

## FRAGMENTED AND YET INFLUENTIAL: MPS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE MEDIA IN LATVIA

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### Abstract

*More than 30 years have passed since Latvia gained its independence, however, systematic studies of present-day relationship between media and politics are still missing. Latvia is a country where choice of media is largely determined by ethnicity. Representatives from ethnic groups acquire their daily information from different news sources, as the result the trust levels in media depend on the media format and the language of choice. This study adds to the literature by studying the perceptions of Latvian Members of Parliament on media agenda-setting power. Drawing on surveys of Latvian parliamentarians, the agenda-setting power of media is assessed and compared to the survey results in Finland. The results reveal that politicians in Latvia and in Finland think that, in general, media have a massive influence on politics, but the power of written press in Latvia is less evident. And although MPs acknowledge that media can have a significant influence on how decisions are made, the greatest impact will be observed during political debates that can be covered by the media. This study also demonstrates that even though Latvia scores high in the world press freedom ranks, MPs do not trust the media to a large extent and that can be a dangerous signal for the functioning of democracy. The results offer valuable information about the influence of media in countries outside Western Europe and provide a basis for further discussions on surveys as a method for studying the power of media agenda-setting.*

**Keywords:** political agenda-setting, media power, political elite, MPs, survey, comparative research

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## Introduction

In the article “Minimal and Massive! Politicians’ Views on Media’s Political Agenda-setting Power Revisited” Juho Vesa, Helena Bloomberg, and Christian Kroll (2015) encouraged debate on the validity of the survey method for studying the agenda-setting power of media. By surveying Finnish parliamentarians on how they perceive the power of the media on politics, the researchers concluded that news media has a strong influence on topics that dominate political discussions, but the impact of the media is less evident on policy-making processes. They emphasized that surveys can be used to study the power of the media, especially in countries with other types of media systems. In response to this call, Latvian lawmakers were surveyed to get a comprehensive picture of how politicians around the European Union perceive the agenda-setting power of media.

Following the line of thought of Finnish colleagues, this article aims to uncover the perceptions of Latvian MPs on agenda-setting power of media and to compare them to the beliefs of Finnish parliamentarians. On paper, both countries have parliamentary systems, where multiparty competition is ensured, and freedom of speech is respected. The picture, however, changes, when sociological and political conditions are examined that have influenced the actual performance of media in Latvia and in Finland.

Hallin and Mancini have defined Finland and other Nordic countries as most typical examples of the Democratic Corporatist model. According to them, the Democratic Corporatist media system can be characterised by these features: a significant degree of political parallelism; early development of a mass- circulation press and a high newspaper circulation nowadays; historically strong party press that provides external pluralism, broadcasting relative autonomy in political issues; strong state intervention combined with protection for press freedom; strong professionalism and institutionalized self-regulation (Hallin, 2004).

There have been numerous studies that tested whether Nordic countries correspond to the Democratic Corporatist model (Ørsten et al., 2008). Hallin and Mancini acknowledged that “media systems are not homogenous” (2004, p. 12), and that “the differences among these models, and in general the degree of variation among nation states, have diminished substantially over time” (2004, p. 251). Juha Herkman notes that recently the Finnish media system and political culture has witnessed radical changes. There has been overall marketization of the Finnish media: the decrease in press

subsidies, the diminishing role of public service broadcasting and concentration of Finnish media in the hands of large corporations (Herkman, 2009, p. 77). Several studies have applied Hallin and Mancini's models to Eastern European countries. Some scholars have tried to draw parallels between "Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Models" and Eastern European countries (Jakubowicz, 2008; Wyka, 2010); however, several researchers refute this assumption by emphasizing that media systems developed in Central and East Europe will not deviate from western models because different media models are rooted in broader differences in the political, economic, social, and cultural structure of particular societies (Balčytienė, 2012; Voltmer, 2013a). The Baltic countries are characterized by low numbers of newspaper reach and circulation, poorly institutionalized systems of media self-regulation, the highest levels of press freedom, together with the highest levels of foreign ownership (Herrero et al., 2017; Balčytienė, 2012). Some efforts to strengthen public service media and few media professionalization activities are evident in Latvia; however, there are high levels of political parallelism and great influence of political public relations on media content. Balčytienė identified that there are certain elements from the Polarized Pluralist model, the Liberal model and the Democratic Corporatist model. She emphasized that journalism has undergone a late professionalization in the Baltics and that corresponds to the Polarized Pluralist model. However, there are some elements present from the Liberal model, such as a laissez-faire media policy and strong tabloid and commercial media, as well as certain aspects from the Corporatist model, tight regulation of media regarding preservation of national identity (Balčytienė, 2012). Thus, the researchers call to name Latvian media system as a hybrid, as it suffers from a lack of one dominant paradigm.

