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“The corruption of Latvian newspapers”

The press has a monumental power. Corruption and interest conflict always threaten the correct use of power. It refers also to the press that's why the country usually determines certain limitations of press freedom, which are pointed towards directness.

The judge of the court of Europe Human rights, Egils Levits (The “Diena”, 5th May, 1999), writes that the main and the most important of press freedom limitation is the term, that paid-up advertisements and announcements should be apparently marked off the redaction text. Though in our press this condition is usually observed, there are still certain attempts to formalize the paid-up advertisement as a redaction text.

Serious press corruption case is taking recompense for redaction text, for example, journalist's article, interview with a politician and so forth. If the newspaper doesn't inform the reader that the politician for the interview or businessman for the article about his enterprise has paid, then it's cheating of the reader. It should be punished, but our lawmaking isn't effective in such cases.

Interest conflict issues are very hard solved. There are so many cases when it's not possible to say whether it's a corruption or not. Very often people, who want to have the article about the business important to them, don't pay money to journalists, but try to get the goodwill by feeding them with different goods. It could be a paid trip from a tourism firm or a dinner in restaurant from the owner. It's hard to define the margins of the corruption.

In her research the author studied the corruption of 2 largest newspapers of Latvia – “Diena” (The Day) and “Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze” (Independent Morning Newspaper (IMN)). Although these 2 newspapers are considered to be professional, still there is some talk that they are not objective in reflecting some important issues of Latvian politics. The Latvians say that IMN reflects the interests of Ventspils city, which is known for the oil transit, but the “Diena” represents the interests of one of the famous political party named “Tautas partija” (The People's Party (PP)). The fact is that the main shareholder of IMN is “Ventspils Oil” and that could be the case of corruption, because oil company can influence the newspaper which belongs to them. The main shareholder of the “Diena” is a Swedish company and officially it has no connection with TP, although a lot of people think that the “Diena” belongs to this rich Party. The leader of TP Andris Šķēle (also the ex-prime-minister of Latvia) and the mayor of Ventspils Aivars Lembergs are the biggest enemies and they usually try to say something bad about each other with the help of media. Many people think that this conflict between both politicians is connected with their business interests, because A.Šķēle was the owner of the 2nd biggest concern group of Latvia named “Ave Lat Group” and sold his enterprises because of his work in politics, but A.Lembergs defends the interests of concern group of Ventspils, which is the biggest one in Latvia. Both politicians have no direct interest in those concerns anymore, they are not allowed to be involved in business because of the political life, but actually no one knows the real situation. A lot of people think that they are hiding their partnership in the concerns.

In her work the author used the method of content analyses to investigate what kind of information the “Diena” and IMN diffuse about both politicians. In general the author researched both newspapers' each issue of the year 2000. During the content analyses she was paying attention not only to the both previously mentioned politicians, but also to the persons who are in good or bad relationship with Šķēle and Lembergs. It is because, if there is a reason to think that both newspapers are corrupted, they would write anything in the way the payer would like to.

The author of the research decided to distribute the work into 4 parts: to find out the 1) what IMN writes about Šķēle, the People's Party and persons, who are supported by them, 2) what

the “Diena” writes about Šķēle, the People’s Party and persons, who are supported by them, 3) what IMN writes about Lembergs, Ventspils City and Ventspils concern and 4) what the “Diena” writes about Lembergs, Ventspils City and Ventspils concern.

