

**THE 4TH TASK AND THE 4TH POWER: NEWLY FORMED NON-GOVERNMENTAL
ORGANISATIONS CAUGHT IN A STRANGLEHOLD BY THE POST-SOCIALIST
ESTONIAN MASS MEDIA?**

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Abstract

The weakest link in the democratisation process of Estonia has been the demobilisation of social movements and the emergence of new civil society institutions. Motivated by an interest in the way participatory democracy is performed in post-socialist societies, or rather with failings in this area, this paper studies the backdrop to this current Estonian problem. In post-socialist societies (including Estonia) people are perceived as either 'winners' or 'losers', the stereotype of 'winners' presuming a well-paid job. In these societies, this label is not associated with non-profit activities. In addition to ethnic, gender- and age-based differences, the relation to money and power in society is one of the major sources of stereotypes. Besides a shortage of the economic, informational and human resources that civil society institutions need in order to function, the present situation is influenced by a lack of acknowledgement and recognition of civil society actors by the general public, mass media and other possible cooperation partners. Although existing stereotypes are difficult to break, the most effective way to deconstruct them is to become aware of the stereotyping way of thinking and its consequences.

Key words: Democratisation, post-socialist countries, civil-society, stereotyping

INTRODUCTION

Democracy implicitly presupposes public discussion and formation of opinions initiated by citizens. The term 'public sphere' has developed hand in hand with a vision of a society in which all citizens have the opportunity to form their own opinions and voice them. The normative basis of this article is the ideal model of *bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit* defined by Jürgen Habermas. In line with Habermas's theory, we consider the public to be a communicative sphere of society in which citizens present their competing arguments and thus participate in the birth of the public opinion that shapes political decisions (Habermas 2001). Although Habermas does not directly speak of mass media when speaking of the public, it is the media that has been the most important public forum – and the communicative fourth power – in the post-socialist Eastern European societies. In the last decades, the role and impact of the mass media in society has grown considerably in Western countries with long histories of capitalism as well as in post-socialist societies in Eastern Europe. Therefore, scholars in the field talk not only about information society but also about media society (Palmaru 2003, p. 154).

This article, exploring some of the less discussed aspects of post-socialist societies, has a number of key objectives. The first of these is to follow up Claus Offe's statement that the former socialist countries must implement a triple transition model establishing the validity of a new economic and legislative order and new rules of social integration (Offe 1996, p. 8). We would like to emphasise an additional dimension to the analytical framework introduced by Offe as the 'magic triangle', namely the establishment of a new form of civil society and its non-governmental intermediary bodies, under the umbrella of which each person could be assured appropriate argumentation and negotiation capacity. This is the fourth of the core tasks of the post-socialist transition to democracy.

Second, using Estonia's transition as an example of the post-soviet transformation process, this paper aims to approach these newly-formed civil society institutions as the main channels and mediating bodies for citizen power in the emerging Estonian democracy. In light of the representational monopoly granted to civil society actors in democratic societies, we explore the availability of the most important channel for their communication efforts: the mass media.

The latter leads us to the third and indeed the most crucial aim of this study. In considering how to promote participatory democracy, and move towards the ideal public sphere as Habermas defines it, the question of whether or not the preconditions for more symmetrical public communication between non-governmental and mass media institutions exist in Estonian transition society is of the utmost importance.⁵⁰ In analysing the public competition of free arguments, the focus of this paper is on civil society actors⁵¹ and their media communication practices as perceived by the gate-keeping policy makers in post-socialist Estonian media institutions. As mass media does not mean free communication in the sphere of private persons who have consolidated to form the public (or as Habermas puts it, *Öffentlichkeit*) but refers instead to a form of institutionalised, intermediated communication with limited feedback, it was important for this study to focus on passing moments of what Klaus Merten terms meta-communication. This refers to moments of communication between a communicator who acts as a recipient and a recipient who is in the role of a communicator (Wiio 1972; Merten 1977 in Palmaru 2003, pp. 146–147). Such communication situations, rare in the context of mass media, highlight a set of crucial problems which, if they remain unsolved, will lead us away from the idea of the competitive democratic public.

If this is the theory, in practice there may be a number of unpleasant surprises in store. Most likely the formation of civil society institutions will succeed despite these problems, but at the same time fail to open a communication channel for citizen power and hence to public discussion and participatory democracy, as media gate-keepers will use their power to block or distort the voice of civil society actors before it reaches the general public (Habermas 1986, p. 352).

