

## **SURVIVING CRISIS IN LATVIA: NARRATIVES OF THE STATE AND ITS CITIZENS IN INTERNET SPACE**

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### **Résumé**

La reprise de l'économie lettone a été célébrée comme une réussite par les représentants du Fonds Monétaire International (FMI), la Commission Européenne (CE) et par la plupart des médias internationaux. Cependant, il s'agissait d'un récit construit par le gouvernement et soutenu par les médias de masse qui a été couronné de succès. Dans les conditions d'austérité sévère, il a permis au gouvernement de rester au pouvoir, avec le consentement du peuple. D'autres histoires ont cependant circulé sur Internet. L'analyse des récits dans les commentaires et les blogs montre comment des points de vue alternatifs sont développés, mais aussi la façon dont le consentement est créé en utilisant la puissance de la connotation et le mythe de l'Etat. Dans cet article, l'examen critique de l'histoire de la démocratie dans la Lettonie contemporaine sert de base pour comprendre les récits de crise, l'État et ses citoyens dans la communication sur Internet.

### **Mots-clés**

Crise, récit, démocratisation, Lettonie Post-Soviétique, communication en ligne

### **Abstract**

The recovery of Latvian economy was celebrated as a success story by the representatives of International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Commission (EC) and by most of the international media. However, it was a story – a narrative constructed by the government and supported by mass media – that was successful. In the conditions of harsh austerity it allowed government to stay at power by the consent of people. Nevertheless, other stories were told on the Internet. Analysis of narratives in the comments and blogs show how alternative views are developed but also how the consent is created by using the power of connotation and myth of the State. In this article, the critical historical review of the democracy in the contemporary Latvia is a base for understanding the narratives of crisis, the State and its citizens in the internet communication.

### **Keywords**

Crisis, narrative, democratization, Post-Soviet Latvia, Internet communication

## **INTRODUCTION**

As a „success story” and Baltic „miracle” international press described the recovery of Latvian economy after the economic crisis 2008-2009. For example, when IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde quoted Latvian poet and politician Rainis in her praising speech on conference in Riga, June, 5th, 2012 saying: "Those who change will endure." (Lagarde, 2012) In fact, this is a change that endures. Rhetoric in the public space in Latvia and abroad was used both with admiration and irony - taking in account the human and social crisis caused by this „success”.

Narratives of success told by the government (Åslund & Dombrovskis, 2011) and repeated by mass media (Sommers, 2014) were like stories of miracles that people are waiting for – these narratives created a consent that turned this waiting into social, political and economic passivity in support to government. Soviet regime in Latvia has left a chain of associations that cause shame, feeling of guilt and other negative emotions whenever people connect critical attitude and call for social activity with Communist narratives of class struggle against suppression. The process of institutional change of the post-Soviet period of time was rooted in old structures, forms of administration and functional bases whereas new values and a hierarchy of symbolic expressions typical for civic society were taken over with a help of foreign capital that was invested into so called democratic institutions, mainly NGOs. Democratic mechanisms of administration have been transplanted but were not institutionalized in the new system of values or a specific form of rational reasoning. Most part of such structures could not survive without a permanent flow of donations. Therefore also institutionalized forms of common living have not been constructed by citizens in the political discourse, but „purchased” or „instructed”. Institutional heritage only became possible due to international nature of the bureaucratic machine, by using old functionaries and mechanisms, and internationally adapted models for narratives of the state under conditions of liberal democracy and its citizens in the new – Post-Soviet - situation. Mass media followed this narrative model in a dubious role of watchdogs of democracy and supporters of national development.

In this situation, new media provided new opportunities, platforms and tools for political activity and social responsibility. Internet blogging and comments responding to acts of individual disobedience initiated by the help of internet tools have a capacity of re-structure public narratives to raise awareness and support of population and government to issues ignored by success stories. However, as our research shows, in Latvian Internet space, passive position is taking over the active and the emergent active position is dismissed in the course of finding a relevant (by consent accepted) narrative of the state and its citizens – the narrative of the suffering and surviving every coming difficulty and all changes introduced by the government in the name of national stability and in-group value.