## **1. Linguistically divided media audiences**

In the Baltic countries, the development of the news media was closely related to the history of the country. During Soviet occupation in the second half of the twentieth century, all three countries were incorporated into the Soviet Union. Everything that was connected to the cultural sphere, including the news media, printed press and films, was supervised by the Communist Party. However, despite the control system, the Baltic countries were able to preserve their cultural heritage and protect their languages against russification. The cultural sphere, particularly the literary and cultural

press, theatrical performances, national song and folk-dance festivals, performed diverse functions such as education and political mobilization (Balčytienė, 2012). Thus, the society became diversified along ideological lines, and even today media choice is largely determined by ethnic groups. This has affected the development of the media system that has not yet been fully separated from the existing political system.

The Latvian society is linguistically divided. According to the Central Statistics Bureau of the Latvia, 37% of the population in Latvia use Russian language at home. As a result, representatives of different ethnic groups acquire information from different sources. Latvians trust and use the media in Latvia, whereas the Russian-speaking minority (which makes up 25% of the total population) prefer TV channels provided by the media in Russia. 89% of Russian speakers use Russian language media and only 9% media in Latvian language (Latvijas fakti, 2020).

Another important factor characterizing the media system is public confidence in the news media. For the news media to fulfil its function, a very important prerequisite is that people trust the news media provide to them. There are several challenges that traditional news media face today. There are many alternatives to traditional media, so-called alternative and partisan media that function as news media. The rise of social media has made politicians less dependent on news media to reach their audiences, providing channels to attack traditional news media (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017). Fake news, disinformation and misinformation has been spreading in news media than ever before (Benkler et al., 2018).

According to data from The European Broadcasting Union, in Finland only 19% of the population do not trust the media, whereas in Latvia 30% of population answer that they have low or no trust in the media. Compared to the average level in the EU, trust in traditional media in Latvia is higher (65% trust in radio, compared to 57% average in the EU, and 63% trust in TV, compared to 49% average in the EU). In Finland 78% of population have trust in radio and 76% in television. The proportion of people in Latvia who say they trust the written media is lower as well, 48% of the population trusts the written press (in 2020, 36% in 2019) in Latvia, and 71% in Finland (The European Broadcasting Union, 2020).

Taking into account the differences between Latvian and Finland, the strategy of this study is to find out whether Latvian MPs agree with their colleagues in Finland that media power is massive by asking them the same set of questions used in previous studies. To uncover a more nuanced

picture of the media environment in Latvia, additional questions were asked about the trust in Russian and Latvian language media.

## **Theory and Hypotheses**

Political communication researchers have tried to uncover what influence the political agenda for last 50 years. One of the main hypotheses of agenda-setting studies is that the mass media (newspapers, television, and radio) influence what politicians think about. Scholars refer to the effect of media on political agendas: when an issue receives more attention by media, politics will follow.

One of the dominant theoretical concepts of communication during the past decades has been agenda-setting. McCombs and Shaw introduced their notion of agenda-setting by quoting Cohen: "The press may not be successful much of the time telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling it readers what to think about" (Cohen, 1963, p. 13). The agenda-setting is based on the assumption that the news media have a significant impact on the perceived importance of issues held by the public. To test this hypothesis, McCombs and Shaw compared the news media agenda with survey responses from public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Since the first study, conducted during 1968 US presidential election, hundreds of studies have been carried out helping agenda-setting to develop into a rich theory. One of the dimensions or subareas of agenda-setting theory studies how the media agenda is related to the policy agenda. In other words, how media influence decision makers. Political agenda-setting scholars have focused their attention on the agenda interaction between the media and politicians.