An important issue to consider when interpreting the outcomes of the present study is the unequal positions held by civil society actors and mass media editors both in their communication with one another and in mass communication situations. The powerful discursive position of the mass media in society both in the Western world as well as in the post-socialist Eastern European countries is well noted in the field (Fowler 1991, p. 122 in Bishop et al. 2003, p. 267; Fischer et al. 1997, p. 299, p. 319 et sqq.; Hall 1997, p. 258 et sqq.; Palmaru 2005, p. 44 et sqq.), as its messages reach vast numbers of people at the same time. Today, social control is carried out first of all through discourses shaped by mass media (Bishop et al. *ibid.*). These discourses define what is 'normal' or 'natural' in a society, forming part of the socio-cultural code (Imhof 2002, p. 61). Discourses are created by society, at the same time creating and expressing the reality of that society, thereby determining how its members think and behave and what kind of performance is undesirable (Bishop et al. 2003, p. 246). As a result, stereotypes often derive from discourses constructed by the mass media. It has been argued that almost all our knowledge about our society – and about the whole world – has its origins in the mass media (Luhmann 1996, p. 9).

⁵⁰ Habermas, though, has not always sympathised with the organised civic initiative (Lagerspetz 2005, p. 144; see also Habermas 2001)

⁵¹ We prefer the term 'NGO actors' as it is short and well-established in European social sciences to 'actors of the non-profit organizations' which would be the direct translation of the Estonian term 'MTÜlased' or 'mittetulundusühenduste aktivistid' – the term that has become a synonym of the civil society institutions in Estonia resulting from the legislation that has given the majority of civil society initiative that format.

The logical assumption deriving from that is that mass media has had a strong impact on the discourses prevalent in Estonian society, and on the stereotypes that have their origins in and are kept alive by those discourses. If Estonian civil society actors hope to have an impact in society, the success of their efforts depends greatly on the effectiveness of their communication with the mass media.

During the time that Estonia was part of the Soviet system, Estonian civil society activity was blocked. Citizen power was able to take its first steps only during the *perestroika* as the regime loosened its grip and people became less fearful of possible repercussions. That was the time when independent social movements were born (Lagerspetz et al. 2007, p. 9). However, civil society in Estonia in the 1980s did not emerge from this alone. The entire process of regaining independence, of breaking away from an autocratic, mono-party regime, was based on the existing readiness of important elements of the civil society, and among others, the people, to act for the public benefit (Lagerspetz 1996, pp. 42–44). But the civil society's ability to take part in solving the series of problems of transformation to which post-socialist Estonia and many other countries in Eastern-Europe are exposed does not result automatically from the existence of the social movement that had its peak in revolutionary actions. In Eastern Europe, revolutionary movements have often had an unconditionally anti-institutional, if not 'anti-political', twist to them. They have thus been in danger of underestimating the capacity for negotiation and compromise, the only things that would have made it possible to convert social mobilisation into political power. These movements then disappeared from the scene soon after the bureaucracy of the old regime was deprived of its power and the only factor that united the former social movements was eliminated (Offe 1996, pp. 42–43). The overall result was the demobilisation of social movements in Estonia at the beginning of the 1990s and the emergence of new civil society institutions – the non-governmental organisations that Mikko Lagerspetz and Aire Trummal, Estonian researchers of civil society, judged in 2003 to be the weakest link in the democratisation process of Estonia (Trummal et al 2003, p. 32; see also Schöpflin 1995, p. 197; Wallace et al. 2012).

These events in the recent history of Estonian civil society motivated us to examine the background to the problem and to ask whether it is possible that in addition to a shortage in the economic, informational and human resources that NGOs need in order to function, the present situation could also be influenced by another factor, namely a lack of acknowledgement and recognition of civil society actors by the general public, mass media and other possible cooperation partners (See also Elster et al. 1998, pp. 31–32). As the question of public recognition is closely connected to the opportunities for mass communication, we suggest that the ability of civil society actors to function as a public go-between is strongly mediated by whether or not they are recognised as being 'important' and 'competent' in the leading Estonian editorial offices. The basic assumption of this study is that in terms of media communication, the success of civil society actors – that is, the ability to channel citizen power effectively – depends on the communication process itself moving towards more collective goals. For this to happen, there would have to be a mutual interest between the two communication partners in achieving a positive outcome for many, and less unthinking reliance on black-and-white belief systems such as stereotypes which distort the outcomes of communication.

