



Shrinking citizenship

Analytical Report on the Monitoring of Printed Media, Parliamentary Debates and Legislative Initiative concerning Civic Participation in Latvia

2007

Executive summary

Opinion leaders and major printed media in Latvia sometimes propose arbitrary limitations to the public visibility/ participation/ citizenship (in the broader sense of the word, including access to policy debate) of a number of groups whom they deem ‘suspect’ – non-citizens, new immigrants, LGBT, and activists of NGOs which receive international funding.

The ability of NGOs and other civil society actors to effectively oppose the arbitrary attempts to ‘shrink citizenship’ depends on their ability to provide evidence-based assessment of these attempts and to mobilise public support for inclusive and participatory policy-making.

This annual report was produced within the framework of the project **Shrinking citizenship** (*Izaicinājums pilsoniskajai līdzdalībai*), implemented by Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS and supported by Open Society Institute Think-Tank Fund.

The goal of the project is to attract public attention to the cases when some politicians and opinion leaders attempt to limit the field of democratic citizenship arbitrarily. They do this by using intolerant and exclusionary rhetoric about minorities and NGOs, or by attempting to introduce a hierarchy of civic participation (e.g. suggesting that some forms of participatory citizenship should be guarded from ‘disloyal elements’).

The main activities of the project include the monitoring of printed media and parliamentary debates, as well as the monitoring of legislative initiatives aimed at the ‘shrinking’ or broadening of participatory citizenship. PROVIDUS also monitors the

implementation of government policies which have as their declared primary objective the promotion of tolerance.

The far-reaching goal of the project is to mobilize the support in Latvia for pluralist, participatory democracy, to expose alarmingly populist tendencies, and to raise public awareness of minorities' and NGOs' right to public presence and to participation in the public policy field.

Intolerance in the Media and in Parliamentary Debates: some Common Features

Acceptance of pluralism or demonisation of opponents?

In liberal democracy, the understanding of what is permissible in political discourse and what is 'out of bounds' stems from the acceptance of pluralism and the recognition of the opponent's right to dissent.

'...A democratic society makes room for the 'Adversary', i.e. the opponent who is no longer considered an enemy to be destroyed but somebody whose existence is legitimate and whose rights will not be put into question. The category of the 'adversary' serves here to designate the status for those who disagree concerning the ranking and interpretation of the values. Adversaries will fight about the interpretation and ranking of values but their common allegiance to their values which constitute the liberal democratic form of life creates a bond of solidarity which expresses their belonging to a common 'we'.¹'

As pointed out in a recent study,

'Tolerance of others and of their opinions is perhaps the most basic general attitude underpinning democratic practice. Toleration is rarely absolute and can be difficult to achieve, but is of huge importance. However, the ability to tolerate not just the political views of others but also their right to express those opinions publicly is at the root of a democracy. In addition, tolerance demands making allowances not only for the political opinions of others but also for other aspects of their lifestyles, especially where these lifestyles differ from one's own²'.

The demonisation of adversaries, turning them into enemies with whom no civilised debate is possible, could not happen with the notion of pluralist society permanently

¹ C. Mouffe. Politics, democratisation, and solidarity. *Inquiry*, 38: 1-2 (1995), p. 107.

² C. J. Pattie and R.J. Johnston. It's good to talk: Talk, disagreement and tolerance.
<http://www.ggy.bris.ac.uk/personal/RonJohnston/CurrentPapers/Electoral/electoral21.pdf>.

present in parliamentary and media discourse. With the notion of pluralism absent or delegitimised, the demonisation of adversaries becomes possible and desirable.

‘Us’ versus ‘them’

References to Latvian citizens of ethnic minority origin as “foreigners” in a *jus sanguinis* sense, or in some way as “different” from “the people” even though resident for decades or even generations in the country serve to undercut their legitimacy. Delegitimising strategies of this kind are often framed in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’, constructing the illusion of two opposed, clear-cut camps, each with its own goals and values, which are incompatible with the goals and values of the other ‘camp’.