During the last year there are several important themes connected with A.Šķēle, which are described in both mentioned newspapers. There is a strong tendency that IMN writes more about ex-prime-minister of Latvia than the “Diena” does. A.Šķēle was a premier till the April 2000 and till that time there are still many articles and news about him and his political party. From all the articles, which are found in IMN, only a few of them are neutral and it’s almost impossible to find anything positive. IMN writes negatively about the work of government during the time when Šķēle was a premier. Newspaper mentions that nothing has changed since that time, that 2/3 of all Latvian inhabitants distrust the government. All editorial columns and standpoints are very skeptical and ironical according to Šķēle, this newspaper tries to find anything what can influence ex-premier’s reputation. In the period of last year there were several scandals in which Šķēle was involved. The biggest one was where another politician named him as the one of 3 persons, who has relevance with pedophilia. Other scandals were connected with his business interest in “Ave Lat Group”; IMN writes that this politician still holds a part of this concern and is lobbying his concern’s interests in the politics. IMN describes very widely the fact that Šķēle stated a 29 million-dollar bill in a declaration. Newspaper writes that a politician could get such a bill only in doing dirty affairs. IMN criticized almost all the ideas, which were given by ex-premier.

While IMN writes mostly negative things about A.Šķēle, the “Diena” looks more neutral. There are several positive articles about this politician, but it is possible to find some negative news too. For example, the “Diena” writes that the People’s Party is too authoritarian, there is some information about “Ave Lat Group”, which isn’t too good for the politician. The “Diena” also mentions the fact that unpopularity of Šķēle has achieved the record. The “Diena” is more objective than IMN, it affords to criticize Šķēle, but all the editorial articles are positive for him and what concerns the conflict between Šķēle and Lembergs, the “Diena” is always on Šķēle’s side. The “Diena” is usually strongly against the people who do some harm to Šķēle. The politician, who named the persons involved in pedophilia scandal, was called a liar, because he hadn’t enough facts against “pedophiles”. What refers the work in the government, the “Diena” wrote that premier hadn’t done everything he had promised, but they also wrote that it was normal. There had never been the situation that everything what was promised, had been done. After the demission of Šķēle the “Diena” wrote about his positive work and concluded that Latvian president had praised him for the things he had achieved. IMN at the same time wrote just about the negative things.

What regards the enterprises of Ventspils, the articles in the newspapers are mostly neutral, but both newspapers write different about the mayor of Ventspils and some bargains, in which he is involved. IMN betrays the opinion of Lembergs very often. As IMN’s main shareholder is “Ventspils Oil”, the information about its deals shows up regularly. IMN writes about the development of the city, also about the enterprises of Ventspils. The jubilee of the city was very well reflected. There are negative articles about the persons, who try to bother Lembergs or the work of concerns of Ventspils. Widely described was the scandal that the finance minister didn’t give the guaranty for “Ventspils Oil” to get the credit from European Reconstruction and Development Bank. IMN was writing that the finance minister had no rights to do that and the only purpose of rejection was that he was also from the People’s Party and all of them were against the concerns of Ventspils.

The “Diena” writes a lot of neutral articles about the concerns of Ventspils, but usually negative things about Lembergs. About the scandal because of guaranty rejection mentioned above the “Diena” said that finance minister had all rights not to give it, but the rest of the facts were reflected neutrally. Commentators of the “Diena” like to speak out ironically about

Lembergs. They also come down that a lot of politicians in the parliament are on the side of Lembergs and it's bad for the future, because he supports the opposition of coalition. The "Diena" also writes about the properties of Lembergs and accents that regional newspaper of Ventspils is never surprised about the high incomes of Lembergs, but is thrilled about the incomes and properties of A.Šķēle and other politicians from the parliament. Commentators are offering an opinion that some parts of concerns of Ventspils belong to Lembergs, although he is not allowed to own them.

To compare the both newspapers, it is possible to notice that in many cases, if the newspapers write about the same theme, IMN gives the opinion of A.Lembergs, but the "Diena" – of A.Šķēle. It causes the situation that those persons, who can give their opinions, are the winners, because they can explain the situation in their favour. So it means that Lembergs will always be better in the IMN readers' eyes and Šķēle in the the "Diena" readers' eyes.