INFLUENCE OF STEREOTYPES ON COMMUNICATION

Stereotypes are faulty generalisations which reduce people to a few characteristics (Hall 1997, p. 257) and assume that those characteristics are shared by all the members of a specific group (Baron et al. 1991, p. 183; Aronson 1994, p. 299, p. 302). Herein lies the potential danger of stereotyping in the context of communication: a particular group is seen as homogeneous – in the present study the characteristic applied to the group is ‘incompetent’ – and on that basis decisions are made which harm the interests of that group, possibly also those of the communication partner and even the interests of the entire society.

Stereotypes can be described as a set of beliefs about the personal characteristics of an individual belonging to a certain social category (Dorsch 1994, p. 764, see also Lexikon der Psychologie 2001, p. 246). In order to understand how stereotypes function, it is important to approach them as heuristics, or generalising mechanisms. Both perception and memory are selective: if an individual has to process a great deal of information (as everyone, journalists in particular, must in today's world, where we are surrounded by a surplus of information), he/she perceives the information that corresponds to his/her expectations rather than the information that contradicts his/her stereotypes (Bierhoff et al. 1988, p. 252; Stephan 1989, p. 44). As a result, an impression is formed about the communication partner, which (seemingly) confirms the correctness of the stereotype. Memory functions in the same way and thus this impression will be saved in the brain.

Categorising the world is a natural way for an individual to cope with a complex social reality. As a result, however, faulty, inflexible, simplified and biased generalisations emerge which are obtained through socialisation and mirror the prevalent values of the society in which a person lives (Katz and Braly 1933, Klineberg 1951, Allport 1954, English and English 1958 in Stroebe et al. 1989, p. 4; Brigham 1971 in Hinton 2000, p. 11; Schäfer 1988, p. 51; see also Spreckels and Kotthoff 2010). It is impossible to prove or disprove a stereotype as the features it contains are seldom measurable (Hinton 2000, p. 12; Hahn et al. 2002, p. 25). Moreover, stereotypes are difficult to change, as they are highly resistant to new experience (Lexikon der Psychologie 2001, p. 248, Degner 2009). Klaus Roth points out that although stereotypes change in the long run, they are very stable ‘routine categories’, attempts to typify the world around us, to interpret the behaviour of people around us and thereby influence and construct our reality (Roth 1998, p. 23).

People are mostly unaware of cognitive stereotyping processes and assume stereotypes to be a valid part of the objective world. On this basis, the way in which the behaviour (efficiency and success) of others is perceived and judged often depends more on the social class or the particular group to which the individual belongs than on the personal qualities of the individual or his/her behaviour in a particular situation. Thus, stereotypes influence our social competence (Six 1988, p. 317) and the decision-making process (Hinton 2000, p. 39): the presumed typical qualities of the relational partner determine the expected behaviour of the partner. In relation to the present study, we would like to draw special attention to the impact of stereotypes as self-fulfilling prophecies in the context of communication: the above-mentioned expectations and the respective performance on the part of the interactor influence the communication to such an extent that the typical, expected behaviour of the communication partner is brought out with the help of those expectations (Bierhoff et al. 1988, p. 252; Schäfer 1988, p. 45; Watzlawick 1991, p. 92; Aronson 1994, p. 310; Hinton 2000, p. 98, Degner 2009).

In a communication situation, stereotypes, in spite of their endemically faulty nature, create in interactors an illusory feeling of mutual understanding – a feeling which influences the outcome of the communication. In the context of this study, such outcomes include the judgements and performance of the editors-in-chief and other gate-keepers in editorial offices, as well as the performance by civil society actors which is generated by and mirrors these judgements. Here, a specific potential outcome might be

the decision not to publish arguments and claims mediated by civil society actors, regardless of whether or not the information actually is of public interest.

While intentionally deconstructing stereotypes is not simple, there is a general tendency for negative stereotypes and prejudices to be increasingly less accepted today, as they are viewed as socially unacceptable patterns of judgement (Six 1988, p. 69). Many authors are hopeful that contact between different groups, that is, communication as such, would convince people that the images they hold of different groups are not true. However, in most cases this contact actually affirms the existing stereotypes not only through stereotype-confirming behaviour or communication, but equally through obvious exceptions to that. If contact is to affect stereotypes in a positive way, that is, prove their relativity or even falseness, the contact must be long-standing, voluntary and take place in an environment that emphasises the equal status of the communication partners (Inglehart 1989, p. 29; Wilder 1984 in Baron et al. 1991, p. 206; Docidio et al. 1997 in Hinton p. 2000, pp. 123–124; see also Stroebe et al. 1990, p. 409). More often than not, however, the social groups are not equal. Another important factor in the deconstruction process is the mutual interest of communication partners in a positive outcome. More than anything else, however, becoming aware of the stereotyping way of thinking and its consequences helps to deconstruct stereotypes (see also Beelmann 2009, and Ruhrmann et al. 2009). The process of deconstructing negative stereotypes can be accelerated by changing the starting points of relational partners, by training their social competence, and by enlisting the help of mass media.