In our paper we propose to look at causes and roots of this attitude based on the analysis of the historical conditions of developing democracy in Post-Soviet Latvia and their current outcomes in narratives of the state and its citizens in Internet comments and blogs.

## **HISTORY OF DEMOCRATIZATION AND CONSENT IN LATVIA**

After the Soviet regime collapsed the newly made labour market based relationships institutionalizing in Latvia similarly like in other transit societies was mimetic type i.e. adapting in jurisdiction often different and even contrary West European or American models of institutions. Besides, while the new-born state and its regime was in a big need of legitimization the discourse battle of different ideologies and values played crucial role. The more stable new regime became- the less important was discourse type legitimization of authority decisions. Masses became de-politicized but it was surely not on the price of increasing welfare as it was in the core industrial countries. The most prominent contemporary researcher of communication Jirgen Habermas describes this colonization of communicatively discursive lifeworlds by market and administrative power as “tensions between capitalism and democracy”. (Habermas, 1995)

These processes caused massive immigration waves - especially during recent economic crisis (the biggest waves starting in 2008 and going up to now). People fled to the western socially backed democracies seeking welfare state's social security net. Meanwhile the socially democratic leftist solidarity values and political representation of labour was discredited in Latvia by the Soviet past (even “the green” party has obtained right wing political orientation in Latvia while everywhere else it is traditionally leftist) but autonomous libertarian ideology is coined with pro-russian side. Further democratization of the society bottom up from the grassroots level is dependent on the new generation of citizens (as it worked out in the Western societies by social movements of the year 1968) with counter-culture ideology represented by autonomous alternative and do it yourself (DIY) media with libertarian ideology like DIY street art graffiti, radio piracy and desktop publishing zines.

In the time of so called "singing revolution" Latvia's independence and parliamentary democracy regime have got high legitimization from Latvians and non-Latvians. As the result of nationalism trends in foreign and inner policies, one third of population - non-Latvians were considered "colonists" and did not get citizenship receiving second-class non-citizen "alien" passports.

In the period of gaining legitimization there were established strict differentiation of political ideologies: firstly- west orientated liberal capitalism and free market as "the messiah" that will bring welfare for everybody and shops full of mass consumption products, and secondly- from the other side there were pro-Soviet orientated forces. Consequently everything that did not fit in the vision of uprising liberal capitalist welfare was considered and claimed red and pro-soviet. As an outcome such values as solidarity and co-operation that were discredited already by Soviet functionaries disappear and so did egalitarian collectives and communities. That is social cocooning process. Master and servant hierarchical relationships were considered as the most efficient and proper as the history proof it.

At the same time those working and life forms that did not fit in the market relationships died. With the de-politicking of masses elections became the market of buying votes by advanced manipulative technologies of advertising within the mass media. Those technologies developed in the western societies together with the resistance forms and behavior patterns that lead people becoming immune to the manipulation while they were completely new here in Latvia. Modernization of economy and society followed the same guidelines like it was in Latin American countries after WW2 when they tried to follow the industrial core countries' model. Globalization

Researcher Ulrich Beck invented on this basis the term of “brazilization” for this scenario (Beck,1999). Only a small number of population were able to adopt the behavioral standard of free initiative entrepreneurs - they became socially mobile and reached the spots in social hierarchy to share the national resources without control. That was a time of cheap credits and pyramid type of growth of financial corporations.

Latvian situation now seems to be in a way very similar to the Western Europe (Germany and France) after WW2 and before May '68. The state structures then and there as well as now and here are dominated by the same generation collaborative to the totalitarian regimes in the past and cynically converted their value systems in the present according to the free market and material wealth pragmatic ideals.