The following quotation, from a debate concerning the right of persons whose knowledge of the Latvian language may be insufficient, to stand for election to municipal councils, illustrates the particular way in which ‘us’ versus ‘them’ is often framed:

‘And at this moment, if an ethnic Latvian MP does not support this proposal, then I really have a question: ‘What is his ethnicity, and what is his mother tongue?’
(J. Dobelis, MP)

Rhetoric aimed at excluding the opponent in the Saeima is indeed often framed in ethnic terms, however, this is not the only possible framework for exclusion. Another example, from a different MP, shows that also NGOs and active members of civil society can be targeted as the dangerous ‘other’, threatening what is described as ‘us’:

‘We cannot avoid seeing that some interest groups receive from their donors funding that is unlimited by Latvia’s scale. This money allows to exert influence, recruit the media and opinion leaders... This is an unconcealed wish to subject the representatives elected by the people to the unclear goals of a little group of self-satisfied manipulators. We should not forget that in a democratic state, nothing can substitute the legislative power of the Parliament...’ (Indulis Emsis, former Speaker of the Saeima)

In order to discredit the individuals or groups deemed undesirable by the speakers, they are portrayed as an intrinsically alien force, often having access to unlimited resources, and pursuing unclear and dangerous goals.

The discourse of threat

One of the preconditions for the use of delegitimising strategies is the discourse of threat. References to vaguely identified threats to the country and ‘the people’ in some opinion leaders’ interviews and articles go hand in hand with accusations directed at minorities or active civil society groups. Using presuppositions to construct threats, speakers justify the

exclusion or unequal treatment of social groups, opposing their involvement in public policy.

For instance, financial and PR consultant Mārcis Bendiks in his interview to the *Neatkarīgājā Rīta Avīzē* (19.09.07.) produces and reproduces the discourse of threat when speaking about the activities of a vaguely identified group he calls ‘the Sorosites’. At first the speaker identifies the philanthropist George Soros as a threat, but almost immediately the notion of threat is extended to include any organisation that receives Soros funding:

‘Soros’s ideas and activities developed by his organisations are directed against the free world.’

Neither the speaker, nor the two journalists that interview him, provide any definition of what is implied by ‘activities directed against the free world’. The notion of threat is constructed at the level of presuppositions. Accusations are formulated as if no proof is necessary:

Journalist: What are Soros’s interests in Latvia?

M. Bendiks: To destroy the nation state.

Repeating several times that the vaguely identified ‘Sorosites’ have power in Latvia, the interview labels them as a source of threat for society. At the same time, both the speaker and the journalists who interview him use *access control*: sentence structure and the structure of the whole text do not allow any space for discussing the assumptions projected in the interview. The threat produced by the unnamed organisations is simply evoked, reiterated and taken for granted.

The discourse of threat is a permanent feature of political populism. Like some Slovak politicians, also the Latvian MPs sometimes find it difficult to “abandon the very themes that make possible a dramatic call to the people, nourish its need to seek external enemies, and provoke a sense of crisis and threats to the state’s existence”.³

Homophobic discourses

The highest number of cases of delegitimising speech in the Latvian printed media in 2007 was directed against LGBT people (117 cases). Two newspapers, *NRA* and *Rītdiena*, were particularly consistent in promoting homophobic discourses. Statements concerning the ‘fundamental’ differences between a gay person and what the journalist termed a ‘healthy person’ were repeatedly published in *Rītdiena*. Both in *NRA* and *Rītdiena*, the activities of LGBT groups were portrayed as part of a foreign-sponsored campaign with the aim to discredit Latvia. Among the Russian-language media, homophobic articles were particularly frequent in *Čas* and *Vesti Segodna*. The publications pointed out the ‘infectious’ nature of homosexuality and declared that it may pose ‘threats’ to society.

³ Peter Učen. Populist appeal in Slovak politics before 2006 elections. M. Butora et al. (eds.). Democracy and Populism in Central Europe: The Visegrad Elections and their Aftermath. 2007. 178.

Results of the media monitoring

The media monitoring methodology was designed by Robert Gould (Carleton University), Maria Golubeva (PROVIDUS), Anda Rožukalne (Riga Stradins University) and Iveta Kažoka (PROVIDUS). The monitoring team used textual analysis (content analysis and critical discourse analysis) to identify exclusionary (delegitimising) strategies directed against minorities and NGOs, and to register the number of cases when such strategies were used.

The list of groups defined for the purpose of this study included the following:

- 1. Non-citizens**
- 2. Non-Latvians (Russian-speaking minority)**
- 3. New immigrants**
- 4. NGOs**
- 5. Sexual minorities**
- 6. Roma**
- 7. Other ethnic minorities**
- 8. Other groups**

The following delegitimising strategies used about the identified groups were defined for the purposes of this study (based on a sample of texts from 2006 and 2007):

- 1st strategy - **Justifies excluding the group from the public space, from politics**
- 2nd strategy - **Justifies limiting the group's rights**
- 3rd. strategy - **Complains that the group is too visible/ too active**
- 4th strategy - **Denies the relevance of problems identified by the group**
- 5th strategy - **Shows that the group creates problems for the rest of society**
- 6th strategy – **States that the group implements activities against Latvia in the interests of foreign donors**
- 7th strategy – **Self-marginalisation** (a delegitimising strategy used by representatives of the group about the same group, sometimes for rhetorical purposes).