In our study, however, where one of the interactors is an editorial office, it is difficult (although possible) to use the latter measure. If mass media helped to tone down the stereotypes that are presently established in the Estonian transition society – in our case, the mental images that concern success and failure – the stereotypes about civil society actors would in all likelihood lose their sharpness. Making use of the mass media in deconstructing stereotypes is complicated precisely because, on the one hand, mass media reaches many members of the society, and on the other hand, gate-keepers in editorial offices are subjective and affected by their selective perception.

The main negative feature dominating the perception that Estonian media leaders hold of civil society actors as a group is incompetence. The ability of civil society actors both to be successful in society and to communicate with mass media is doubted. Competence is a very subjective indicator, depending on the background of the interactors and the communication situation. Competence can be defined as social judgement, which requires an evaluation of one's communication performance by one's relational partners (Koester et al. 1993, p. 7): it is an impression, comprising both effectiveness and appropriateness (Spitzberg et al. in Martin 1993, p. 17). Effectiveness is related to one's goals. It is measured by the extent to which an individual accomplishes what he/she wants to accomplish – in this case, to what extent civil society actors succeed in persuading the editorial staff to publish something on or comment on their arguments and claims. Appropriateness marks the ability of the interactor not to violate norms and role expectations in the communication situation – in this case, if the person presenting the argument is someone the editor considers to be a successful member of society, he/she finds the information 'interesting' and worth to be published/aired, whereas, the message assumed to be appropriate to a civil society actor is one that is not very interesting (Lauristin 2004; Saar 2002). Competence is less a feature of one partner than a relationship between people, the extent to what one communication partner can persuade the other of his/her ability to be successful in a particular field. Based on this definition, only an individual who succeeds in making his/her communication partner perceive him/her as competent is actually competent. In other words, in order to perform in a competent way it is important both to achieve the goal and to leave an impression of competence on one's communication partner. Though, the motivation to perceive the other as competent in the communication process plays also a vital role (see Matsumoto et al. 2009).

In sum, as stereotypes distort the ways in which communication partners perceive each other and the conclusions and judgments that are reached on the basis of a communication situation, stereotypes are a significant aspect of the workings of citizen power. The stereotype that the mass media holds of civil society actors, that is, their attitude towards them – including a perception of their success in society and their ability to function as mediators of citizen power – is, because of the role of the mass media as a major wielder of communicative power in society, of crucial importance in determining how democracy is performed.

STEREOTYPES ESTONIAN MEDIA LEADERS HOLD OF NGOS

This paper is based on qualitative in-depth interviews carried out in 2003 for a study targeting editors-in-chief at the Estonian political mass media institutions with the largest readership, and leaders of civil society organisations with experience in communicating with mass media. The study aimed to examine the conceptions and associations connected with civil society actors. The interviewers tried to influence the respondents as little as possible, in order to let them word their images of civil society actors as freely as possible, and thus reveal how they are perceived in Estonia. Based on the objectives of the study and on the nature of qualitative sociological research in general, the collected material was systemised according to the categories and topics the interviewees themselves used.

A follow-up study was carried out in 2012. We analysed interviews given by media leaders, that is, editors-in-chief, in daily broadcasts on Estonian TV and radio, on two topics related to the civic initiative: the demonstration against and opposition to The Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (Acta) in February and the strike of employees from several sectors in March, the biggest general strike since the re-establishment of the Republic of Estonia.

When carrying out a study about stereotypes, it is important to take into account the fact that as the democratisation of society proceeds in Estonia, stereotyping has become a taboo topic among more informed members of society, just as it is in countries with longer democratic traditions. Therefore, the interviews often reveal little that could be directly connected to stereotypes – at least at first glance. The interviewees try again and again to express politically correct attitudes and to avoid generalisation. They only express a stereotyped opinion in conjunction with claims that it ‘has been proven’ – claims that are used to demonstrate the correctness of a stereotype or to justify an attitude. Often respondents apologise while generalising, or offer ‘logical’ social reasons that again attempt to legitimise the stereotype. Such actions can be seen as attempts to downplay the negative or politically incorrect generalisations that have been voiced (Tusting 2002, p. 668).