The question "How powerful is the media agenda setter?" has been studied from several perspectives and has led to contradictory results, depending on the media outlet, issue, political agendas, the period studied (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006), as well as the strategic interests of political actors (Van der Pas, 2014; Green-Pedersen & Stubager, 2010) and the methods used in the studies. Recently, the traditional time-series approach has been complemented with surveys (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011; Vesa et al., 2015), interviews (Davies, 2007) and experiments (Helfer, 2016), thus enhancing our understanding how various actors depending on circumstances are influenced by actions of the media. Despite growing number of studies, still very little is known about how responsive politicians are to media agenda-setting power across different countries.

Earlier studies in Belgium, Sweden, Netherlands, Denmark, and recently in Finland have confirmed that media is amongst the most powerful political agenda setters. Vesa, Bloomberg and Kroll (2015) argued that it is reasonable to expect roughly similar findings in other countries as well. To test this assumption the following hypotheses were formulated:

**H1. The Latvian MPs perceive the media to be one of the most important political agenda-setters.**

If the Latvian MPs agree that the media has an impressive agenda-setting power, do they accept various dimensions of the media's power on politics? S. Walgrave and P. van Aelst have stated that "there is no such thing as the political agenda but only an archipelago of different loosely associated political agendas" (2006, 94). They propose to arrange political agendas on a continuum from substantial to symbolic. Symbolic agendas are ones that do not have direct political consequences, whereas substantial have a direct impact (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006; Vesa et al., 2015). The survey of Finnish parliamentarians revealed that the news media has a strong influence on which topics dominate in political discussions, but the impact of the media is smaller on policy making processes. To find out whether Latvian MPs think similar, the following hypothesis was included:

**H2. The news media affect symbolic political agendas much more strongly and more often than substantial political agendas.**

Do MPs tend to exaggerate the power of media? In 2011, Van Aelst and Walgrave conducted a massive survey of MPs in Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, and the Netherlands. They found out that the MPs that are frustrated about their limited personal influence on the political agenda try to shift responsibility for their own political shortcomings to the media. In 2015, Vesa, Bloomberg, and Kroll (2015) cross-validated previous findings by using another indicator of negative attitudes: trust in the news media. The researchers did not find evidence that levels of trust are somehow related to the perception of agenda-setting power of the media. To find out whether Latvian MPs agree to the perception of their colleagues in Europe, the following hypothesis was included:

**H3. The less MPs trust the media, the more agenda-setting power they attribute to it.**

Since the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century when the first surveys of MPs were carried out in Europe, the media landscape has changed dramatically, and nowadays it is important to bring into discussion the impact of social media on politics. Internet and social media created new 'hybrid media systems' that have

expanded the number of actors who can shape the political communication environment (Chadwick, 2013). Despite an increasing number of studies (Jungherr, 2016; Barbera et al. 2019; Peeters et al., 2019), researchers have not come to an agreement on the role of social networks in setting political agendas. To clarify whether MPs acknowledge the importance of social networks and whether they see it as a powerful tool, the following hypothesis was formulated:

**H4. MPs who see social media as a valuable tool in political battle will attribute more agenda- setting power to the media.**

