LATVIAN JOURNALISM AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: A BRUSSELS AND RIGA PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: Journalists play a central, yet not fully studied, role in the accession of the Baltic States to the European Union. Consequently, this study presents an analysis of EU journalism in Latvia as one of the Baltic Member States. Findings are based on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with journalists in Riga and correspondents in Brussels, who all are directly responsible for EU news coverage. The study shows that EU journalism in Latvia takes surprisingly similar shapes to that of the Western EU Member States.

KEYWORDS: European Union, Journalism, New EU Member States, Latvia, European integration
INTRODUCTION

The process of European Union integration is central to the lives of all its citizens. Yet, research suggests the EU citizens are neither interested in, nor know very much about, the EU (European Commission, 2011). This is particularly true for the so-called ‘new’ EU Member States that have joined the Union since 2004 (European Commission, 2010; 2011). The gap between the EU and its citizenry is generally described as a major obstacle to a further deepening and widening of the EU, which today depends, to a very large extent, on public approval (see European Parliament, 2010; Machill, Beiler and Fischer, 2006; Risse, 2003). The relationship between levels of public support for the EU and news coverage about it in the national media is strong, because citizens see the national media as a primary source for information about the EU (European Commission, 2011).

However, extant studies show that the media may neglect to report on EU issues (Adam, 2007; de Vreese, Banducci, Semetko and Boomgaarden, 2006), present relevant topics in a negative way (see Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005; Peter and de Vreese, 2004), or produce so-called ‘domesticated’ news (see Bourdon, 2007) that focuses on the domestic relevance of the news issue only. This may lead to decreasing support for the EU, which can be observed in low turnout rates for the last European parliamentary elections (de Vreese et al., 2006) or the rejection of EU initiatives by means of public referendum (see de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006). To understand the role EU news coverage plays in the EU integration process, one must trace this coverage back to its origins: the journalists as the producers of our daily news. Journalists working in Brussels and their colleagues at the home offices are a crucial link between audiences in the 27 Member States and the EU institutions (see Lecheler, 2008).

So far, most studies have examined journalists from the ‘old’ Member States, such as the United Kingdom or Germany (e.g., Adam, 2007; Brüggemann and Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2009; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). But, how does EU journalism function in the new, predominantly post-communist, Member States? Research has shown that Brussels correspondents from new EU Member States, such as Poland or the Czech Republic, often feel at a disadvantage compared to their colleagues from the older Member States (Lecheler and Hinrichsen, 2010). In addition, their journalistic practices are deeply affected by the young and evolving journalism traditions of their home countries.

This study focuses on EU reporting in one of the Baltic States – an area which has been neglected in the available literature on EU journalism (for an excep-
tion, see Evas, 2007). Specifically, this study focuses on Latvia as an example of a relatively small, post-soviet country with a small and volatile media market (Balčytienė, 2010). By means of qualitative interviewing, we explore the (1) working routines, (2) professional self-perceptions and (3) contextual economic restraints of Latvian EU journalists. Our results can shed further light on how Latvian journalism functions when it comes to the EU as a topic, and how journalists see their role in the future of the EU integration process.

THE EU AND THE MEDIA

To understand how EU news functions, we must first discuss how the media treat the EU as a “topic” of daily reporting. To date, there are a number of studies that investigate different aspects of EU coverage (e.g., Brüggemann and Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2009; Heikkilä and Kunelius, 2008; Peter and de Vreese, 2004; Statham, 2008; de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006). Most scholars agree that EU coverage in the national media faces several challenges. In light of the study of EU journalism, we want to focus on two of these challenges, namely a (1) lack of “newsworthiness” or visibility of EU news in national media, as well as the tendency of journalists to (2) ‘domesticate’ EU issues. These function as the overarching concepts in this study, helping to explain journalistic working and organizational routines, as well as professional self-perceptions.

There is empirical evidence that EU-related issues, especially those pertaining to daily political routine, are considered as not very newsworthy in the media (Adam, 2007). As a result, the visibility of the EU as a topic across all media in the Member States and beyond is low, and increases only during important events such as summits (Peter and de Vreese, 2004) or the European parliamentary elections (de Vreese et al., 2006). What is more, television channels often neglect the EU, possibly because the EU institutions do not provide them with a strong leader or a “face” that could represent them (Bourdon, 2007; Lecheler, 2008). Peter and de Vreese (2004: 17) argue that “[t]he coverage conveys the impression that EU politics is decided upon by anybody, but definitely not by EU officials”. This also implies it is local politicians and national governments who lead the media discussions on EU topics. Our study will investigate how Latvian EU journalists perceive the newsworthiness of EU issues, and what make them decide to report on one issue rather than another.