Overall, the interviews reveal that Estonian editors-in-chief hold fairly unambiguous stereotypes about civil society actors. These stereotypes concern characteristics related to competence in communicating with the mass media, and features related to the scarcity values (Inglehart 1990, 2000) of a transition society, as well as qualities related to individualistic-emancipatory values, which the members of higher social classes, who are viewed as the more successful members of the Estonian society, supposedly possess. The editors-in-chief and other gate-keepers in the most important media institutions belong to the latter group due to their above-average income. Veronika Kalmus and Triin Vihalemm have argued that individualistic-emancipatory values dominate over collectivistic-universal values in the attitudes of the so-called sub-culture of socially successful members of a transition society. There is a tendency among members of social classes with higher incomes to see economic welfare as explicitly derived from the ability to enforce one’s claims and ideas (Kalmus et al. 2004). This is one of the qualities that the study showed media leaders perceive as necessary in communicating with the mass media.

The analysis of the initial interviews revealed five aspects of the image Estonian media leaders hold of civil society actors: (1) they have no opportunity to earn money or make a career, (2) are individualistic

persons engaged in entertaining themselves, (3) are ineffective in their field of activity, (4) play a marginal role in society, and (5) are incompetent in communicating with the mass media.

Image 1: civil society actors have no money and no careers

Remarks by the editors-in-chiefs stating that it is not possible to make a career or earn money while working in the non-governmental sphere – leading to the implicit assumption that civil society actors do not really wish to achieve much in the society – could be seen to be influenced by the scarcity values of a transition society. Researchers analysing post-socialist transition societies (including Estonia) refer to the perceived categories of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in these societies, in which the stereotype of ‘winners’ includes traits related to consumer society values characteristic of higher social classes (Lauristin 2004, p. 284). In the young market economy of Estonia, which does not have an existing class of capitalist owners, these traits presume a well-paid job. Such jobs, however, are not associated with non-profit activities. Thus, the stereotype that Estonian media leaders have of civil society actors includes a low income and no career opportunities.

In addition to ethnic, gender- and age-based differences, the relation to money and power in society is one of the major sources of stereotypes. It is interesting how the categorisation of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, as it obviously appears in the stereotypes revealed by our interview data, overlaps with the ‘just world hypothesis’. This notion refers to the general tendency of people to believe that the world is just and, accordingly, the distribution of resources in society is also fair (Hinton, 2000, p. 88). As civil society actors lack money and power, it must be that they are inefficient and therefore deserve their position as ‘losers’ in society.

(Media leader A)

People cannot afford to work in low-paid positions. There are basically no generations in Estonia that would inherit their capital and a feeling of security from their parents – everybody has to establish themselves; thus, there is a lot of pressure on people in Estonia to earn money. And I think that that is one of the reasons why there is little interest in NGOs. An NGO as such is not associated with career and ‘big money’ [---] But the communication style of the NGO actor is influenced by the fact that if they had a good job offer from the private sector, they would quit [working for the civil sector]. It is as if they do what they do because they have no choice... I mean, again, one has to think of money... [---] We cannot afford charity. Because of lacking time and funds for that. [---] I mean, in Estonia, the whole NGO-thing is rather unnatural because people are trying to establish themselves and that will take at least another ten years.

Image 2: civil society actors having fun

Editors-in-chief belong to a social class associated with individualistic values: these values include success, a pleasant and interesting life, and personal fulfilment. This study showed that, in accordance with this class-based value system, the editors-in-chief we interviewed regarded civil society activities as entertainment or, in the best case, an opportunity for personal fulfilment. When asked what civil society activities brought to mind, the interviewees began by naming activities such as belonging to clubs and societies: singing, (folk) dancing, handicrafts, fan clubs, and so forth. Taking individualistic values as a starting point, these editors viewed NGOs as a way of spending time with other people, or a pleasant opportunity for personal fulfilment that at the same time allows people to apply for financial support. Thus, these media leaders did not appear to perceive civil societies as in any way a fundamental part of society or a way of expressing free will. As described in ‘Image 1’, the background to this attitude is that editors-in-chief feel that working for civil society institutions can be neither the free choice of an individual nor a real way of fulfilling oneself personally. This attitude derives from assumptions based

on the values of a transition society – the ‘natural’ wish of all the members of the society to be on the side of the ‘winners’.