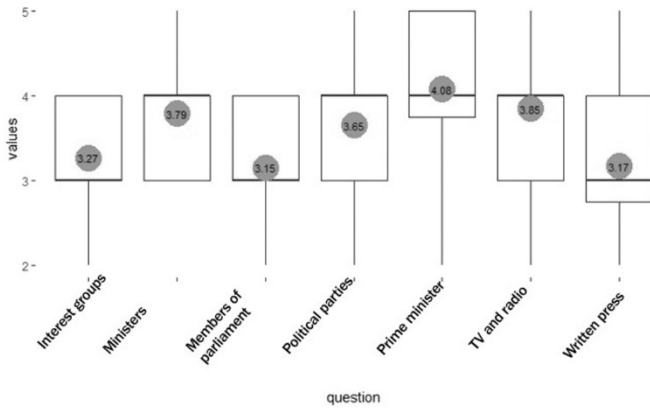
## **2. Survey Data**

This survey targeted all legislators in Latvia. In February 2017, an email containing an invitation letter and a link to an online questionnaire was sent to all factions of the Parliament. A week later, the researcher was invited to the faction meetings to present the idea of this research and to distribute questionnaires. After a couple of days, the researcher contacted political party groups to remind the MPs about this survey. As only 25% of the politicians responded to the survey, the researcher made one more visit to the Parliament to hand out the questionnaires a short time before the plenary session. At the beginning of March 2017, the last questionnaires were collected to analyse the results. It can be concluded that the effort to contact politicians several times contributed to satisfying the response rate.

Of the 100 members of the Parliament, 52 completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 52% (Appendix, Table A1). The distribution of political party groups as well as government and opposition status among the respondents was roughly the same as in the Parliament. However, not all parties were equally represented. The party in opposition “Saskaņa” was underrepresented among the respondents with 29% response rate, while some of the parties such as “Latvijas Reģionu apvienība” and “Vienotība” were overrepresented with response rates over 60%.

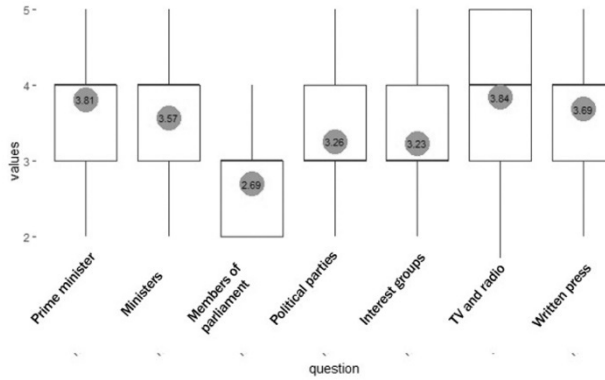
To compare Latvia with other countries, the set of questions was borrowed from earlier studies (Vesa et al., 2015; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011). First of all, the MPs had to answer to the questions – “How often do the following actors succeed in setting a new problem on top of the political agenda?” The MPs were asked to evaluate the influence of various actors in scale 1 to 5

(1 – very rarely, 5 – very often). As Figure 1 shows, the Latvian MPs think that the power of radio and television to set new problems on political agenda is strong. In the opinion of the respondents, only the Prime minister has greater influence. However, the power of the written press is less evident and only the influence of the parliamentarians was evaluated less important.



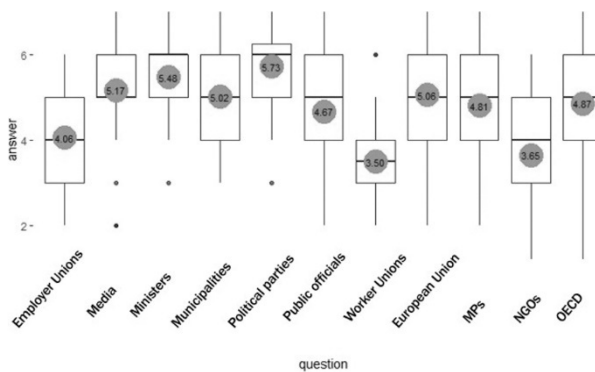
**Figure 1. “How often do following actors manage to set an issue to political agenda?” Latvian MPs’ perceptions (scale 1–5 (very often))**

To further test H1, the answers of Latvian MPs were compared to the answers of Finnish MPs (Figure 2). The Finnish MPs think that the power of television and radio to set news agenda is stronger than that of other political actors. Only the Prime minister can compete for this position. Unlike politicians in Latvia, Finnish MPs ranked the written press as the third important actor, and that reflects the strong position of press in Finland (Vesa et al., 2015, p. 7).