‘Domestication’ has been described by several researchers, usually along the lines of one of the main characteristics of EU news coverage within the Member States (e.g., Bourdon, 2007; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005). Domestication al-
cludes to the fact that EU issues are presented as being consequential only on a national level, or are not presented in an ‘EU’ context at all. While this is conceivable from the standpoint of journalistic news production--given that news values, such as proximity, function as important orientation points for journalists--this has several consequences for the process of EU integration and the emergence of a European public sphere (e.g., Bourdon, 2007). There are differing conceptualizations as to what would represent a “European public sphere” in democratic theory (see Risse, 2003), but authors agree that this public sphere must be based on some form of common reference point or journalistic angle in the media when it comes to reporting on EU issues. Consequently, this common or shared reference point can establish the European media as an arena for public discourse and deliberative decision-making (see Gerhards and Neidhardt, 1990). This means that, while a particular EU issue can be presented with a national reference, it must be accompanied by information as to how it is being discussed in other Member States or across the European Union. Also, scholars argue that journalists must reference European (e.g., MEPs) rather than national actors (e.g., the German chancellor) when describing the development of European integration in the news. Yet, this is not the case when news is domesticated. This is summarized by Bourdon (2007), who provides four points of the EU domestication often used by the national media across Europe as

“(1) the interpretation of non-national events by national leaders and experts; (2) foreign events that resemble and help frame national events (e.g. a terrorist attack in Spain will be picked in the UK with an implied comparison with Northern Ireland); (3) non-national figures who also have a national ‘added value’ (the Pope, especially in Catholic countries); (4) events that take place in former colonies of the country that picks up the story” (267).

Empirical research has shown that, understandably, high levels of domestication can be explained by the mere presence of national governments within Member States. National political actors are still the main, or even only, agenda-setters in a country (Trenz, 2004). In other words, national governments are most successful in placing EU issues in the news media, which contradicts common assumptions as to the creation of a European discourse enabled by European actors. For instance, research has shown that European issues in the Spanish press are closely linked to the national media agenda, and serve only the interest of national elites (Pradel Miquel, 2008). Another study on EU coverage in the British, Danish and Spanish presses concluded the dominant news frames on the EU are only shared

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1 Some authors see it as an ideal, better form of the national public spheres that spread across all Member States, but which is unlikely to emerge due to such factors as language diversity and national media barriers (Grimm, 1995). Others suggest that a European Public Sphere can develop once the media in Europe approach and evaluate European issues and actors from a common European perspective and not primarily from the national or domestic point of view (Balčytienė et al., 2008).
in part by different EU countries, and that the framing of political issues therefore largely depends upon local contexts and politics (Just, 2009). As said, while this is not an unnatural process, we argue that high levels of domestication could be detrimental for the creation of a European Public Sphere, because emphasis on local actors and issues does not create a common, Europe-wide understanding of EU integration politics (de Vreese et al., 2006). Therefore, domestication represents one of the key dimensions within this study.

Thus, we can argue that EU coverage faces a number of challenges. In the field of journalism studies, the origin of these challenges is studied by means of investigating individual journalistic working routines and self-perceptions, and by evaluating which contextual restraints journalists face (e.g., Lecheler, 2008). Media content research has shown that the EU is not very visible in the news across Europe, and it is domesticated. This indicates the structure of the news coverage about the European Union and EU issues does not match its political, economic and social significance.

Low visibility and domestication can, at first, be explained by examining journalistic working routines. The questions are why do journalists not feel the growing importance of the EU? Do they think the EU is too complex? And how do journalists within a media organization argue the importance or newsworthiness of the EU? Also, journalistic self-perceptions can explain how journalists themselves see their role within the EU integration process. Lastly, contextual restraints, such as an economic crisis, can give more circumstantial evidence as to why EU news coverage has this particular structure. These points are elaborated on in the following section.

THE EU AND JOURNALISTS

Journalists play a crucial role in connecting the EU with its citizens around the continent (Statham, 2007). Because EU news coverage is characterized by low visibility, which suggests unclear standards as to its real newsworthiness, one could assume that journalists play an even bigger role in promoting or dismissing EU topics in their medium than when it comes to national politics, where news patterns are more stable (Lecheler and Hinrichsen, 2010). In the following, we evaluate EU journalism as to working routines, journalistic self-perceptions, and contextual economic restraints.

Considering their daily working routines and self-perceptions, journalists covering EU politics face a dilemma between the national and European agenda.
They often feel the necessity to deliver more information about the EU to raise public awareness. On the other hand, they recognize that public interest in EU issues is low – that the EU is maybe not important enough for many citizens. Therefore, journalists feel they need to provide local perspectives on European topics, because it may attract a bigger audience and increase ratings for the electronic media or circulation numbers for the newspapers and magazines (see Heikkilä and Kunelius, 2008; Balcytiene et al., 2008). As a result, these journalists are often blamed from two sides. The editors criticize them for ‘going native’ and becoming advocates or hesitant ambassadors of Europe, while the representatives of the EU institutions often argue that journalists are too critical and sceptical regarding their performances (Heikkilä and Kunelius, 2008). Generally low public and editorial interest towards EU politics as described above limits the space at the newspaper or air time at the electronic media allocated for the stories about the EU (Lecheler, 2008; Statham, 2008). At the same time, the importance of the decisions taken by the EU and their direct effects on the Member States keeps increasing as a result of the further integration of Europe. Therefore, journalists who cover the EU become local rather than foreign news journalists (Terzis, 2008).