(Media leader B)

I'd say they [the civil initiative] have probably given many people a chance to label whatever they are doing [...] to determine an official framework for a club or a society, whatever they have. The NGOs surely are a good opportunity for people who want to do something – they offer a juridical framework.

Image 3: inefficient civil society actors

The efficiency of civil society actors, that is, their ability to achieve their goals, was estimated to be low. Civil society actors were perceived as somewhat discouraged people, who are interested in achieving something but are not able to do so. They were perceived as rather ineffectual members of society who require encouragement to make them really participate in society, and who need to develop personally in order to get past the point of being a civil society actor, of investing their energy within the ineffective framework of civil society institutions.

(Media leader B)

Well, they could do better. I think that they [the civil society actors] are not really efficient. Maybe one of the roles [of civil society actors] could be to encourage people to participate in society. I mean, those discouraged persons – they could find a way to participate in the society first as NGO actors and later as something else. [...] I think the goal is not to be an NGO actor – that is just the means to get going.

(Media leader E)

We have no veche,⁵² we have lobby work, and those NGO actors are regarded as simpletons of some sort who want to achieve something.

Image 4: third-rate civil society actors

The media leaders interviewed emerged as benevolently but unanimously of the opinion that the third sector plays a third-rate role in society. Depending on the theoretical background of each respondent, the importance assigned to the role varied. The stereotypes expressed by these media leaders showed that they associate civil society institutions with low levels of success and with an inability to achieve anything. It is therefore clear that these editors-in-chief do not see civil society actors as constituting a power capable of achieving anything of importance in society. The perceived impact of civil society actors on Estonian society is neither considerable nor of any significance because of their classification as ‘losers’. Media leaders are of the opinion that the best that civil society actors can achieve is to give their ideas and concerns a voice – to bring the field of interest in question to the attention of decision makers and the public sphere.

(Media leader B)

Well, I guess I would insult those NGOs by saying that [the role of civil society actors in society as such] is null and void, but that is the way it is. I'd say that they rather don't matter. There are some rare exceptions, surely [...].

(Media leader E)

⁵² Popular assembly in medieval Slavic countries as opposed to the parliament and other democratic institutions of power

They unite groups of individuals who are connected by some shared feature, they represent those people and try to communicate their interests and needs to society, to the rest of the members of the society, to state authorities and so on. They try to make those interests understandable, bring their message to those authorities. [...] Their role isn't important, really, I'd say...

Image 5: civil society actors are incompetent in communicating with the mass media

Editors-in-chief hope and expect that their sources – including civil society actors – will present their information in a simple and clear format. One of the preconditions for cooperation between a civil society actor and an editor is mutual understanding – regarding both the way the information is presented and what it consists of. From a media leader's perspective, the relational partners who are perceived as socially competent are those who understand the professional needs of a journalist – first of all, the need for information that is at once interesting and relevant, presented in a short and matter-of-fact format that respects the limited time the journalist working in the environment of a market economy feels he or she has.

(Media leader C)

Mass media tells simple stories but they [civil society actors] don't get it [...] I think the conflict between the NGOs and the mass media springs from all the talk about the third sector and so on. It is just that they [the civil society actors] generalise too much; they just don't descend to the grass-root level, which would make civil society activity interesting for the mass media.

The editors-in-chief in this study estimated the ability of civil society actors to communicate with mass media to be fairly low: their manner of communication was considered appropriate but the message was felt to be boring. This implies that the editors have not communicated with civil society actors on an equal level, that they have simply judged the ability of civil society actors to communicate with the mass media to be poor both linguistically and nonverbally. Civil society actors are thus perceived as not being able to persuade the journalist of the relevance of the information he/she mediates. The editors-in-chief complained that civil society actors have no idea as to how to communicate with mass media and lack experience in this area.

(Media leader A)

Everyone who comes to us with information thinks that it matters – and it does. However, often it is not interesting. [...] Often, those NGO topics are the ones that are neither exciting nor interesting. They are, let's say, flat, the messages contain no conflict, no plot – nothing of the stuff that makes mass media intriguing.

(Media leader B)

[Civil society actors communicate with mass media] in an appropriate and yet slightly boring way. [...] Mostly, these are people with little experience – with a few exceptions [...], but probably, yes, among NGO actors the number of people with very little experience in communicating [with the mass media] is high ... there are some certain tricks ... maybe they should read a book about it or something [...] about how to put their message into simple and clear words [...] Well, it could be that those NGO actors just don't understand that – they seem to think that everything they do is very interesting and very important. The ability [...] to see and highlight the relevant things is non-existent [...]