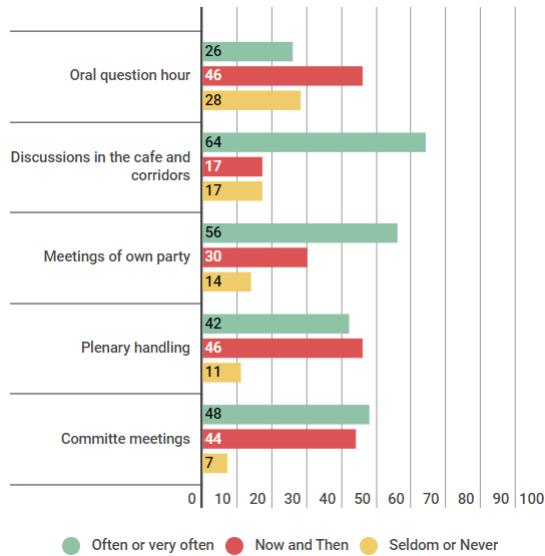
**Figure 2. “How often do following actors manage to set an issue to political agenda?” Finnish MPs’ perceptions (scale 1–5 (very often))**

To get full understanding about MPs’ perceptions on media influence in the long-term, the following question was asked: “How much influence have the following actors had on politics during last decade?” The results (Figure 3) indicate that the news media’s long-term influence on politics has been quite significant. The respondents rated media as the third most important agenda-setter, following political parties and ministers. When comparing Figure 1 with Figure 3, one can conclude that media is and has been among the TOP 3 political agenda-setters for the last 10 years. Therefore, H1 is supported.



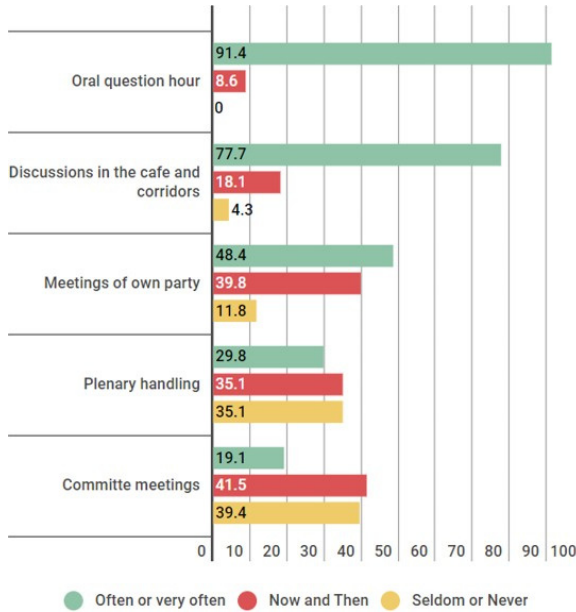
**Figure 3. How much influence have the following actors had over what political decisions have been made during the last 10 years? MPs’ perceptions (scale 1–7 (very much))**

The second hypothesis (H2) predicts that media has more power on political discussions and less on actual political making process. To find out the answer, the MPs had to answer two sets of questions. First of all, they were asked to provide answers to the question “How often is an issue discussed in the following places because the media have raised it?” As one can see in Figure 4, according to MPs, media have the strongest influence on discussions in cafés and corridors– 64.5% agree to that. These are places where most of political negotiations, political gossips and lobbying takes place (Vesa at al., 2015, p. 10). Importantly, the journalists can access these places and participate in political discussions. The MPs perceive that the second most affected agendas are the meetings of political party groups. On the one hand, these are quite substantial, because party groups discuss most important issues of a day and the voting strategy for the next day’s plenary sitting. On the other hand, these are the meetings where parties often plan what issues will be raised on symbolic agendas. Approximately half of respondents agree that the news media often affect the work of parliamentary committees. The standing committee meetings are very crucial part of parliamentary work in Latvia. The main function of committees is to consider draft laws, proposals and submissions that latter will be considered at plenary sittings. However, committee meetings are often attended by the media and that can influence what discussion will be held. Almost the same number of MPs (48%) agreed that media quite often affect attention paid to issues in the meetings of governing parties (the Coalition Council’s Meeting). These meetings provide a forum, where major political figures of political parties gather every week to discuss what, when and how issues will be voted in the Parliament and the Government. The media representatives do not attend these meetings, but after each of them press briefings are held, so MPs use this as a platform to disseminate their symbolic agendas.



