trust in Latvia is increasing with the growing

consumption of Russian media content, while, on the other hand, the majority of the Latvian society still tends to distrust political institutions. Perhaps, Russia's information influence activities affect political trust indirectly, and overall, it would be higher without the presence of Russian media content. However, again the impact of Russia's information activities on the perceptions of societies of other countries must be looked at in the context of the domestic factors because they certainly have an impact on political trust.

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