In a communication situation, the interactors assign similar meanings to their behaviour. A mass media communication situation generates an expected attitude in the civil society actor, which matches the media leader's stereotype: the civil society actor feels that he/she is not a worthy communication partner

to the editor. That attitude does not depend on the topic at all – the same feeling emerges also when the topic would be of interest to the mass media. The journalist's stereotype becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: as the editor-in-chief is convinced already before meeting the civil society actor that the latter is an incompetent and marginal person who has no authority in society, his/her communication style mirrors these attitudes which in turn discourages the civil society actor – whose behaviour adapts to the expectations. A vicious circle has come into being.

(Media leader B)

...there is sort of a contradiction: on the one hand, the people are annoyed that we don't talk about them – they do something and yet ... On the other hand, if someone [a journalist] says okay, let's go and talk, then they answer: 'I don't know – should we?'

(Media leader A)

Often those NGO actors – they are rather pessimistic already beforehand, they have been told 'no' so many times. So they come in the door and they have this 'will-you-say-no-to-me-as-well' face, they sort of make you say no.

FOLLOW-UP

The interviews studied in 2012 revealed no change in the attitude towards civil society activities, confirming the observation in the same year that '... there is in general little change in the development of civil society in Eastern Europe over the period 1995–2008. Levels of participation in voluntary associations are still low and there is only a limited indication of growth' (Wallace et al. 2012, 16).

Media leaders' reaction to protests against joining the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement

Similarly to the civic initiative, media leaders are themselves often in a critical position towards the government. However, the activists of the anti-Acta movement were discredited as an 'uproar' and a 'hysteria', even as 'wild', although the methods of the movement were classic methods used by the civic initiative both in Europe and in the USA, that is, fairly moderate. In spite of this, media leaders stereotyped the activities as incompetent acts of communication.

(Media leader B)

The uproar that is taking place around the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement [...] the hysteria that some of the Acta-antagonists have brought up and that obviously is not grounded – there is a wildness of unclear signals around the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement, to the extent that its content is actually in danger of being overshadowed.

Media leaders' reaction to the general strike

The general strike saw a re-emergence of an especially large number of the features of the stereotype that the interviews in 2003 revealed that media leaders hold of civil society actors. Individuals who commit themselves to civil activities are continuously seen as inferior citizens, as 'losers', and are still not granted the level of access to media channels that would correspond to their actual growing role in the Estonian society. Ironically, though, both these events initiated by civil society actors, which prompted the analysis of interviews on which this paper is based, were very large in scale, proving that Estonian civil society, and with it democracy, is gaining strength – while media leaders attempt to oversee and control this process, sticking to established stereotypes and thus slowing down democratic development.

Downplaying – ‘confirming’ the picture of third-rate civil society actors:

(Media leader G)

[Answering the question whether trade unions have any power to organise employees] *We can call it a game – let us play trade unions, someone plays the game and someone else joins in.*

(Media leader H)

Trade unions could play a bigger role [in the society] if they were able to do something else besides just wagging the flag. They could produce some analysis or reports about salaries or working conditions or, let’s say, about the state budget. They’ve never done this...

The ‘winners’ versus ‘losers’ debate continued

(Media leader G)

...people will finally understand that money is an absolute unit that can be taken, redistributed, you can’t just keep printing money. [...] redistribution, the understanding of where the money comes from, will finally hit home.

Access to media channels

(Media leader H)

[Answering the question of whether the strike gave the newspaper any interesting material] *As I see it, the trade unions provided us with nothing.*

CONCLUSIONS

In post-socialist Estonian society, citizens have been roughly classified either as ‘winners’ or ‘losers’, displaying the sort of dichotomous classification which has been said to be one of the characteristic features of post-socialist societies (Lauristin et al. 1998, p. 900). The ‘winners’ have adapted themselves successfully to the dramatic changes that have taken place: they have access to money and power and are thus in a position to use the possibilities to consume that have emerged together with the market economy. At the same time, almost anyone who cannot spend money in the way that has become a norm in the post-soviet consumer society, is looked upon as a ‘loser’ (Lauristin 2004, p. 284). This view is a very black and white one, one with hardly any shades of grey: the middle classes, which traditionally play a substantial role in democratic societies, are weakly represented. A black-and-white view of the world does not allow for a plurality of values. For instance, an individual working in the non-governmental sphere in a post-socialist society is automatically considered to be a ‘loser’ as success is mainly associated with money and power, and these are things that the executors of the fourth task of the transition society – civil society actors – do not possess in Estonia today. In a post-socialist society, universal and collectivist values like equality and fairness (and hence also solidarity and social responsibility) typical of a civil society actor, are associated with ‘losers’.

