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The Way We Talk Now:

Demonisation of opponents and search for scapegoats in Latvian political discourse in 2007

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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.

It has been pointed out more than once that

‘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 own¹.’

The paper will analyse the recent data gained during the monitoring of the debates in the Latvian Parliament and in the printed media, conducted by PROVIDUS. It will do so with the purpose of showing the particular ways in which political opponents and groups viewed as ‘undesirable’ or threatening the public peace or the state are excluded from the field of legitimate political debate. I will call these ways ‘strategies’ and will give examples of the most widespread strategies used in the Saeima and in the media.

But first, I have to make a few general points.

As Chantal Mouffe has aptly put it,

‘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

¹ 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>.

which constitute the liberal democratic form of life creates a bond of solidarity which expresses their belonging to a common 'we'.²

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 present in political discourse. With the notion of society absent or delegitimised by discourse, and substituted by the abstract notions of 'the people' and 'the state', the demonisation of adversaries becomes possible and even desirable.

Some recent research shows that there is, in Latvia, a systemic weakness in the perception of society as a field where individuals and groups defend their interests and where debate about values is accepted.

Not so long ago, a group of researchers from the University of Latvia studied the plenary debates in the Latvian Parliament from the 1990s until 2006, and one of their conclusions was that one of the persistent features of Latvian parliamentary discourse is the usage of the abstract noun *tauta* ('the people'). References to *tauta* are used to legitimise ideological claims. At the same time, politicians in their public speeches avoid the notion of 'society' which consists of pluralist groups and whose interests may not all be identical, but are nevertheless legitimate. The usage of *tauta* in parliamentary speeches to undermine the legitimacy of pluralist society is successfully summarised by Sergejs Kruks:

'*Tauta* (the people) ... is a spiritual substance, it is not differentiated and identified. *Tauta* observes politics from outside but rarely actively participates in it. After the materialisation of the idea of *tauta*, the notion differentiates, creating a 'state' and a 'society'. Both are separated: society is imperfect, divided, it holds unreasonable demands. The state in its turn undertakes the mission of a protector, educator, and developer. Being unable to come to terms with such a deformed society, the state feels responsibility towards *tauta*. In order to minimise the impression of its failed mission, the state appeals to pity, maintaining the past trauma, which turns out to be more important than flaws of contemporary politics.'³

The appeal to the trauma of the past (Soviet occupation) is still a major feature of rhetorical strategies used to discredit the adversary. A vivid example of this during the 2007 presidential election was the reference to the collaboration of the opposition candidate, Aivars Endziņš, with the Soviet authorities, used by his opponents. The rhetoric proved effective: some of the opposition candidate's supporters withdrew their unconditional support, A. Endziņš was marginalized as a candidate. On the other hand, not abiding by the laws in the recent past is disregarded as a trifling misbehaviour compared to the all-encompassing stigma of an occupation collaborator. Thus, when asked about his attitude towards the fact the mayor of Ventspils, who is accused of criminal offences under investigation, remains in his position as mayor, Prime Minister

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

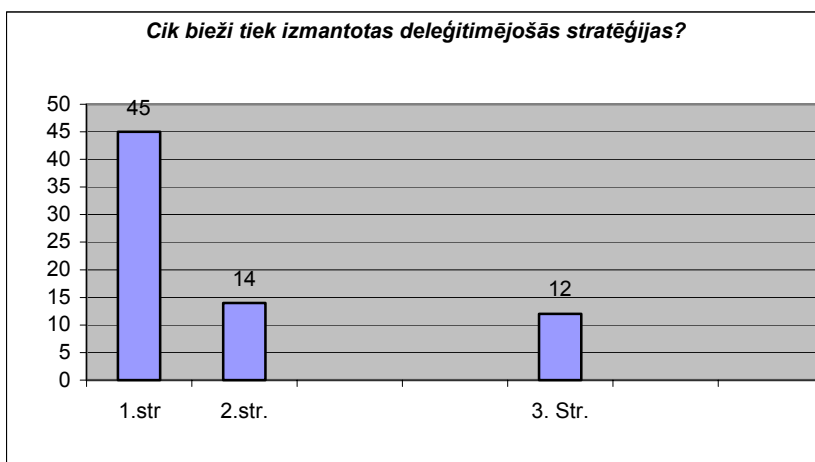
³ S. Kruks. Concept of the Nation in Latvian parliamentary discourse, p. 47.