The monitoring began on 1 March 2007 and has continued until 31 December 2007 (to be continued in 2008). Media monitoring included the dailies *Diena*, *NRA*, *Latvijas Avīze*, *Telegraf*, *Vesti Segodnya* and *Chas*, as well as the weekly *Rītdiena*.

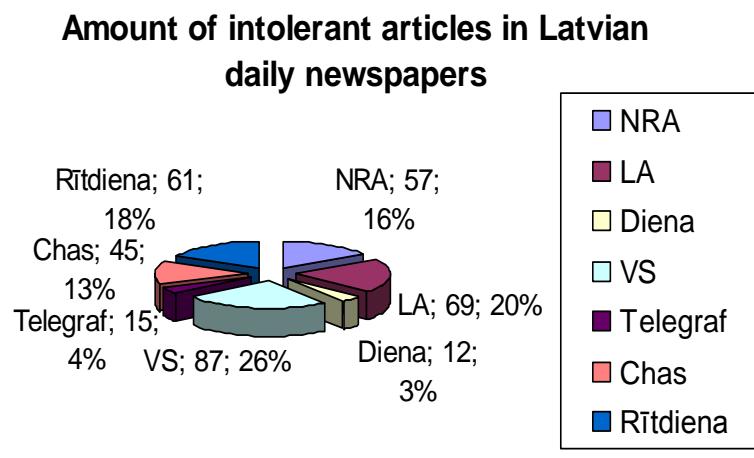


Figure 1. Articles containing delegitimising strategies against minority groups and NGOs.

As can be seen from Figure 1, in 2007 Latvian printed media included in this study have published 346 articles containing exclusionary strategies against minority groups and NGOs.

The highest number of such articles was found in the Russian-language daily *Vesti Segodnya* (87). The Latvian-language daily *Latvijas Avīze* comes next (69), followed by *Rītdiena* (61), *Neatkarīga Rīta Avīze* (57) and *Čas* (45).

Monitoring results show that articles containing statements aimed at undermining the legitimacy of minorities, such as the Russian-speaking minority or LGBT people, are equally common in Latvian- and Russian-language newspapers in Latvia. Indeed, two of the three Russian-language dailies included in the monitoring rated high on intolerance, with one (*Vesti Segodnya*) rating the highest. To project an attitude of blame and alienation from the Latvian political sphere, these newspapers use the disproportionate representation of the statements and opinions of Latvian politicians on the extreme right, expressing hostility towards the Russian-speaking audience.

The most alarming discovery of the monitoring of printed media conducted by PROVIDUS is the conclusion that editors and journalists are the primary source of intolerant content in Latvian media. In 2007, journalists and editors were responsible for 149 articles containing rhetoric undermining the legitimacy of minority groups, leaving politicians far behind with ‘only’ 57 cases.

Figure 2 shows which groups were most often targeted by delegitimising strategies (the total may not coincide with the total number of articles in Figure 1, since sometimes one article contained several strategies).

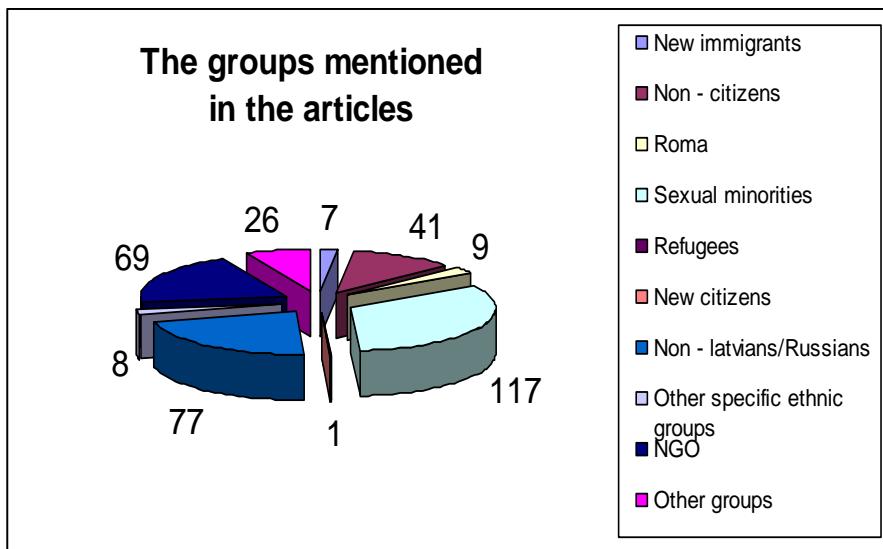


Figure 2 Groups targeted by delegitimising strategies.