There are certain characteristics that differentiate EU journalists based in Brussels from their colleagues at home. Unlike other political journalists, European correspondents have to be brokers between European and national public spheres (Lecheler, 2008). On the one hand, European correspondents are “pioneers at the national level, whose journalism creates a possible space for the emergence of Europeanized viewpoints” (Statham, 2008: 418). EU correspondents, like their colleagues, are prisoners of the nation-state in terms of defining journalism practices (Heikkilä and Kunelius, 2008). Unlike journalists who work from the home office, Brussels correspondents are in close proximity, not only to the EU officials, but also to one another. Thus, they “facilitate horizontal integration by allowing for a sharing of perspectives and criteria of relevance on European issues” (Lecheler, 2008: 446). These correspondents could play a special role in the emergence of a European Public Sphere.

EU journalists stationed in Brussels share one decisive characteristic with foreign correspondents of the, for example, Washington press corps (see, e.g., Hannerz, 2004; Gross and Kopper, 2011): they are stationed in a foreign country, members of a tightly knit group of journalists from different nationalities who interact closely in reporting about the EU. However, as Baisnee (2002) argues, they are not reporting on foreign, but national news directly relevant for their home countries, which suggests a different mechanism of news production.
When it comes to their relationship with the home office, many EU journalists in Brussels are given relatively more freedom in their choice of topics and coverage, as editors consider these journalists to be professionals in their field (Lecheler and Hinrichsen, 2010). At the same time, the situation can be different in the home offices, where journalists are in closer contact with their editors. Nevertheless, the choice of topics for Brussels correspondents is limited. The existence of the direct link between the home-country of the journalist and the particular EU event is one of the crucial factors in such a process (see Lecheler, 2008; Heikkilä and Kunelius, 2008). Moreover, many journalists who cover the EU think that explaining what one or another EU decision might mean for their home-audience in simple terms is one of their major tasks (Balčytienė et al., 2008).

High quality coverage of EU politics requires not only journalistic knowledge and experience but also a favourable contextual setting and, most importantly, considerable financial resources in order to enable permanent correspondents in Brussels as well as extensive coverage at home. Thus, not every media outlet, especially in economically weaker or geographically smaller Member States, can afford to have their own journalist in Brussels. And even if a media outlet has a permanent correspondent in the EU capital, many news stories and articles concentrate only on key EU events, therefore opportunities to create interesting and appealing stories about Europe are often missed (Balčytienė et al., 2008).

The importance of permanent correspondents in Brussels has been emphasized not only by academics (e.g., Lecheler, 2008), but also by the European Union institutions (e.g., European Parliament, 2010). But the current economic crisis and other factors often dictate the opposite. At the same time, it should be noted that the economic crisis has had different impacts on Member States. It is clear that the number of accredited journalists in Brussels has been reduced rather sharply in recent years (European Parliament, 2010), but the absence of available data does not allow us to make general conclusions about the impact of the economic crisis on EU journalism throughout the Union.

In sum, EU journalism depends on working routines, which are characterized by low public interest in, as well as the complexity of, EU issues, and the influence of these characteristics on journalistic self-perceptions. Among journalists covering the EU, correspondents in Brussels play a special role because they serve as brokers between the national and the European sphere, and also because of their relationships with editors at home. Lastly, economic restraints pose a considerable threat to EU news coverage.
LATVIAN JOURNALISM AND THE EU

Latvia is one of the twelve Member States to have joined the EU between 2004 and 2007. Even though they are often referred to collectively, these “new” countries differ greatly from one another, not only by their size and language, but also historically, politically and culturally. What is more, a large majority of the new EU members are post-soviet, which means they have experienced tremendous changes during the 20 years since the fall of the communist regime. This change also fundamentally affects their media systems and, in the context of this study, the journalistic profession (Jakubowicz, 2007). Among the new members, the Baltic States (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) “have introduced a more or less liberal ‘laissez faire’ approach: the journalistic culture of these countries is affected by the ideals of the liberal model (through such processes as secularization, individual consumption and consumerism)” (Balčytienė, 2009: 47). Although there are differences, media markets and journalism in the Baltic countries have several common characteristics, such as small market size, a very liberal climate of media regulation, weak traditions of professional journalism and weak accountability of journalists (Balčytienė, 2010).

The Latvian media market in particular can be described as liberal and competitive (Balčytienė, 2009), but different economic circumstances are hindering the development of specialized and investigative journalism (see Kruks and Šulmane, 2005; Šulmane, 2007). Not much is known about how EU coverage is characterized in Latvia, however, there are a number of characteristics of the Latvian media market that suggest it will display the two main challenges to journalism, discussed above, which hinder the chance of furthering EU integration: low visibility or newsworthiness of the EU, and domestication of EU news.