Latvia made progress in stabilizing its economy and pursuing market-oriented reforms. Its currency was strong enough to appreciate steadily in a free foreign currency market. There were left a lot of industrial factories without work in the territory of Latvia. The administrative apparatus in the interest of capital slowed the re-industrialization and did not help to invest in the sphere of industrial production. At the mean time it was easy to invest in oil transit and raw timber materials export. It was gained by so called liberal and pro-European political forces which were helping to accumulate primary national capital that would be possible to invest in industry in the further future. Still this is not accomplished- the privatization and economy de-centralization policies failed as the World Bank reports indicate. (Ruduša, Lase, 2000)

With the slowing of re-industrialization the growing labour market relationships and unemployment of wage-labored population increase the social tensions. To overcome those tensions there were three ways of the development in state policy making: growing of administrative apparatus, de-ideologization, domestic nationalism and indoctrination of threats by inside/outside enemies- namely bordering Russia and Russian speaking population. Administrative system growing makes space for the products of passive proletarianization while the industry is shut down. The Latvian conscription type of army left with unchanged structure and officers serves the same function- temporally exclusion out of the labour market. It is significant that in Latvia there is no contra-culture forms (for example, neo-nazis namely-skinheads) very common in other Europe, Surely here is presented the same street violence of teenage gangs, especially those of growing number drug-addicts, while the continuous distrust in positive values and social ideals plus the loose of social and geographical mobility results youth contra-culture groups political de-ideologization.

The non-governmental organizations (NGO's) that is the most organized basic structure for civil society unless skips the isolation they are isolated from population as they share different living standard (imposed by western funds), lifestyle and values. Besides NGO's as a part of facade democracy have governmental support. Basically most NGO's in Latvia are so called "grey NGO's" i.e. they speak out governmental point of view or the point of view harmonized with this of the government in discourses where it is not allowed to speak for government itself. NGO's in Latvia mainly represent only formally local civic society. Masses are deprived from social problems and their possible solutions (i.e. ideologies) because there is annihilated mechanisms of solving social problems- solidarity, uniting for collective action and self-governing. Social responsibility and activity was not encouraged in discourses of the elites (Ījābs, Kruks, 2008).

Within the process of "coca-colonization" (i.e. imposing multinational corporate capital domain over the territory of Latvia) institutionalization of relationships of capitalist production and living conditions managing become very manipulative. Dominate power reached by those structures that are based in the sphere of technological manipulation colonizing political discourse, communication and civic politics. As the result people are not able to decide upon their living conditions as well as organization of their communities (Offe, 1984).

The material circumstances of reproduction i.e. governing class control upon the wage labour makes it necessary to regulate politically who is and who is not wage laborer otherwise system won't work. The control is possible by stationing (depriving from mobility) those segments of population that have got extra door to the life and self maintenance beyond the labour market and which are temporally or permanently exempt from selling their labour on the wage market. Other life forms- family, school, health insurance system, etc. are sanctioned by the state policy only if they facilitate labour transition into wage labour. It is important considering the social division between relatively wealthy cities (Riga and Ventspils concentrate 2/3 of overall economic activity) and the rest of underdeveloped rural areas. Region bordering Russia- Latgale was nominated as the most prominent in this respect to future EU enlargement: "The most difficult situation remains in Latgale (Eastern part of Latvia) where unemployment in some regions exceeds 20% of economically active persons "(Charemza & Strzała, 2012).

Farmers and agricultural type of independent nation ideology (slightly similar to Qadafi's Libyan model) has special role in Latvia's situation as an opposition to soviet industrial colonization from 40-ties to 80-ties. Russification was more consequence of industrial policy particularly in Latvia than planned intentional demographic re-ordering. Latvia regained its independence together with other neighboring Baltic states Estonia and Lithuania in 1991 after 50 years of Soviet rule. "Since then, the country's main migration issue has been the status of its 1.1 million Russian-speaking residents, the legacy of the Soviet Union's Russification policy in which millions of people were removed from their homelands and sent to other parts of the territory," Migration Policy Institute's expert states (Heleniak, 2006). A parliamentary democracy, Latvia in June held its first free and fair elections in over 60 years, reinstated its 1922 Constitution. The Parliament "Saeima" in July the same year elected Guntis Ulmanis from "The Farmers' Union" as the first President head of state. He was totally unknown person and became a president just because of the same surname as authoritarian leader in Latvia's pre-soviet independence had. In the early period of Latvia's independence it was highly recommended ideal of self-maintenance farmer. The same time ruling class was not very interested in getting taxes or other state incomes because they were busy on building their own capital from western donations and state property. Therefore proud self-sustained farmer's ideology helped to destroy collective farming system allowing to get those communal properties to the very limited range of population- mainly high rank functionaries who firstly get into the legal procedures of privatization. They have got monopoly on information and slightly afterwards to the other resources.