According to these dates, the author of the research thinks that IMN is a corrupted newspaper. It is not normal that IMN doesn't write anything good about Šķēle, his People's Party and the persons who are connected with him. It is all just because of his argument with Lembergs, who has a strong influence on the board directors of IMN. The "Diena" also mentioned one case where there was described an ex-redactor of IMN, who had to leave his job, because the establishments of Ventspils influenced him too much. The author of this article also had a chance to ascertain that IMN is corrupted by the concerns of Ventspils. During the May-June, 2000, she was having an internship in IMN and was unofficially told that journalists were allowed to write about anything except good things about A.Šķēle. It is also seen from the content analyses. During the internship the author had a possibility to make sure because not knowing the situation very well, she wrote the news that Šķēle and his guided government got the anti-prize for the bad works. The author wrote this article very neutral, but when it was published, several negative things had been added to it. To the author's mind, Lembergs or the leaders of the concerns of Ventspils are paying the editors to write good about all events in Ventspils and bad about their opponents. Or maybe "Ventspils Oil", which is the main shareholder, or some other connected concerns are not paying directly, but editors and the journalists are just afraid to write anything what can cost them their job.

The "Diena", to the author's mind, isn't corrupted. Although still there are some tendencies to write negative about Lembergs, it's not possible to find out who has bribed this newspaper to write so. The author doubts that it is Šķēle, someone from the People's Party or Ave Lat Group, because the "Diena" spreads also a bit negative information about them too. The mentioned enterprises are not officially connected with the "Diena", because the main shareholder is a Swedish company. The tendency to write negative about Ventspils can be interpreted the way that there are some dirty affairs and the "Diena" just wants to discover them. There could be some corrupted journalists, especially the author noticed the commentator, who was writing very strong critics about Lembergs' "dirty tricks" and quite good about Šķēle. But it could also be just his political stay and all the comments are usually subjective. The news didn't spread such subjectivity.

Despite the author's opinion about the corrupted IMN and quite independent the "Diena" several opinions about this theme had appeared in the both press editions. Lembergs himself had written a comment in IMN that the "Diena" is a real People's Party's newspaper. Commentator of the "Diena" writes that IMN is dependent on "Ventspils Oil" and Lembergs. Many other people who are not involved personally in this interest conflict, also offer an opinion that both newspapers are dependant, but at least in the case of the "Diena", it can't be proved.

Juris Bojārs, the director of Institute of Foreign Affairs, writes (IMN, 8th of August, 2000): "I assert that there is no true liberty of the press in Latvia, because everyone clearly knows who owns which press editions and whose opinion each newspaper is reflecting. Corrupt

journalism and publishing invited papers, involving clear drug traffic, homosexuality, unisex and even propaganda of pedophilia defense is widely diffused phenomenon in our country. But the priority of state's interest, the moral in politics are not much popular in Latvia." It is very hard to say which cases should be called as a corruption, especially situation in the medium market. The problem is that nobody follows the corruption in media. Media itself write about corruption in different other areas, but very seldom someone speaks about corruption in media itself. The previous quotation by J.Bojārs is one of the rare cases when someone notices the corruption in the media field. In the both newspapers described in this research work, corruption of the "Diena" and IMN is mentioned mostly when both newspapers write about each other and try to prove that the information their concurrent is spreading is framed up just because of corruption.

The author of the research has noticed also some other corruption cases in Latvian newspapers. She had worked in regional newspaper of Valmiera and has had an experience that people, who try to get positive articles about them in regional newspaper, bribe the journalists with different goods. No one can say that it's a corruption, because they don't pay the money and don't push the journalists (with some exceptions) to write positively about them. But still they influence the journalists with the goods, because only in few cases journalists can stay neutral after enjoying the goods offered by the people seeking a positive reputation with a help of media. That author can name the case of attempt of corruption during the election of self-government when the leading political Party had invited all the journalists to celebrate the victory together in a good restaurant. After celebrating the victory together it is hard to write something negative about the persons the persons who became quite well known during the evening. Another case of corruption was when one businessman was making a party for business companies and the press was invited with a deal to reflect the sponsors of the evening and write a positive article about an event.

The last one was a typical case of a corruption, but journalists often can't choose, because it can cost their job. It is sad that economical situation in Latvia isn't so good that journalists are sometimes pressed to take the bribes and act against their morale.