Figure 3 shows the relative popularity of each individual strategy of delegitimisation:

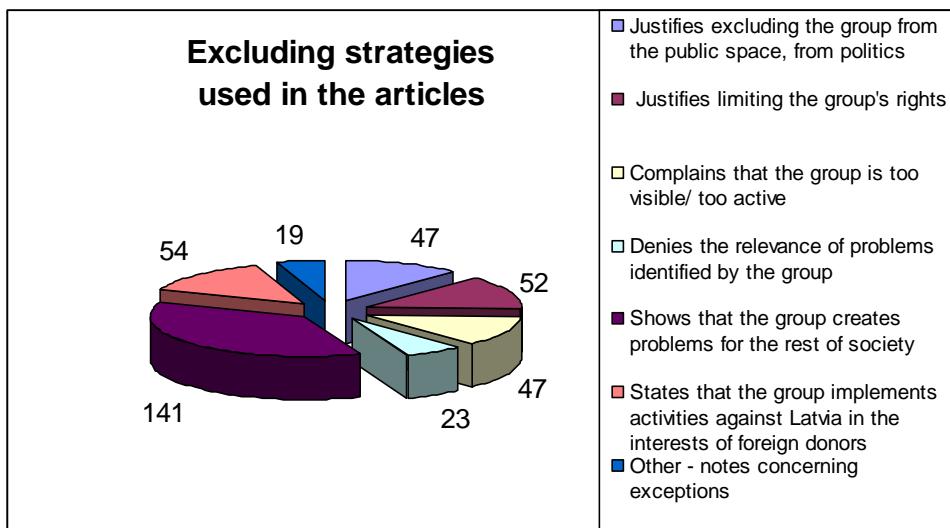


Figure 3 Delegitimising strategies (strategies of exclusion) used against the groups.

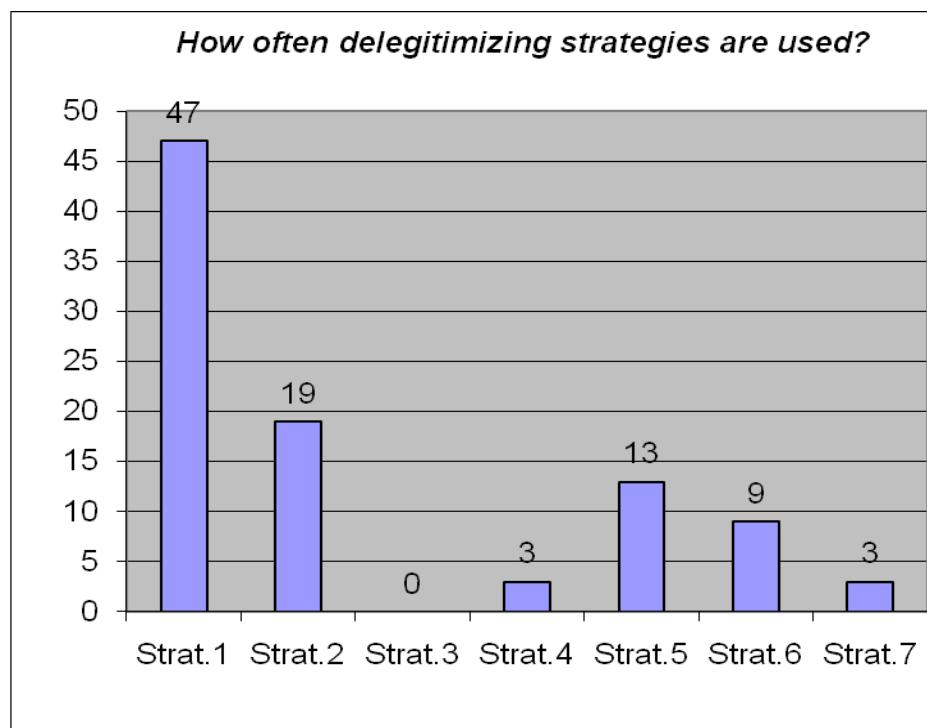
The group most often targeted by intolerant articles and delegitimising rhetoric are sexual minorities (117 cases). The number of articles containing homophobic rhetoric was particularly high in the free daily *Rītdiena* (which has made homophobic articles its weekly staple), as well as in *Neatkarīga Rīta Avīze*, *Vesti Segodnya*, *Čas* and *Latvijas Avīze*.