The same scheme worked out for de-nationalization of property in Latvia- it became the only one transit state where de-nationalization on the basis of kinship was not restricted at all: "It has to be underlined as well that the whole privatization process — in which Latvia is notoriously behind most of the other East European countries — was in a permanent process of legislative changes, which continued from the early nineties up to 1994..." Latvian property law reviewer observes (Rozenfelds, 2001). Such legislative order was lobbied by high rank

functionaries with western origins from immigrants' families) of new administration. As the result main privatized property was gone to the westerners and new-born elite who had know-how of operating within legal system as well as resources to hire professional lawyers to deal the legal procedures of privatization.

Starting with year 1995 politicians speak about shortening the population employed in agriculture motivating it with European model- that is the right and proper way of organizing economy. State is not anymore efficiently governing agricultural sector of national economy. The largest cities of booming economy is in a harsh contrast to the rest of the farmland with destroyed infrastructure of communications, roads and so on. The municipalities of annually cut off budgets are led by women except those earning ones of harbors and transit money- those are headed by big strong bosses- men. The Russian speaking population is dominated in these urban environments while Latvian speaking inhabitants rests at the farmlands within almost feudal natural type of maintenance. Nowadays even illiteracy among children (never experienced under Soviet rule) is a thread. Parents can not afford sending kids to school, local schools are shut down. And the only strikes experienced since independence were those of school teachers. The choice between existence of wage laborer and other living maintenance forms that lies out of the labour market is not anymore let in the hands of labour owner. While it became more easy administratively regulate people's lives after the de-collectivization. Technological invasion is serving this function: even the social sector is administrated with the perspective of prison. It is IT based overlook and control of ghettos instead of structural re-arrangement of those under-social environments.

Post-socialism countries like Latvia have very appropriate labour resources for the development of industry. People still are well educated, deprived from production forces and their administration besides there is lack of labour self organizing forms. There are no real trade unions as the political representation of the labour. It causes facade type of democracy - the social reforms and changes of legislation are made by outside pressure of European standards as joining the Europe Union became the state's primal foreign policy's task aside of longing for virtual NATO's "nuclear umbrella". Without inner social pressure this legislation did not end up in efficient implementation.

Latvia saw almost no strikes even in the harshest years of change. Although many state-owned factories were on the verge of bankruptcy and seriously behind in wage payments, workers fear dismissal if they strike, and non-citizens fear that their participation in strikes may affect their residency status. After the most of local industries collapsed they formed a large sector of grey economy of small and medium sized enterprises while Latvians are expanding growing state and municipal administrative apparatus. But still both sub-societies lacks the experience and legally established formal procedures to influence the decision making process. That causes a widespread corruption. The state power centers are outside of country borders: economic power that national economy is dependent upon is Moscow's controlled oil and gas transit pipes but the legislation is dependent of Brussels' imposed EU norms aside of international financial donors IMF and WB proposed cures for social sector. If the whole population of Latvia would die in one night it almost will not affect the country; the state machinery is not dependent of its inhabitants of neither citizen nor non-citizen side. That means the loss of civil participation.

Libertarian ideology as part of established political praxis thorough West-Europe became strong after so called cultural (also named "student") revolution of the year 1968 as result of civil disobedience by anarchist, anti-statist and non-conformist movements through

confrontations as well as through further slow transition of ruling political elites to the "generation of 68" (most prominent examples: Joschka Fischer in the minister post of foreign affairs in Germany or Europe parliamentarian Daniel Cohn-Bendit- the former leader of student revolution in Paris, France). Western hierarchic structures of state and municipal governance were reformed in a way to democratize society, e.g. towards transparency and openness to grassroots civic initiatives oriented bottom up. Inseparable part of those movements were alternative media originated by the democratizing of the media production's technological costs (radio piracy, photo and xerox copying).