First, only one newspaper (the broadsheet Diena) has ever had a permanent correspondent in Brussels. This means that, compared to eleven correspondents in Brussels from Hungary, or seven from the Czech Republic (Raeymaekers, Cosijn and Deprez, 2007), Latvia has only ever had a very limited possibility to create visibility for EU politics right from the source. A good example of this limitation is the newspaper Latvijas Avīze, which is one of the first newspapers to develop a special weekly EU supplement, and had already done so before the 2003 referendum on Latvian accession to the EU. However, it has never had its own permanent correspondent in Brussels, and over time has relied on various freelancers in Brussels, as well as the newspaper’s own journalists at the home office.
Second, the development of public broadcasters has been strongly affected by the desire of politicians to ‘keep an eye’ on them, which has taken away from a European focus in this medium (Brikšė, 2010). Specifically, Latvian Television and Latvian Radio cannot be seen as traditional public broadcasters, because they feel responsible not to the public, but to the state that provides for them by means of funding (Bērziņš and Šulmane, 2009). The management of Latvian Television and their policies have been widely criticized in recent years, in particular for the commercialization of its content and a decrease in journalistic quality (e.g., Brikšė, 2010). Maybe as a result, the popularity of this broadcaster among viewers is decreasing (see Brikšė, 2009; Šulmane, 2007; Tjarve, 2006). Latvian Television previously had one permanent correspondent in Brussels, but today relies mainly on stories provided by the home office journalists away from the Brussels “buzz”. Latvian Radio is still quite popular with the audience (Šulmane, 2007; Brikšė et al., 2010), and is the only media outlet that has kept a permanent EU correspondent based in Brussels during the economic crisis.

Third, several aspects pertaining to the journalistic profession are likely to influence both visibility and domestication of EU news in Latvia: (1) the lack of established journalistic norms and standards in an economy that suffers from economic restrictions, (2) the slow development of journalistic codes and ethics, and (3) developing journalistic self-perceptions.

The creation of a truly democratic media system in post-communist countries such as Latvia is not finished, because such a system can only develop over time (Lecheler and Hinrichsen, 2010). In the literature, the professional identity of Latvian journalists is considered weak and their professional environment is seen as fragmented (Balčytienė, 2010). According to Šulmane (2010), the Latvian journalistic community represents problems and paradoxes that exist in Latvian society in general, which are (1) a clear division between the Latvian and Russian language communities, (2) a lack of trust in politics, and (3) the inability to agree on common journalism work standards. Although legislation ensures sufficient freedom of speech, political and economic pressure, as well as lack of knowledge and experience, plays an important role for journalists (Brikšė, 2009). Today, the ongoing economic crisis strengthens these pressures. For example, Bērziņš and Šulmane (2009) argue that the use of questionable practices in journalism may rise due to the significant decrease of advertisement revenue during the last years.

Second, the development of an editorial codes of ethics is slow, and the level of self-organization among journalists weak (see Balčytienė, 2010; Šulmane, 2007).
Also, existing journalist organizations are often described as weak and non-influential, and many journalists are not members of these organizations (see Šulmane, 2010). Moreover, Balčytienė (2009: 47) argues that there are “signs of clientelism in journalists’ relationships with their political or economic news sources.” Such signs are manifested in the careful adjustment of the media towards political agendas. Serious concerns regarding self-censorship and internal censorship as being present in the private media have been expressed (Balčytienė, 2010).

When it comes to journalistic self-conceptions, a majority of Latvian journalists think that the main purpose of their media is to be a watchdog. However, at the same time, priority is given to informing and educating their audience (Balčytienė, 2010). This means that analytical and investigative journalism are barely present in news coverage (Rožukalne, 2010). On the other hand, the majority of journalists in Eastern Europe and Latvia represents a younger generation who started their careers after 1990, and therefore can position themselves as modern thinking personalities who are distant from Soviet ideology (Lecheler and Hinrichsen, 2010). At the same time, a majority of the senior media management in Latvia received a Soviet education and has significant work experience during that period (Šulmane, 2010), which may have an effect on their understanding of the role of independent media in a democratic society².

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The above suggests there are several important factors pertaining to journalistic work that determine EU news coverage and that may lead to low visibility and increased levels of domestication. First, we have described that journalists who work from Brussels or the home office have created their own working routine (Lecheler, 2008). However, Latvian journalists (who are mainly stationed in Riga) suffer from specific structural restrictions that can be connected to their cultural, social and educational backgrounds. More specifically, previous research (e.g., Adam, 2007; Bourdon, 2007; Lecheler, 2008; Peter and de Vreese, 2004) has identified three major parts of the daily routine as important: EU complexity, the prominence of EU news stories, and the relationships between Brussels and the home offices. In the Latvian case, these could differ from what we know so far, because of the small market size, local journalism traditions and other aspects that are special to this Baltic state. First, we ask the following questions:

RQ1: How do Latvian journalists who are covering EU politics describe their working routine?

² Šulmane (2010) points out that distinction between old and young generation of journalists might be too simplistic as there are examples when journalists use old standards in the new situation, namely serving not to just one ideology but the interests of one media owner.
RQ1a: How complex do these journalists think the EU as a topic is?

RQ1b: How prominent do these journalists think EU topics are in news production?

RQ1c: How do Latvian journalists describe the professional relationships between EU journalists at home, Brussels correspondents, and the home office(s)?

Next, we have emphasized the importance of journalistic self-perceptions or role conceptions in determining EU news coverage. Previous research shows many journalists who cover EU politics see themselves as educators and find it very important to explain EU decisions to their audience (Balčytienė et al., 2008). But this might be different for the Latvian case. Thus, the second research question of this study is:

RQ2: How do Latvian journalists perceive their own task as journalists when it comes to covering EU topics?