Results of the monitoring of parliamentary debates

The results of the monitoring of parliamentary debates in 2007 show that the most frequent delegitimising strategy used by members of the Saeima (Parliament) in plenary sessions is the rhetoric that **justifies excluding the group from the public space**.

This rhetoric is most often used against **non-Latvians/ Russian-speakers** and against **non-citizens**, as in the following quotation:

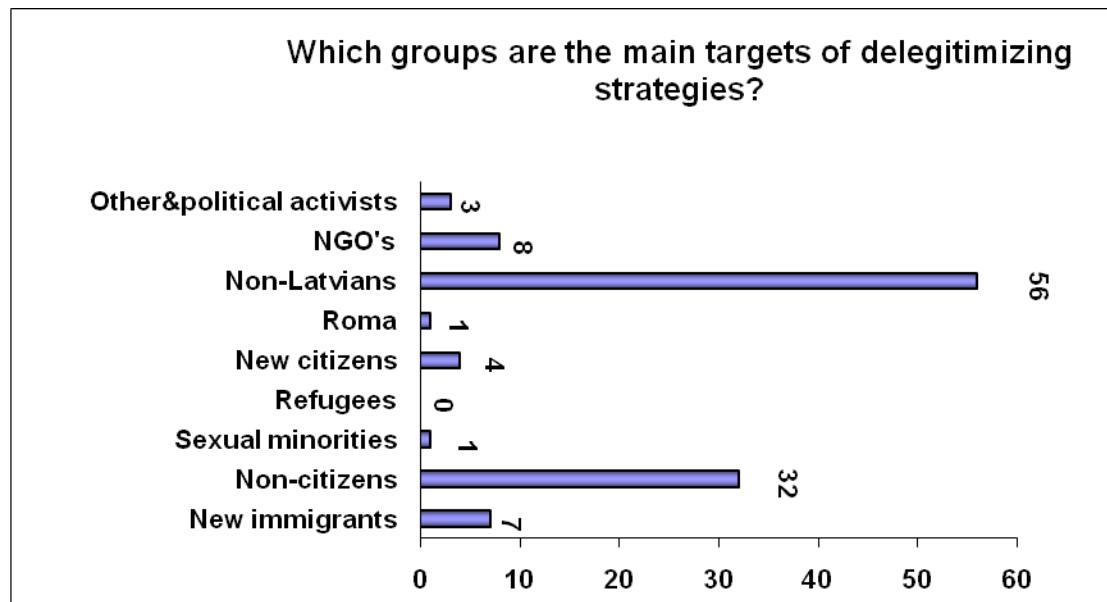
“God forbid to tell something to those, whose real place is somewhere else, not in Latvia, but in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus – in all the former Soviet Socialist republics. A large part of them hate this land, hate the Latvians, but they live here... they do it only because it is better for them here. They have businesses here, apartments, all the opportunities... They do not wish to hear the Latvian language spoken here.” (Pēteris Tabūns, party *Fatherland and Freedom*)



Strategies:

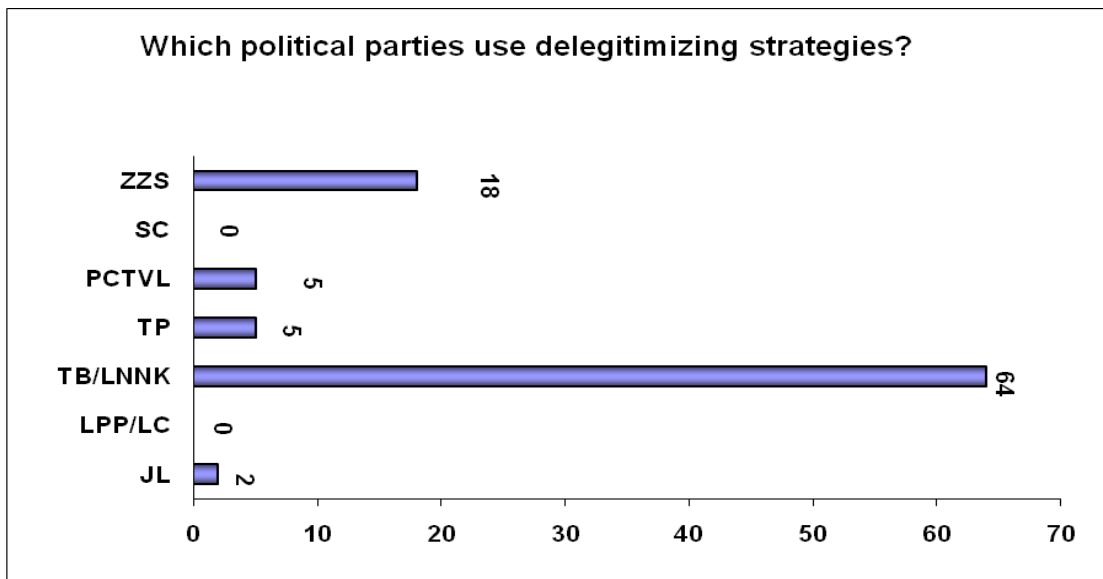
1. Justifies excluding the group from the public space, from politics
2. Justifies limiting the group's rights
3. Complains that the group is too visible/ too active
4. Denies the relevance of problems identified by the group
5. Shows that the group creates problems for the rest of society
6. Shows that the group is unwelcome in Latvia
7. Self-marginalisation