Part of Latvia's contemporary civil initiatives are included in official legally juridical sector as non-governmental organizations (NGO's) that function on the basis of bureaucratic reports subjected projects to the financial donor-organizations (at the beginning of transition process mainly western foundations such as Soros's and more recently domestic such as Cultural Capital's foundation). But much more essential answer to the libertarian ideology and to its values remains anarchistic left-wing subculture existence within society with its autonomous and alternatively subversive communicative practices such as do it yourself (DIY) zines of desk top publishing (In Latvia: "Pretspars" (translated as "Counter-blast") [<http://satori.lv/raksts/2480> Anarchist zine "Counter-blast": against charity, fascism and capitalism Latvian anarchists' internet zine "Counter-blast" presents articles with titles such as How to help to the dying and dead? Why we need the concept of heterosexuality. Against charity. Notes on free-lance artists. With swastika against fascism. Bicyclers' direct action "The critical mass". as well as controversial publication of guide how to make an abortion with the help of home-made herbal teas and tinctures. "Counter-blast" is accessible on internet: <http://pretspars.hardcore.lt/> .], "Wilks", "Torņa orgāns", etc.), radio piracy ("Imantas maurotājs", "Marx FM"[ active during contemporary art festival "Survival Kit 2013"], etc.), graffiti (In Latvia: collection of stencil-art graffiti with counter-culture ideology messages (<http://jeremy.lv/stencils/>), stickers, etc. Unfortunately these initiatives do not collect many followers because the civil disobedience activism as well as solidarity values are discredited by weather actual or imaginative threat for Latvia's sovereignty by the Russian political and/or military influence so people are being told by the political elite "not to shake so fragile common newly born state's boat" (Točs, Latkovskis, 2011).

Most recent Latvian contemporary civic initiative manabalss.lv (translated as "my voice") becomes public platform through the advent of digital era of communication technologies and, in particular, social media where obviously various and seemingly contradictory ideological initiatives are being raised to alter the existent actual legal system. Examples are initiative for de-criminalization of cannabis from one side and changing of national symbolism from the other. Main part are radical and activist initiatives based on everyday practices and discourse remaining rather small scale and marginal, and having a sub- or contra-cultural status in the public discourses, treated as such not only in official and mass media discourses, but also dispersed and fragmented discourses (Tsatsou, 2014) maintained by the audience in Internet comments of mainstream news where a typical attitude is to start diverse narratives out of emotion, resentment, but not finishing it in any completed form of solution or seeking for an action (Risi, 2014).

## RESEARCH MODEL: QUESTIONS, METHOD AND MATERIAL

In this paper, our aim was to analyze the role of the state in connection to its citizens as it appears in different narratives developed by users in the context of crisis in Internet comments and blogs and interpret it in the context of historical developments of the public space and democracy in Post-Soviet Latvia. We have selected two different cases. One was a discourse in blog community “Sviesta ciba” (<http://klab.lv/>) on a case of a supposed hacker Deniss Čalovskis, after petition to the government to not allow his extradition to USA for prosecution was initiated in civic initiative manabalss.lv (<https://manabalss.lv/>) and forwarded by one of the community members. Second selection was made by the help of software tool for the analysis of the level of aggressivity of Internet comments Barometre of Internet Aggressivity (<http://barometrs.korpuss.lv/>) that allows to analyze word usage in the context of a comment. Analyzed were comments that connected a selected central key word *crisis* with two other key words contexts - *state* and *citizens* – to find out how they were used to construct and refer to existing narratives in the course of commenting in 3 biggest Latvian news portals – TVNET, Delfi and Apollo.

## RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

The analysis of a discourse around the Čalovskis case showed that even if there are different views on the particular actors in the case that show up in different narratives (main actors include – Latvian state, government, American forces and officials and Čalovskis himself with his supporters). The state is always supposed to protect its citizens by all means:

*“[...] our state must have as a priority the interests of its own not the American citizens.”*  
*“Society will only have a profit, if it will take over the responsibility about its actions instead of waiting for State’s careful mother’s wing.” “I don’t need to be more restricted than ever in the name of state’s support.”*

It is interesting that the situation is often described as a lack of understanding of principles of democracy by the citizens of Latvia: *“It becomes clear to me that the democracy have a long way to come to this country, in addition, the most active part of the population is intellectually retarded”*. But the state is expected to hold those principles, especially, on international level.