**Figure 4. Latvian MPs' perceptions on how often is an issue discussed in the following places because media have raised it (percentage)**

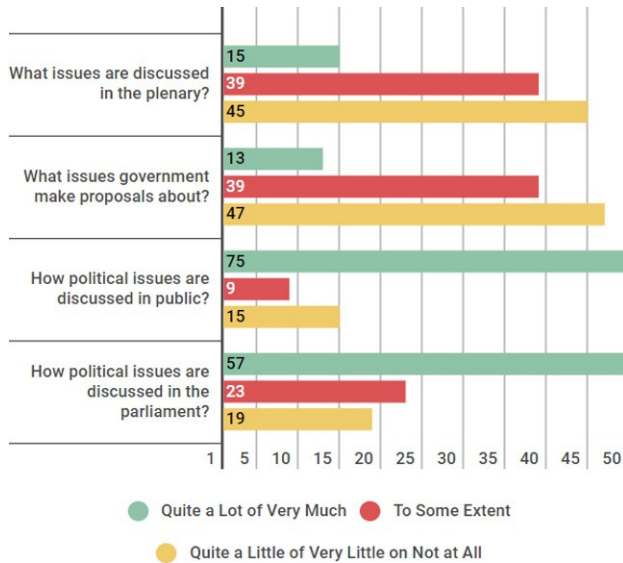
According to MPs, the least affected by media are the answer sessions to parliamentary questions. Only 26% agreed that it is “very often and often affected by media”. These sessions provide opposition parties the opportunity to “grill” ministers in front of the media. However, quite often ministers refrain from participating in these sessions and choose to answer MPs’ questions in written form. Thus, in 2017 when this survey took place only 7 sessions were held. This is very different from Finland where question hours are very popular. Question hours are broad-cast live on the parliament web page and on television, and usually there is a live audience as well. Finnish MPs think that the media have the strongest influence on the question hour due to prior media coverage (Figure 5). According to Finnish parliamentarians the parliamentary standing committee meetings are the least affected. In contrast to Latvian Parliament, committee meetings are held behind closed doors (Vesa et al., 2015, 11).



**Figure 5. Finnish MPs’ perceptions on how often is an issue discussed in the following places because media have raised it (percentage)**

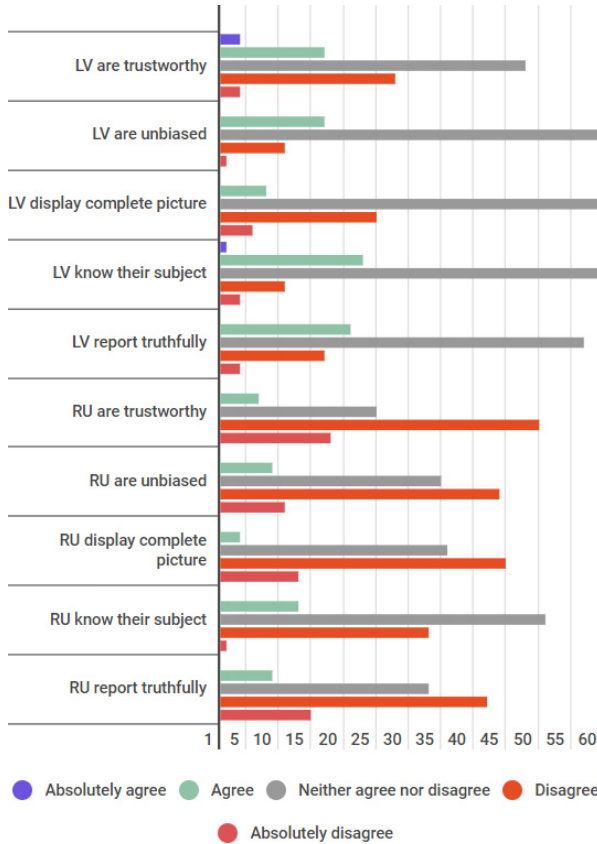
To further test H2 the MPs had to answer the question about media’s ability to influence what and how issues are discussed in the society and in the Parliament. Figure 6 states that according to the MPs the media affect the most how issues are discussed in the society. Seventy-five percent of MPs answered “very much and quite a lot”. Most MPs agree that the media can also influence how, but not what issues are discussed in plenary sessions. Forty-seven percent of MPs don’t believe that the media affect what issues government make proposals about. Almost the same number of parliamentarians don’t think that the media influence what issues are discussed in the plenary sessions.