As in the first half of 2007, Russian-speaking “non-Latvians” (a term used in Latvia to describe people with Russian mother tongue) remained the group most frequently targeted by MPs using delegitimising strategies in 2007. In 56 cases, exclusionary rhetoric was directed against this group, as compared to 32 cases when such rhetoric was used against non-citizens (permanent residents whose families settled in Latvia after the occupation of 1940 and who did not undergo naturalisation after 1991). Other groups (NGOs, new citizens, new immigrants) have also occasionally become targets of exclusionary rhetoric.



An analysis of the number of cases of delegitimising strategies used by political parties shows that exclusionary rhetoric is most often used by Fatherland and Freedom MPs (64 cases in 2007), leaving far behind the *Union of Farmers and Greens* (18 cases in 2007) and other parties. The parties *Harmony Centre* and *Latvia's First Party/ Latvian Way* have not used delegitimising strategies against minority groups and NGOs since 1 March 2007 (see chart below).

The fact that the majority of statements undercutting the legitimacy of targeted groups were made by *Fatherland and Freedom* MPs explains why the groups most often targeted by exclusionary rhetoric in the Saeima are Russian-speakers and non-citizens, since this party’s political profile is fairly nationalist. Most statements, however, were made by 2 deputies from *Fatherland and Freedom*. Also in the *Union of Farmers and Greens*, the use of exclusionary rhetoric in the first half of 2007 was due to one MP, whose low activity in the second half of 2007 may have been one of the reasons behind the limiting of intolerant discourse.

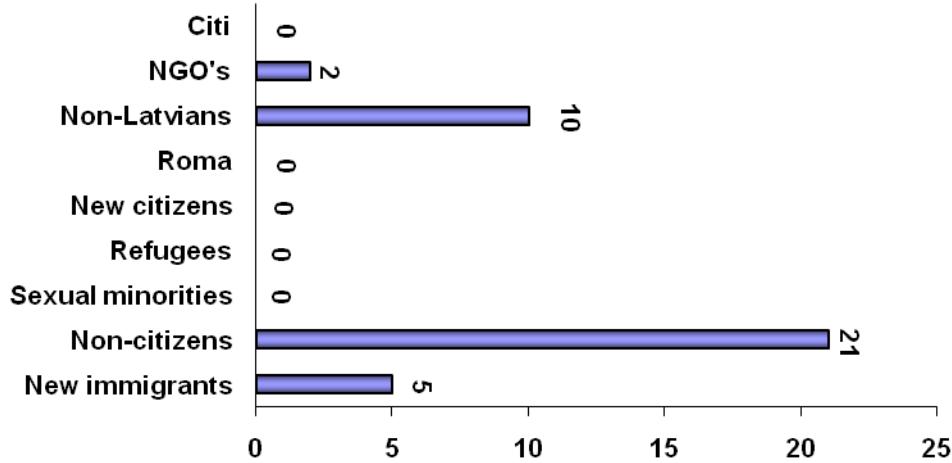


The monitoring has also revealed some positive tendencies in the Latvian Parliament. In the second half of 2007, **the use of exclusionary rhetoric to undermine the legitimacy of minority groups has fallen considerably compared to the first half of 2007**. Some MPs have used rhetoric which was not characteristic of earlier parliamentary debates, e.g. recognising and even praising the contribution of opposition MPs (Kārlis Leiškalns, *The People's Party*, during the debates concerning the work of Education Minister Baiba Rivža) and condemning the intolerant statements of their own party representatives (Anna Seile, *Fatherland and Freedom*, about Juris Dobelis, MP, attacking civil society).