Nevertheless, all criticism of the Latvian government in international context earns strong rejection on the connotative level 1) because of ethnic/ national connotations of the topic and 2) because of advocacy of the state as an outstanding instance – with all symbolical, mythical and total connotations it might have. The state is referred to as a rescue and protector of its citizens but with that the obeying to laws and recognition of the official ideology is expected from the citizens.

The analysis of the comments in biggest Latvian news portals showed that people tend to use well elaborated and managed narratives in a kind of ritualized communication. Whatever the topic of the article is (where radical expressions cause more comments), discourse slowly slides back to ordinary structures of stories, styles and narratives. For example, the crisis in the state is claimed as never ended, still on-going, even “raging” in most of the crisis – connected narratives:



*“There is a crisis in the state and government, and there is no sign that it decreases, rather an increase is observable. The people are busy with their things connected to the exchange and obtaining of money. So we are falling into the rift, would be difficult to call it coming down from the mountain.”*

The tone is often ironical:

*“What? The crisis already ended? Have not noticed...”*  
*“The miracle is that they think that the crisis is over.”*

Commenters go beyond the official narrative to show it is falsification:

*“The fact that crisis has been solved, is the fictional fabrication of the writer/economist lobbied by Swedish banks in the book [...] The state is continuing to borrow the money and lives on this account.”*

*“We should tell the EU how we live.”*

This is based on the classical model of the narrative where government is strongly separated from “ordinary” citizens, who claim themselves innocent sufferers betrayed by the government and left alone without any support or social guaranty in harsh economic situation:

*“The farmer in Latvia had no possibility to buy the land from other Latvian, because the economy is degraded and people in desperation were doing what they could do selling their property to the first who gave more than 2 Lats (Latvian currency before Euro) for a ha, and they were foreigners, organizations that artificially raised the price – what was left to Latvian farmer who wanted to work, to develop – he was going to bank to mortgage his existing farm and the new property [...] crisis all of them brought into the U-turn, and the banks were not communicating, but brutally stripped of their property selling it over later for several thousands, and the farmer - deprived of all – still stayed with his debts! Who is then guilty if not the government...”!*

In other variations – it is state who suffers from bad government or – more often - the state itself appears in this model of narrative as an actor who doesn't support its citizens, but robbes and makes fear to them:

*“Our ministers and other from the higher positions are not able to understand the common people, the crisis in the best case, is in the middle.”*

*“There is nothing that was done for the people, the crisis is not over, the working places are not created, the stream of emigrants is still growing, no discourse on its stopping or diminishing, the healthcare – under all criticism!!!! The blown bubble of fastest economic development will collapse very soon!! And it is blown to reach the selfish goals of the government and prime minister in the form enjoyed by Brussels!!”*

The state is “letting the money go”, but in other pessimistic scenarios state “has committed suicide”, “is dead” because it has ruined its future, it is especially true because the state is not only unforgivable passive, not making any efforts, any reforms, but also this is the state that

*“with its taxes takes off all wish to be legally economically active”.*

There are voices to tell personal stories of economic crashes against the system of state:

*“I worked in the budget institution, and my salary was reduced, because there were crisis and salaries were reduced everywhere, but I haven’t get the reduced part back. The average salary is increasing probably only because of increasing salaries of parliamentarians, ministers and the prime minister, not because of working people salaries.”*

Indeed, criticism, expectations and regrets describe also ideal model of the state – suffering but caring, giving protection, but also the state that needs to be saved, protected by its citizens, because in the independent country no crisis is too hard:

*“What crisis? We had crisis, when Soviet power deported our people to Siberia. This is not a crisis, this is a difficult moment.”*