Third, and in light of developments dominating the news at the time of writing this article, we turn to economic restrictions of Latvian journalists as an example of the contextual determinants of EU journalism. Latvia was one of the first EU countries to be strongly affected by the ongoing economic crisis (see Latvijas Banka, 2009). Just like many others, various media outlets have experienced dramatic decreases in their income (see Brikšė, 2009). Due to the economic crisis, the number of Latvian correspondents in Brussels has dropped from three to one. Therefore, it is important to understand the role of economic restraints in EU news coverage, which leads us to the third research question:

RQ3: How do Latvian journalists who are covering EU politics describe the effect of economic restraints on reporting EU topics?

METHODOLOGY

This study seeks to answer both how and why EU politics are covered in major Latvian media outlets. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method because an “interview gives individuals appropriate outlets through which their experiences and thoughts can be shared with others in meaningful interactions” (Cisneros-Puebla, Faux, and Mey, 2004: “Interviews as parts of daily life”, para. 4) and also, due to their flexibility and capacity, interviews allow participants to reflect deeper on their own professional performance (Bryman, 2008).
Participants were selected using *purposive sampling*, which is a form of non-probability sampling that allows for the sampling of cases strategically, in order to get a relevant sample for answering particular research questions (Bryman, 2008). During the process of sampling, the concept of theoretical saturation, described by Strauss and Corbin (1998), was also applied. This concept allows the gathering of data until “(a) no new relevant information seem to be emerging regarding a category, (b) the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions demonstrating variation, and (c) the relationships among categories are well established and validated” (212).

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with Latvian journalists and editors/producers who are working with EU issues from Brussels or Riga. The participants represent four different major media outlets (two public media - *Latvian Television* and *Latvian Radio*, two private daily newspapers - *Latvijas Avīze* and *Diena*) that currently have or previously had permanent correspondents in Brussels or regularly cooperated with the Brussels-based journalists from Latvia.

All of the interviews, except the interview with Journalist 1, took place in Riga in January 2011. The interview with Journalist 1 was conducted in December 2010 using Skype. Every interview was recorded and transcribed in Latvian. Quotes used in this text were translated into English.

The interviews were conducted using an interview guide that was structured into several lines of inquiry and categories which were followed by suggestions for open questions. The focus of the interviews was on the daily routine of the journalists covering EU topics in Brussels or Riga, their relationships with each other and their audience, as well as other potential factors that can affect EU coverage in Latvia. The lines of inquiry were based on previous studies that included interviews with journalists and editors working with EU issues (e.g., Coman, 2000; Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005; Heikkinen and Kunelius, 2008; Statham, 2008). Important socio-demographic data about professional experience, education, and gender was also gathered.

The interview guide was designed to shed light on the relationship between editors and their correspondents and explore the potential influence of these relationships on actual news coverage. This aspect is important as EU politics are complicated and often lack the classical news value standards (Statham, 2007). Therefore, the role of journalists and their editors in coverage of EU politics becomes crucial. Every interview transcript was analyzed using the qualitative content analysis method introduced by Mayring (2000), which involves paraphrasing and then coding into categories. During the analysis, for instance, categories relating to ‘domestication’ or ‘prominence’ were identified.

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3 A table with an overview of the participating journalists and editors is available from the authors.
RESULTS

WORKING ROUTINE

THE COMPLEXITY OF THE EU AS A TOPIC

The complexity of the EU was one of the points the journalists addressed the most during interviews. According to them, good coverage of many EU topics requires lots of time and knowledge. Many of the journalists claim one needs to follow EU issues closely in order to really understand them, but very often this is not possible due to the way the daily work is designed. One of the journalists pointed out that he, as well as colleagues from other media, sometimes make mistakes in their EU stories, because it is hard to get all the details correct when you are based in Riga. And, even if a correspondent has all the information, it still takes “considerable effort” (Journalist 6) to produce a story understandable and interesting for the audience. Thus, journalists sometimes take the path of least resistance and tend to avoid the topic of EU politics, unless it is really necessary to mention it:

“There are two topics many of my colleagues would prefer not to make stories about – the EU and the Middle East” (Journalist 3, p. 28, line 214-216).

By comparing the EU to the Middle East in the previous quote, Journalist 3 points out the great amount of detail and complexity both issues have, and that they are hard to cover in a short news item. At the same time, TV journalists admit the “EU does a lot to provide visual material” (Journalist 2) for the TV stations around Europe these days, which makes it easier to cover EU stories. Still, “not all the stories can be told on radio or TV” (Journalist 1), especially those regarding new laws and policies that, for instance, deal with financial regulations. “TV is a harder challenge and the story needs to be clear from the very beginning” (Journalist 3), because people cannot read it again or pause while watching, as is possible in newspapers. The same can be said about radio coverage. But, the interviews show that complicated issues are not well received in newspapers either, as editors believe their audiences are not interested in such issues:

“I still have the feeling the EU is far away and does not affect us. Because they decide somewhere there, and it is not clear when one or another new policy will actually start. So, there is a feeling it will not happen now, and thus it is not important. And the second feeling is that Latvia is so small and cannot affect these decisions anyway. Everything will be as they decide. So, what is the point in talking about it too much?” (Journalist 7: 63, line 138-145).
One of the only ways to explain EU topics, according to a majority of the journalists, is to domesticate them. In other words, it is important to speak not about the policies, but about their influence on a particular person or group of people at home. And it is preferable that those people would be from Latvia: “Otherwise you cannot make it readable” (Journalist 8). Asked about the importance of ‘domestication’ or the national angle in the EU stories, most of the journalists replied that it is crucial or “über-important” (Journalist 3). Others said the national angle is not the only determinant. Other elements, including the “importance and sexiness” (Journalist 5) of the event, are crucial when a decision about the coverage is made. Overall, the journalists and editors in this study see ‘domestication’ not only as important but also as a positive practice:

“I do not think that searching for the Latvian role in one or another issue would be provincial. That is the best way to attract the attention of our audience” (Journalist 1: 6, line 260-262).

“If it is possible to compare [EU issue] with the Latvian situation, then maybe it can cause some discussion in the society that might affect government decisions” (Journalist 7: 73-74, line 95-97).

At the same time, most of the journalists are against the idea of providing additional light or human interest stories in order to bring the EU closer to people. They believe the mission of public broadcasters (i.e., of the Latvian Radio and Latvian Television in particular) and the daily broadsheets (such as Latvijas Avīze) is to provide serious topics and to educate the reader. Also, it is the task of the journalist to bring the story to the audience in an interesting form. Some of the journalists think that feature stories and elements of the reportage in a news story can help to explain complicated EU issues to the audience.

But such measures are not always possible, because of limited resources and several ‘unwritten rules’ regarding the kinds of EU topics that are important and should be covered. Agriculture is one of these important topics and was mentioned by all journalists in this study:

“When there are the words “direct payments” it is clear that I am going to have to write about it. Even if the minister of agriculture goes there for the 350th time and nothing happens, just the usual negotiations. Anyway – I will have to write about it” (Journalist 9: 88, line 245-250).

Therefore, answering the RQ1a, it is possible to conclude that most of the journalists in this study describe the EU as a very complex topic.
PROMINENCE

Some of the journalists and editors have stressed they do not agree with the current practice of placing EU stories in the foreign news section. They argue that the majority of the audience is less interested in foreign than in domestic news and the placement of EU stories amongst foreign news contributes to the general perception that the “EU is somewhere far away” (Journalist 4). Exceptions to this practice are very rare:

“Sometimes I think EU stories should be placed higher, together with Latvian local news. Once, I had a short but exclusive interview with Tony Blair and it was placed very low, almost at the end of the program. I had expected that it would be at the beginning of the program” (Journalist 1: 9, line 437-443).

Interestingly enough, the same idea, namely that the EU is perceived as something distant, is also used by most of the journalists and editors to justify their current practice:

“For us [Latvians] the most important thing is what happens in our own backyard. Only after that, we look outside” (Journalist 6: 68, line 380-381).

Thus, answering RQ1b, we suggest the prominence of the EU topics in Latvian media is generally described as low.

RELATIONSHIPS

Many of the dimensions discussed above are related to the relationships between correspondent in Brussels and editors and EU journalists working in Riga. Also, the relationship between journalists and their audience is important.

Looking at the relationships between the only current Latvian correspondent in Brussels and her colleagues (journalists and editors) in Riga, it becomes obvious the influence of the Brussels correspondent is enormous. Editors admit the Brussels correspondent is given almost complete freedom in her work. Although editors or producers in Riga decide which EU topics should or should not be covered, they are making this choice based on the options provided by the correspondent in Brussels. Therefore, the initial choice of one person affects EU coverage on the Latvian Television and Latvian Radio quite fundamentally:

“We rely on her competence... If in the morning she suggests just one topic, we accept it without a lot of discussion” (Journalist 5: 47, line 145-146).
In the case of the newspaper *Latvijas Avīze*, the impact of the single Brussels correspondent is smaller, but still considerable. Even some of the representatives of other media outlets, which do not even cooperate with the Brussels correspondent, call her “completely irreplaceable” (Journalist 9).

Mostly, the Brussels correspondent is perceived as an authority in EU topics because she has spent approximately five years in the EU capital, consequently considered experienced enough to make professional choices and judgments. The second reason is the fact that the Brussels correspondent follows the EU agenda much closer and receives much more information (both from formal and informal sources) than her colleagues in Riga. In other words, “she knows it better, because she is out there” (Journalist 8), resulting in a geographic advantage.

At the same time, relationships between Brussels and Riga are mostly described in terms such as ‘cooperation,’ ‘common decision-making’ and ‘dialogue.’ The correspondent in Brussels, her producers or editors, and other journalists in Riga, regularly consult each other on various issues. However, in most cases, it is the Brussels correspondent who gives advice on the significance of an issue. Exceptions are made for the bigger and more analytical news stories prepared for *Latvian Radio*. The ideas for these stories mostly stem from producers in Riga and later get developed in discussions between the correspondent and the producer at home.