As in the first half of 2007, also in the second half of the year opposition parties *Harmony Centre* and *For Human Rights in United Latvia* continued to use legitimising strategies supporting the rights of the groups whose interests these parties represent – Russian-speakers and non-citizens. Almost all legitimising strategies used in the Parliament are targeted at supporting these two groups (see chart below). The use of legitimising strategies is almost exclusive to opposition parties representing the Russian-speaking electorate, as the use of exclusionary strategies against these groups is the almost exclusive prerogative of *Fatherland and Freedom*.

The total number of cases when MPs made statements recognising any minority group's contribution to society, showing that the group is entitled to participation, or questioning the 'us' versus 'them' rhetoric used by other MPs remained relatively low compared to the number of intolerant and exclusionary statements.

Which groups are defended by legitimizing strategies?



The relative unpopularity of legitimising strategies cannot be explained by nationalism alone, since also groups to which people of all ethnicities can belong (sexual minorities, NGOs) were seldom mentioned in a supportive or inclusive way. **The predominance of exclusionary and delegitimising statements in parliamentary discourse is alarming, and reinforces the vision of society as divided into ‘camps’ where some ‘adversaries’ are to be perceived as hidden enemies, rather than as democratic opponents.**

Inappropriate speech and violations of the Code pf Ethics of MPs

Throughout the period, MPs continued using language that contradicts Clauses 7 and 8 of the Code of Ethics for Members of the Saeima.

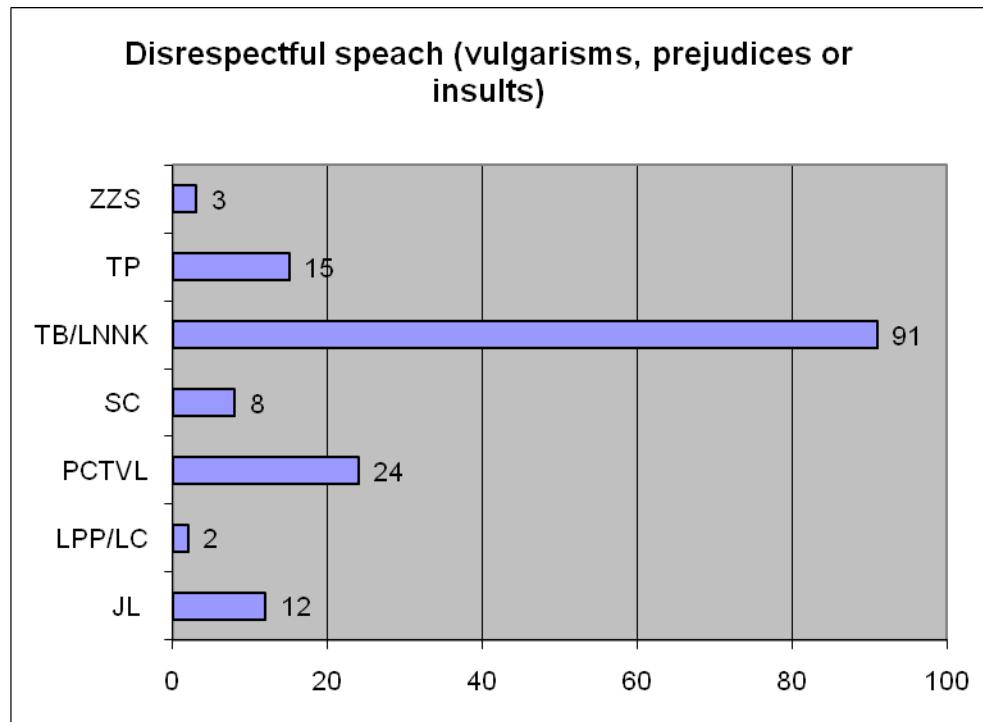
Clause 7 of the Code of Ethics for Members of the Saeima of the Republic of Latvia reads: *A Member of Parliament avoids using words, gestures and other actions that can be insulting and does not use offensive or otherwise inappropriate statements that may dishonour the Saeima. A Member of Parliament bases his/her decisions on facts and their fair interpretation, as well as on logical argumentation.*

The second part of Clause 8 reads: *A Member of Parliament observes the principles of human rights and does not appeal to race, gender, skin colour, nationality, language, religious beliefs, social origin or state of health to justify his/her argumentation.*

Multiple violations of these clauses by deputies have taken place during plenary sessions.

Most breaches of the Code can be divided into three categories: the use of vulgarisms to discredit an opponent’s statement, the use of biased language or biased (prejudiced)

statements for the same purpose, and, finally, the use of personal offences towards other speakers.