Other popular models often used in comment’s narratives are based on the ethnic groups and their political affections. So Russian speaking group (supported by Russian Government) and represented in political life by such political actor as *Saskaņas centrs (Harmony centre)* is accused by some comments in destructive actions creating chaos in the country (antihero) but no real actor to defeat it is mentioned (The state stays open to this destruction):

*“Crisis will be solved when Moscow’s agents from Saskaņas centrs will end to incite irresponsible citizens against everything that is Latvian??”*

From another side the same group is depicted as deprived of all rights and wealth and in part citizenship itself and here state appears in dubious role as something wanted and neglected at once, because support for a suppressed acting hero is searched outside the state (EU or USA, for instance):

*“There live a lot of Russians that have a base to see themselves as abject and discriminated: the alien status and the treatment of their native language etc. These countries that are ruled by radically russian-phobic elites [of perverts and opaque dilettantes] that are declared Russia as a source of every kind of evil.”*

In economic context yet another role of the state becomes more represented – it is a kind of bank managed by and held in hands of the government – it could be stolen, hidden and shared behind the visibility of the citizens, it is where the money from outside comes in and where the increase in pensions was stopped to leave pensioners in poverty and crisis forever:

*“[...] everything is stolen in the country, crisis is developing and poor people are dying without food*

*“The state has boon sold, banks as well for a piece of bread and butter. Production was destroyed, everything that could be stolen, was stolen, they issued beneficial laws and made in Saeima (Latvian parliament) all kind of committees – to collect money -, and got their bosses in boards of all state owned businesses.”*

The stories in the Internet are told by audience mainly in chronological order, sometimes reverse direction, stories with relatively clear timing models are frequently repeated, often from clearly opposite points of view. However, in many cases no chronology is relevant because the story is based on general observations of actions (continuous or generalized) in a

longer duration of time. For example, for a personalized narrator her 45 working years might be the duration of her real active working period, but it is generalized, she is tending to be included in the group of “we” that with words of other narrator has been heroized as “*those who did fight for the independence of the state*” and now are let down.

Describing the voice and mode of narratives in the Internet space in Latvia it can be stated that the narrator is tending to stay in the group, but as he is mainly neutral or criticizing, her/his group is not that explicit in terms of aims, actions and achievements as that of his/her opponents:

*“This crisis was cleverly organized. Nothing in the world happens without a cause. The new member countries must send their labour to old European countries where it is warming up their economies, and their life is flourishing. In Latvia, the reforms are nothing else as the ruination and destruction that we all experience.”*

Narrator with only few exceptions is not directly involved in any actions, but he/she expresses him/herself in mainly emotionally subjective or generalizing mode but in the exceptional way that shows that this external position she/he is tending to propose as omniscient (and probably objective).

## DISCUSSION

Social philosopher Jurgen Habermas described modern society as systemically integrated by the anonymous power and exchange of goods. It is represented by the bureaucracy of the state apparatus and, from the other side, by the universal exchange via money – the mechanism of the market. Still, the level of democracy in the society is characterized by the level of opportunity for the people to influence the processes of the decision taking by the power and control the conditions of common life in the verbal communication or symbolic exchange. The sphere of verbal communication according to Habermas is the third source of systemic integration that ensures egalitarian communication in contrast to power or market. In the democracy, communication in the political sphere is the field of confrontation of the ideologies as “collective projects of better life” expressed in circulating narratives. In Post-Soviet Latvia, the institutions of the democratic state are transplanted, not created in the political discourse. Institutional heritage became only possible thanks to international character of the bureaucratic machine whereas old mechanisms and functionars have been saved. Speaking about corruption Latvia is internationally known through the metaphor of “stolen state” (Ruduša, Lase, 2000) – that refers to convergence of political and economic interests or “buying of laws” – in this regard, comparative research shows that the situation in Latvia is worse than in other countries of the Baltic region. The small sector of production economy has not yet built the political representation of the working class that would be based on strong trade unions. Ruling coalitions are constructed only by the right wing parties, i.e., power of money rules, because there is no articulated representation of the workers in the political life in form of effective trade unions. Even if mainstream media and NGOs have systematically reported on corruption (Karklins, 2005), they are not able to call for direct actions that would be oriented on the inclusion into the political agenda of the question of reforms to solve problems of corruption. This why these media can’t be seriously taken in account in the aspect of the systemic level of logic of democratization.