To summarize, the MPs’ answers show that the media have a great deal of influence on symbolic agendas. Although in some questions MPs indicated that the media can have an effect on what decision will be made, most of MPs’ responses indicated that the media can have a greater impact on the political debate that could be covered by the media. Thus, one can conclude that the media affect more strongly symbolic agendas and H2 is supported.



**Figure 6. Latvian MPs' perceptions on the media influence on political issues (percentage)**

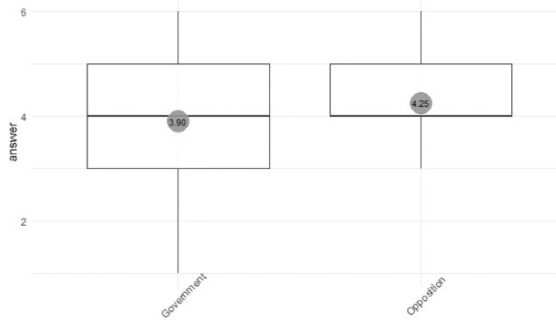
To understand whether weaker positions of the written press to set the issues on the political agenda could be connected to trust levels several questions were asked about the media's truthfulness, trustworthiness and the competence of media. As one can see in the Figure 7, the MPs do not trust the media to a large scale, especially the Russian-language media. Only seventeen percent of MPs agree that Latvian-language media are unbiased and only nine percent that Russian-media language in Latvia are unbiased. MPs are particularly sceptical about the media's trustworthiness, ability to display full picture and to report truthfully. Only eight percent of MPs are convinced that Latvian-language media display a complete picture and only five percent believe that Russian-language media display a complete picture. MPs don't believe that Latvian and Russian media report truthfully (twenty-one percent agreed about Latvian language media and nine percent about Russian language media).



**Figure 7. Latvian MPs’ perceptions on Latvian-language and Russian-language media**

To test whether the trust level in media is related to the agenda-setting power of media (H3), correlation tests were used between two variables “media’s agenda-setting power” and “trust in media”. “Media’s agenda-setting power” is a sum of questions that measure the power of the written press, radio and TV to set political agenda (Figure 1) (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.745$ ). The variable “trust in media”, is a sum of questions: “Media reports truthfully; is trustworthy; knows their subject; display complete picture and is trustworthy” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.857$ ) (Figure 7). Results showed that the correlation is not strong ( $r = +.02, p >.05$ ). To further test this hypothesis, the author used Pearson correlation for Latvian language and Russian language media separately. There were no statistically significant correlations ( $r = +.01, p >0.05$  (Latvian language media) and  $r = -0.2, p >0.05$  (Russian-language media)). Therefore, H3 must be rejected. And once again

the finding echoes previous studies, there is no evidence that trust in media is related to the perception of trust in media (Vesa et al., 2015).