Aigars Kalvītis noted that this is an issue of survival for the mayor, and ‘ethics by definition is about survival’.

The representation of what is ethical and what is not in public discourse in Latvia today is disproportionately dominated by contrasting the notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, as shown in the quotation from the MP above. Only the in-group, described simply as ‘us’, is deemed worthy of defining political priorities. The popularity of this view among the MPs is illustrated by the following data, showing the frequency with which statements to the effect that the political field is ‘ours’, and ‘they’ have no place in it, were uttered in the Latvian Parliament since the beginning of March this year:

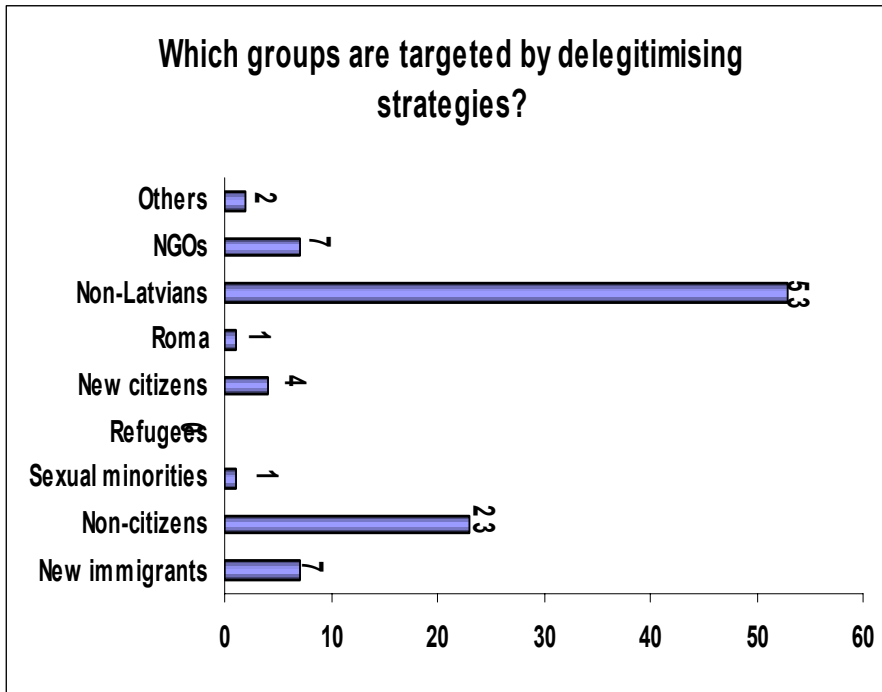
The 4 most popular strategies of exclusion in the Saeima (2007)

1. Justifies excluding a group from the public sphere/ politics, speaking of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, where politics belongs to ‘us’ (27 cases)
2. Justifies limiting a group’s rights, stating that the group has not ‘deserved’ such rights (7 cases);
3. Suggests that a group’s presence in Latvia is not desirable (7 cases)



4. Claims that a group creates unwelcome social consequences for Latvia, associating the group on the whole with a dangerous phenomenon (6 cases)

1. strategy - Justifies excluding a group from the public sphere/ politics
2. strategy – Justifies limiting a group’s rights
3. strategy - Shows that a group creates unwelcome social consequences



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 active NGOs and 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.

To support this final point, I will allow myself one more quotation:

‘Anyone (who wishes so) can stick with the socialists, the communists, with Brussels, with the Kremlin, with the UN, with the homosexuals, with (George) Soros, with the foreigners, and support their values. I choose Latvia, Latgale, Christian faith, our traditions and morality.’ Ināra Ostrovska, MP

This quotation from an MP’s interview in the press illustrates that groups that are marked as extremely undesirable in the Latvian public discourse are virtually interchangeable, and the same strategies are used to delegitimise them all. An implied link with forces abroad that are deemed to be hostile or ambivalent towards what is described (but not defined) under the signifier ‘our values’ is still one of the surest ways to discredit an oponent.

The marginal role that the notion of pluralist society plays in Latvian political discourse has a negative influence on the acceptance of the differences of opinion, culture and lifestyle. As a result, groups perceived as different are marginalized in political discourse and their opinion is disregarded as of no value. A parallel tendency stigmatises all claims to difference as ‘fake’ and represents the attempts of minority groups and NGOs to be equal players in the political field as attempts to usurp power that threaten ‘the people’.