It's in the anonymous public space of the Internet, where people of Latvia produce and confront alternative narratives exchanging their crisis connected reflections, thoughts, concerns, affects and emotions constructing an alternative narrative on the state and its citizens. Fragmented, chaotic and sometimes rude in its form, this narrative is virtually, openly made in common conversational discourse, it includes several under-narratives that might seem opposed to each other in their ideological tuning and critical / supportive discourse, and might tend towards more argumentative or more emotional style of communication. Personal stories break through into Internet space less than quasi-public (3<sup>rd</sup> person) utterances of intersubjective and inter-passive (Žižek, 1998) reasoning, but no real political activity and no rational action is suggested (except of going abroad) (Buholcs, 2013).

However, what unifies all the different sub-narratives is the major narrative of the state that is suffering from crisis, “stolen” by its politicians, betrayed and humiliated by supposed allies, left behind by its neighbors and even let down by its citizens going abroad for search of better economic conditions, but still is a legitimate subject of loyalty for its citizens. The state is also depicted in narratives as a disappointing, passive, dead, without future and without support to its citizens that it is expected to provide, to give – first of all, security, warranty for future social and political safety and economic prosperity and, second, a motivation for future actions. But, even if it seems to openly fail in all this – because there no commonly accepted, rationally based and in practice rooted way to succeed – the state for Latvian bloggers and commenters still remains last standing instance where all discourses return back to support. This attitude is rooted in the symbolic level. The myth of the imaginary national unity as an ultimate goal to serve was developed by the first generation of Latvian political writers in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was further on elaborated in the symbol of the national state in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, carried on in the public rhetoric of the first Latvian Republic between world wars and gained even more in its sublime and imperative status in the hidden and repressed narratives never ceased to circulate through the Soviet period of 20<sup>th</sup> century Latvian history. Thus, the state in the narratives is not expected to be rational or active, it is expected to protect, at least provide a symbolic protection in exchange to the consent – for this purpose the narratives of state and its citizens are an excellent tool.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In the last 25 years the society of Latvia has made a difficult way to build a democratic state in the context of globalizing free market after the collapse of Soviet Union. Its industry stopped and traditional, pre- WW2 forms of farming many were hoping to revive were not competitive in the end of 20<sup>st</sup> century. In addition, corruption flowered and politics became a field where personal economic interests are often held above those of people - characteristic with re-structuring of almost the same elite in different parties after each election. It was possible because the democratic institutions were not seriously encouraging civic engagement and participation with mass media covering the political theatre but not promoting the democratic way of reasoning and acting via discourse based types of practicing democracy in exchange of different views, arguments and reflections. Generalized one-sided story of the national state (misleadingly represented as the activities of its parliamentarians and government) was foregrounded as a super-value to be saved from all the difficulties. Only small number of alternative media was examples of different discourse. The critical situations that endangered people's well-being, including last hard financial crisis of 2008/2009, were depicted from the point of view of this monolith narrative with a consequent consent from

population to the austerity politics of government. Even when the opportunities of the Internet media emerged for support to civic engagement and expression the lack of similarly competitive great narrative seemed to leave people unable to turn it into the instrument of political praxis. Thus, only fragments in anonymous Internet comments show the existence of other, suppressed narrative(s), marked as not for use in public space. Still, the overall mainstream idea also here represent the care and commitment for the country that has “suffered so much” in history and the state “we were fighting for” in the beginning of 1990ies that - along with its traditional (not accepting new) problems and enemies - is positioned over all needs, troubles, suffering and tragedies of its citizens. The narratives analyzed in this paper show how the lack of the institutional support (NGO’s resulting from the social organizing processes) that could held, maintain and develop an argumentative, rational discourse in response to state’s official and was never developed in Latvia during the post-Soviet time in the form of self-sustainable, responsible and grass-roots based organizations with proper program and ideological base is crucial to the impossibility of the alternative narratives in public space opposing the dominant narratives proposed by the government and repeated by the mass media.

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