**Figure 8. “How powerful tools are social media for reaching your political goals?” Latvian MPs’ perceptions (scale 1–5 (very useful))**

To test the fourth hypothesis: “MPs who see social media as a valuable tool for political battles, will attribute more agenda-setting power to media”, the correlation analysis was carried. The first variable represents MPs’ perceptions about the power of TV, radio and written press to put issues on top of the political agenda (Figure 1) (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.745$ ). The second variable is answer to the question “In your opinion, how powerful tools are social media for reaching your political goals?” (Figure 8). The hypothesis failed to capture the strength of tied connection between agenda-setting power and MPs perceptions about use of social media for political goals. The data didn’t confirm that MPs who see social media as a valuable tool for political battles, attribute more power to media ( $r = -0.06$ ,  $p < 0.67$ ). The Hypothesis 4 must be rejected.

## Conclusion

The relationship between the media and politicians has been in the centre of attention in both communication science and political science for several decades. The mass media plays a significant role in modern democracies, and many studies have intensively analysed how these actors interact. Since the raise of the popularity of political communication studies researchers have tried to explore various methods to describe the depth of this interaction.

A comparative approach can tell us how MPs in various countries with diverse media and political systems think about media power, and whether there are any meaningful differences in their perceptions.

Most of social science researchers focus on one national system, and as a result, their theories and conclusions are limited and unbiased. Comparative research can challenge universal assumptions allowing to see some issues in relation to alternatives. Esser and Hanitzsch argue that comparative research is a valuable tool for broadening our understanding of communication processes, as it opens up new avenues for research (Esser et al., 2012, p. 3).

This study reveals that Latvian MPs think very similar to their colleagues in Finland when it comes to general statements about the agenda-setting power of media. However, the difference lies in the type of media. Like other Nordic countries, Finland has a long history of the written press, but Latvia had to take a different path towards development of democratic institutional framework, diverse media and civic society. As a result, MPs of Latvia do not see the written press as one of the most powerful actors that can have a major influence on the political agenda.

To uncover how MPs in Latvia evaluate the media and how much belief they put in the media system that they have helped to create, several questions were asked regarding trust in media. The results showed, that Latvian MPs are very critical about the objectivity of media. They are especially judgmental towards Russian language media. MPs don't see them as trustworthy, unbiased and being able to display the full picture. Taking into account that the most important functions of media in democracies is to provide unbiased, trustworthy information to the citizens about how the government is managed, MPs perceptions can be seen as a dangerous signal to the society.

Since the first surveys were conducted in Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium and Denmark, the media landscape has changed and news online media as well as social media has gained more power. This study was able to take a glimpse of MPs' perceptions and found out that the politicians see them as an important asset in the political battlefield. Therefore, one of the suggestions for future surveys of MPs could be to refine the questionnaire adding questions that could reveal the power of social media on a political agenda.

This study shows that the survey can be used as a valid method to study perceptions of MPs on agenda- setting power of media. The general set of questions about the power of media can give a comprehensive picture how media influence is evaluated in different countries. Nevertheless, it is

important to take into account different formations of media systems that developed under particular historical conditions. Thus, the researcher concludes that the findings of earlier surveys in Western EU countries can be generalized to other EU countries but there are some socio-political and cultural-historical peculiarities that must be taken into account. To conclude, the author hopes that these findings will inspire future surveys of elite politicians in countries with various political and media systems.

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## Notes

Out of 100 MPs in Latvia 52% participated in the survey. Table A1 provides summary of data about MPs who participated in the survey. The questionnaire was organised in routine parliamentary session and no party refused to participate.

## Appendix

*Table A1*

### Characteristic of Latvian MPs

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Government, N = 35<sup>†</sup></b>	<b>Opposition, N = 17<sup>†</sup></b>
<b>age</b>	57 (49, 66)	56 (47, 64)
<b>specialisation</b>		
more than two	25 (71%)	11 (65%)
one or two	10 (29%)	6 (35%)
<b>years_mp</b>	6.0 (4.0, 6.5)	7.0 (3.0, 10.0)
<b>language</b>		
Latvian	32 (91%)	11 (65%)
Russian	3 (8.6%)	6 (35%)
<b>gender</b>		
Man	30 (86%)	13 (76%)
Woman	5 (14%)	4 (24%)
<sup>†</sup> Statistics presented: Median (IQR); n (%)		