Several journalists added that not all EU topics are accepted by their editors or producers. Sometimes, the reason is a lack of the editor’s competence or interest in the issue. Other journalists also complained about the resistance of their editors towards talking about a more diverse range of EU topics than just agricultural funds, gas or oil: “Editors want standard topics” (Journalist 9). For instance, the proposal of Journalist 9 to write more about the annual European capitals of culture or the EU digital library project were refused by the editor on the grounds of it not being important and interesting enough.

Some of the editors also admit their reluctance towards certain EU topics, pointing out their journalists are sometimes persuaded by EU officials or simply involved too deeply in one or another topic and, therefore, cannot decide adequately on its importance. Complexity, perceived distance and specificity of many EU issues are mentioned by journalists and editors as reasons why some of the EU topics are turned down. Yet, breaking news and feature stories appear to be types of material that journalists and their editors can easily agree on. The positive attitude towards feature stories is based on the perception that the audience is interested in this form of news coverage. In the European supplement of *Latvijas Avīze*, which is sponsored by the EU, the feature stories are popular.
The supplement used to be accompanied by a successful weekly column written by Iveta Šulca, who was the head of the European Commission Representation in Latvia at the time the interviews were conducted:

"Her column is so popular that the rest of the newspaper could just as well be gone. People ask just for that column. [...] They cut it out and stick it on the wall" (Journalist 8: 77, line 265-269).

When asked whether their audience is interested in EU topics, most of the journalists replied negatively. Some hope that knowledge and interest levels are slowly rising, while others claim most of the ordinary people confuse the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council just as much as they confuse Latvian parliament and government, thinking all of these institutions are the same. “For many people, Europe is just the same as Moscow in Soviet times” (Journalist 8):

“If you look at the latest opinion polls, it becomes absolutely clear that the saying “Europe is the last thing that I want to hear about” is still true” (Journalist 1: 10, 463-465).

At the same time, while talking about audiences in general, journalists stress it would be a mistake to think audience members are all the same or even stupid. However, most of the people are not interested in the EU because they do not associate themselves with this organization.

“People will never be interested in a story where they do not see their own place” (Journalist 4: 40, line 299-301).

To conclude, the only correspondent in Brussels has a lot of professional freedom and is considered to be an expert by the home office. Thus, she has a large influence on the decisions about EU coverage, which provides an answer to RQ1c.

**SELF-PERCEPTION OF EU JOURNALISTS**

Every journalist who participated in this research described him or herself as an *educator*. Mostly, this role conception was based on the assumption that this is the best way to provide balanced and unbiased information to their audience. Several of the journalists stressed they do not like to be told what to do, thus they do not want, or even feel, they have any right to impose their own attitudes and beliefs on their audience. The journalists and editors alike claimed they just want to provide information and let their viewers/listeners/readers make their own choices.
Journalists also find it very important to explain complex EU policies and decisions to their audience, which corresponds with the findings of several previous studies on EU journalism (e.g., Balčytienė et al., 2008). On the other hand, several journalists in this study pointed out they are not fully satisfied with only the role of educator:

“Quite often, before being able to discuss and criticize important EU decisions, we have to explain them, because the EU is so complex ... Thus, there is often a dilemma – are you a journalist who investigates or a person who explains [EU decisions]?” (Journalist 1: 6, line 271-293).

Several journalists and editors have also pointed out that investigative journalism does not belong to the foreign news desk: “That is a task of our local correspondents” (Journalist 2). At the same time, journalists from the foreign news desk are often the only ones who cover EU issues on a regular basis. Journalist 5 even described himself using the famous English saying “Jack of all trades, master of none”.

None of the journalists wanted to refer to themselves as real ‘experts’ in EU politics, adding there are hardly any Latvian journalists who could claim such a title. The only exception, according to the editors and journalists in Latvia, is the one current correspondent in Brussels. The Brussels correspondent herself noted that even after having spent five years in Brussels, she may call herself knowledgeable, but certainly not an expert, in EU matters.

When asked about their attitudes towards the EU, most of the journalists described themselves as optimists, immediately adding that the organization is far from being perfect:

“While working in Brussels, I did not become less optimistic about the EU. But I realize the so-called “European bubble” exists. Very well situated people live inside of it, and ordinary citizens do not get too much from it at all” (Journalist 1: 11, line 515-518).

Journalist 1 also added she would not be covering EU issues if she did not support EU integration itself. One of the journalists also brought forward the thought that even though EU membership generally provides more benefits than losses, these benefits do not translate to Latvia, due to the inactivity of government officials (“number of pros and cons is almost equal”, Journalist 7).

There was only one clear EU pessimist among the participants of this research, and even she gave a slightly ambivalent answer, admitting that EU membership is good for the security of Latvia:
“I wish it [the EU] would collapse! […] Oh, well... maybe not, because we are going to have Russians over here immediately in such case. Now we at least have some kind of protection ...” (Journalist 4: 43, line 446, 447-482).

Thus, answering RQ2, it is possible to say Latvian journalists, who cover EU politics, predominantly describe their professional role conceptions as educators, but not all of them feel satisfied with this role.