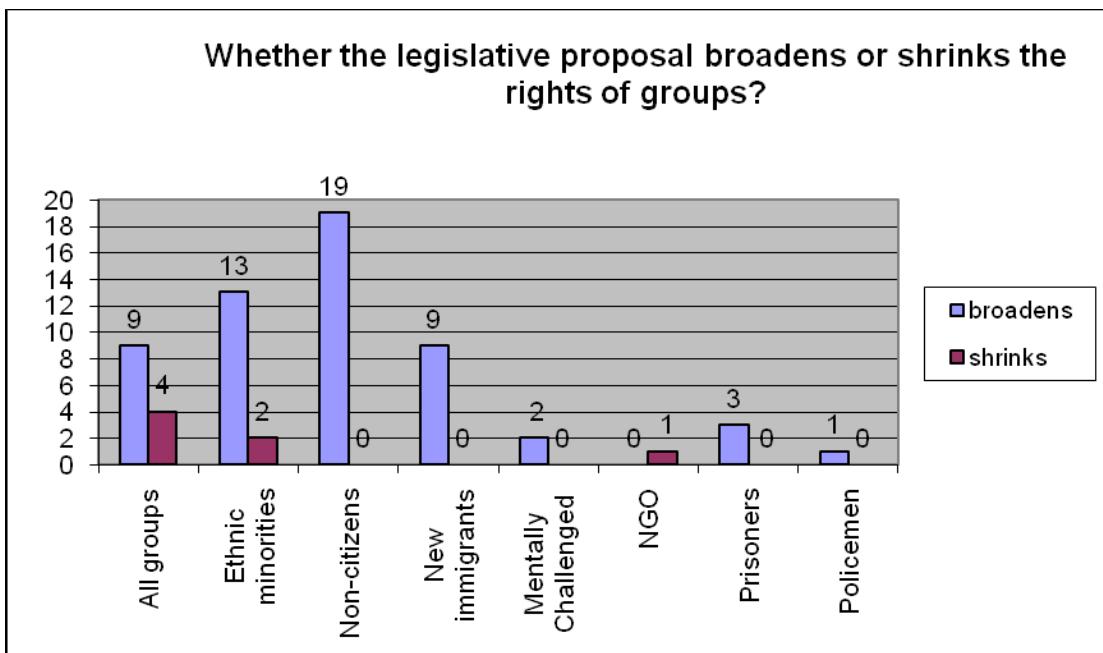


Also in this category, the party *For Fatherland and Freedom* has by far surpassed the use of disrespectful speech by other parties' MPs, with the party *For Human Rights in United Latvia* taking the second place. Unlike the use of exclusionary strategies, the use of disrespectful speech towards opponents has not fallen during the second half of the year.

Monitoring of legislative initiatives

Throughout the project period, PROVIDUS has also monitored legislative initiatives that concern the rights of the groups defined in project methodology and the rights of all groups in society concerning civic participation. These initiatives came from a number of sources – parties represented in the Saeima, Cabinet of Ministers and Committees of the Saeima.

As can be seen from the chart (below), most proposals concerned the broadening of civic or other rights of ethnic minorities and non-citizens. Most of these proposals came from opposition parties and were not accepted.



Conclusions

The monitoring of printed media in Latvia reveals an alarming tendency: **editors and journalists are the primary source of intolerant content in Latvian media.** There is a need for editors and journalists to consider the social consequences of editorial choices and to acquire more profound understanding of the best practices concerning the representation of minorities and NGOs in the media. Media owners and editors are not the only ‘force’ shaping the content of the media. With more initiative on behalf of journalists’ professional organizations (e.g. Latvian Journalists’ Union), the cases when the same editor or journalist repeatedly demonstrates contempt for human rights and minority groups could be discussed and condemned.

The reduced number of cases of exclusionary rhetoric in the Saeima in the second half of 2007 shows that there are some hopeful developments in parliamentary discourse. At the same time, the number of cases when MPs use disrespectful speech towards their opponents and minority groups is still high. Many of these cases constitute breaches of the Parliament’s Code of Ethics. The Code of Ethics is a binding document appended to the Rules of Parliamentary Procedure. The frequency and ease with which members of Parliament breach the Code of Ethics, using biased and offensive

language directed against their opponents and whole groups of population testifies to a lack of consideration towards democratic procedures and, ultimately, democratic values.

PROVIDUS proposes a number of measures to curb the frequent violations of the Latvian Parliament's Code of Ethics, including the right for persons and organizations outside the Parliament to submit complaints to the Mandates and Ethics Committee of the Saeima, and the more frequent use of sanctions against deputies by the Speaker, when repeated breaches of the Code of Ethics are in evidence.