Ronald Inglehart’s studies on scarcity values found low tolerance and valuing subjective welfare, as well as low political activity and personal initiative, to be characteristic of post-socialist societies (Inglehart 1990; Inglehart 2000; Inglehart and Baker 2001 in Realo 2002, p. 36). The above-mentioned black-and-white world view clearly demonstrates these values. The scarcity values in turn offer an explanation to why the NGO actors, as active members of society, are not really respected in the post-socialist society. First of all, they are stereotyped as ‘losers’, and secondly, they have values that deviate from the norm: they do not seem to be interested in money and power, and are therefore perceived as not wishing to participate in shaping society. This makes them different and prevents them from being

acknowledged by mainstream society. This is detrimental to their progress, as in addition to necessary legislation and resources, the civil society needs understanding, acceptance and recognition (Lagerspetz et al. 2007, p. 8) by the public and especially by the mass media – because of the mass influence of the latter.

Our study revealed five key aspects of the stereotypes of civil society actors and concluded that these stem from the scarcity values which dominate post-Socialist transition societies. These stereotypes show that individuals working in the civil sphere are viewed as belonging to the category of ‘losers’ rather than ‘winners’ in Estonian society because of having chosen or having been forced to choose a marginal role. Thus, Estonian media gate-keepers perceive the information forwarded by civil society actors as uninteresting and unimportant, and civil society actors themselves are regarded as incompetent in communicating with the mass media.

Stereotypes influence communication, including communication with the mass media. Because of the media, civil society actors are perceived as poor communication partners in communicating with the mass media, and treated accordingly. This dismissive treatment discourages and forces civil society actors to accept the role of an inefficient communicator, which in turn strengthens the attitude towards them in editorial offices. Once again, stereotypes function as self-fulfilling prophecies: the editors, subconsciously thinking in stereotypes, in fact guide the communication performance of the civil society actors with his/her expectations, and with his/her own behaviour resulting from those expectations, until the civil society actor does what is expected of him/her – his/her performance remains incompetent and inefficient.

In addition to this, the stereotyping attitude affects the information mediated by civil society actors. As the source of this information is individuals whom media gate-keepers perceive to be of marginal importance in society, ‘losers’ who act in a sphere that produces no profit, the information tends to be seen as uninteresting and of little relevance to a society where post-socialist transition values dominate. This attitude leads to the risk of not responding to the actual content of the message. As a result, relevant messages and demands originating from civil society organisations that do actually have sufficient support in society might in fact become classified as irrelevant information that the mass media does not convey to the public, the subjective reason being that they do not think it would be of interest to the latter.

Because the dichotomy of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ cannot be overcome easily, the information flow produced by recently formed non-governmental institutions and their vast memberships of ‘loser’ actors is in danger of being ‘captured’ in the editorial offices and caught in the stranglehold of the editors-in-chief and other ‘winner’ gate-keepers standing guard. If Estonian civil society institutions fail in their capacity as the mediating body for citizen power and its messages and claims, which unfortunately seems frequently to be the case in the post-socialist societies, social mobilisation will be affected and, in reversal, increased political apathy among the majority of the population will emerge. Indeed, this is a topic that calls for further research.

Previous studies carried out in Estonia on the availability of mass media channels to civil society actors confirm that the accessibility is not satisfactory (Trummal et al. 2001). In light of the inflexible nature of stereotypes, this situation is very difficult to change, even though media gate-keepers as well-informed members of the society are theoretically aware of the central role of citizen power in performing democracy. But the roots of the stereotype of an inefficient and marginal civil society actor lie deeper than just in the communication between the mass media and civil society organisations, embedded as they are in the values of Estonian transition society. Furthermore, the stereotypes revealed by our study not only influence the content of daily newspapers or radio broadcasts. Previous studies suggest that a similar attitude dominates in other powerful Estonian public spheres as well (Lagerspetz et al. 2003; The 2003 NGO and 2011 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and

Eurasia). Therefore, to rephrase Habermas (1986, p. 263), civil society actors and all other political actors in Estonia, among others the mass media, are facing a great deal of *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*: the public sphere and the motives for identification with civil society have yet to be established in Estonian society in transition to democracy, which means hard work, as today, as well as in the past, the public in any post-socialist society has to be created, it is not just given.

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