ECONOMIC RESTRAINS

Finally, in every interview, economic restraints appear to be a major contextual factor in influencing EU coverage and journalistic routines in Latvia today. In fact, Brussels correspondents were among the first journalists hit by the crisis. Up until 2008, there were three to five journalists from Latvia permanently based in Brussels and today only one of them remains in the EU capital:

“The current situation is tragic, really tragic!” (Journalist 4: 37, line 107).

The lack of money forces most of the media to cover EU issues from the home offices in Riga. This does not allow journalists to communicate with sources in Brussels directly and forces them to create stories based mostly on the information provided by other media or official EU press releases. A limited number of local experts also participate in public discussions from time to time.

Various journalists have admitted that one correspondent in Brussels cannot cover all the issues. Moreover, a lack of teamwork and healthy competition among journalists from one country also negatively affects EU coverage.

We trust her <the Brussels correspondent> a lot, because we do not have another choice” (Journalist 4: 36, line 81).

We conclude financial restraints are described as a very important factor currently hindering development of the quality of EU reporting (RQ3).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine Latvian journalists who are responsible for the EU news coverage, and to understand not only how but also why EU topics in Latvian media are reported in a particular way. We studied journalists, looking at three main factors that may influence their reporting, (1) working routines, (2) self-perception, and (3) economic contextual restraints.
First, our results conducted for this study indicate Latvian journalists describe the EU as a complicated and even boring subject matter, and they see ‘domestication’ as one of the only solutions to make EU news understandable and interesting for their audience. According to the interviewees, the practice of presenting EU stories from the national perspective is widespread in Latvia, which renders Latvia similar to a number of other EU countries (see Bourdon, 2007). Creating news stories with the underlying idea of ‘what can we get from the EU?’; however, undermines the creation of a common European Public Sphere, because European events are evaluated from a national angle instead of being evaluated from a common European perspective (see Balčytienė et al., 2008). It might also render the EU even more distant from Latvia and its citizens. At the same time, most of the journalists in our study stated they would like their audience to realize that Latvia is a real member and active part of the EU.

Due to the perceived distance of the Union, the prominence of EU news is described as low. Although some of the journalists would prefer the EU news to be more prominent in their media, not much seems to be done to change the current state of affairs. Some of the journalists blame their editors for not being interested in EU topics or for demanding only certain types of stories. Others blame the low public interest in EU topics.

The study also shows the only permanent Latvian correspondent in Brussels has an enormous influence on EU news coverage in several media outlets. Just like many of her colleagues from other Member States (see Lecheler, 2008; Lecheler and Hinrichsen, 2010), the Latvian Brussels correspondent is given lots of freedom in the choices of topics and is considered an expert in her field. But some of the journalists admit they have no other choice but to trust this one Brussels correspondent, because they do not have sufficient access to the kinds of information she has.

The journalists interviewed in this study perceive themselves as educators, and think that one of their major tasks is to explain the EU decisions to their audience in simple terms. Such findings are in line with various previous studies on EU correspondents (e.g., Balčytienė et al., 2008; Lecheler and Hinrichsen, 2010) and Latvian journalists (e.g., Šulmane, 2010). At the same time, some of the interviewed journalists expressed dissatisfaction with their roles as educators and stated a preference for more investigative journalism in Latvian EU news. However, they also admit that investigative reporting is often not possible. Some of the obstacles that hinder development of analytical and investigative EU reporting are rooted in the perception of journalists that Latvia is a small Member State, whose journalists are not capable of achieving such a task.
Economical restraints imposed by the European financial crisis were indicated by the journalists as a serious obstacle to adequate EU reporting. The size of the Brussels press corps has decreased in the last five years (European Parliament, 2010) and, therefore, the Latvian situation to a certain extent is not unique. But, the small number of Brussels correspondents from Latvia is causing a lack of healthy competition between Latvian journalists in Brussels, and undermines the ability of the media to fulfil their function as the enabling body of public discourse. Our interviews show that Latvian journalists more and more have to rely on information provided by the EU institutions, international news agencies or other media without having direct contact with high level EU officials. This situates economic restraints as a very “real” characteristic of European news coverage that stands in the way of establishing a European public discourse.

There are a few caveats to this research. First, future research must determine how the expressed self-perceptions of the interviewed journalists compares to actual news reporting in the Latvian media. Also, interviews with EU officials or members of the Latvian Representation to the EU could shed further light on how information flows between the EU and journalists back home. Moreover, there are several developments within Latvia that may have affected our results. Most importantly, we did not specifically consider the educational or ideological background of the interviewed journalists. Further studies could attempt to connect education to EU attitudes and the self-perception of journalists.

Our study on EU journalism in Latvia has produced results suggesting several similarities between journalistic practices in Latvia and other EU Member States, such as a high level of ‘domestication’, and the self-perception of journalists. We show how EU reporting in Latvia functions, and how it compares to national reporting. Low visibility and interest in the EU as a topic, as well as an economic crisis, have forced the Latvian media to cut their Brussels correspondents, and to rely on news produced in Riga rather than Brussels.
REFERENCES


