



Mediernas diskurser om materiella och etniska klyftor. En jämförande studie i St Petersburg och Stockholm (Östersjöstiftelsen, dnr A029-11, startår 2012)

Media discourses on material and ethnic gaps. A comparative study in St. Petersburg and Stockholm

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1. Purpose of the project

The aim of this project is to obtain deeper knowledge on the media discourses on the material and ethnic gaps – and the impact of these discourses that are in interplay with other social factors – regarding people's ideas of such basic social processes.

The overriding questions are: How does the media illuminate and explain people's uneven *material resources* and ethnic positions? Through which mechanisms does the media contribute to people's (subjectively experienced) notions of the material and ethnic gaps in society and the causes of these gaps? How are these notions linked to the individuals' own material resources and ethnic belonging?

The term *Material resources* refers to everything that concerns the individual's material existence, such as food, clothes, home, health care, etc. measured by means of economic indicators.

Material gaps have a strong relationship with ethnic gaps. Much research has illustrated how “the others” are represented in the media, but research conducted on how the relationship between material and ethnic gaps are understood and explained in the media is meagre.

The questions are answered by the analyses of media discourses in St. Petersburg and Stockholm. Qualitative group interviews with media experts and inhabitants in the two cities on their notions of material resources and ethnicity aim to supplement the analyses. The choice of cities is motivated by the fact that both are cultural capitals with a similar geographical location along the Baltic Sea, at the same time as they have very different historical, economic, and political backgrounds. The comparison, therefore, contributes to more solid conclusions.

Therefore, the project focuses on the structure of the mediated social space in Russian and Swedish metropolises – more concretely, the representations of material and ethnic divides, social classes, ordinary persons, and elites in the mainstream news, political shows, and popular media.

Another aim of the suggested project is to deepen and widen our cooperation with Russian researchers and elaborate a theoretical and methodological basis for future projects, where other countries and cities with relevance in a Baltic and Eastern European perspective would also be included.



Hopefully, the project outcomes will contribute to new knowledge and hypotheses about the media's importance for the reproduction of ideas of two tightly integrated societal processes – material divides and ethnic relations.

The analytical basis consists of several comparative data collections mainly undertaken during 2012-2016 (surveys, interviews, qualitative and quantitative content analyses) as well as analyses of the data collected by others (e.g. World Values Survey). Some significant findings from a previous study (The Media's Role for Identity and Democracy, 2006-2009 financed by the Baltic Foundation, which was documented in an earlier anthology) serve as the background for this project.

This comparison of metropolises (with relatively similar educational and professional distributions) in two neighboring countries that have had different economic and political conditions for more than a century, aims to shed light on the role of media in society, where the mediated space is more and more characterized by global flows and actors.

2. The three most important results of the project and the conclusions that can be drawn from them

Material divides and ordinary people in the news

Our content analyses of the local and national news in the mainstream media show, in line with Tuchman's thesis on symbolic annihilation, that people with little or no financial resources are among the most invisible. When they are depicted, they are often represented (neutrally or with sympathy) as victims in the background or in episodic, negatively-charged situations – their vulnerability is seldom thematically analyzed and explained. Poverty in-itself is a muted subject, most often attributed to concrete politicians or authorities. The discussion of issues of 'economic inequality' or 'wealth' is even more suppressed.

It is remarkable, however, that these marginalizing trends appear to the same degree in both the Russian and Swedish media, considering that poor people and poverty are significantly more widespread in Russian society. The results are particularly interesting given that *social journalism* has been a prominent subject of research and teaching within the Russian academic field after the collapse of the USSR. Indeed, most Russian journalists we spoke to believed that their media covers the fate of poor people and even helps them to solve their material problems – a belief that is not reflected in our content analyses and that goes against the perception of the ordinary people that we talked to.

In general, the great interest in ordinary people displayed by the Soviet media, derived from the state ideology, based on ideals of so-called *socialist democracy*, has more or less disappeared from contemporary Russian media. Instead, liberal values and freedoms are prominent, but in a special, not Western way. In particular, the news on TV and in newspapers appears to be more *democratic* in Stockholm than in St. Petersburg regarding the representation of *ordinary people*. The Russian media gives preference more frequently to topics, information, and images – such as exclusive events, celebrities, and authorities – that are far from the everyday life of the Russian population's majority and seems, therefore, to contribute to the social and material gaps in society.



However, it should be added here that, in the Swedish news media, poverty is linked to migrants and to other, poorer, countries more often than in the corresponding Russian media, where *ethnic Russians* are more often victims of poverty. This result could be problematized from a democratic perspective given that (unlike Russia) Sweden is situated at the core of the increasingly globalized world economy that is characterized by deep material gaps and injustices between different countries and continents.

Social divides in popular media

Another comparative content analysis – of the most viewed television programs in large Russian and Swedish cities (apart from television news, sports, and children’s programming) – aimed to determine how human circumstances, especially material divides, are constructed in such television shows. In sum, the popular television output is related to the economic, political, and cultural conditions in the respective country, and the media logic implies that material as well as ethnic divides play an insignificant medial role.

However, although seldom in focus, material divides were seen in specific ways in the Russian programs. In some of them, poverty was depicted as self-inflicted (due to a lack of initiative, etc.) or even associated with something evil. On the other hand, the *successful person* is emblematic of the media culture of the Russian metropolises.

In the Russian popular media, the *success* was emphasized very clearly by the description or displaying of the elite person’s belongings and symbols of material resources – a significant difference from the Swedish popular media where the material attributes of success are seldom shown. A celebrity’s position (or *specific capital* in Bourdieu’s terms), associated with their prestigious work and peer recognition, was instead the main attribute of success in Sweden.

On the other hand, material divides in the Swedish top list TV shows were mostly in a historical perspective. This may be the result of greater economic equality in the Swedish welfare state of today despite growing gaps, but the finding may also be interpreted as an ideological turn; the general tone in the most popular programs in Sweden seems to show a problem-free and equal society where there is no distance between the different layers of social hierarchy. It could be added that, with a few exceptions, ethnic tensions were, broadly speaking, absent from the top lists in both countries.

How is the diversity of political opinions in the mainstream media related to democracy?

Could the diversity of intellectuals and ideas represented in a country’s mass media be a relevant measure to take into consideration when discussing the state of freedom of expression and democracy? If this statement is true, you must question the negative image of the Russian democracy that the Swedish (and Western) media have painted during Putin's reign.

Our analysis shows that the Russian media system during the period studied (2011-2013) stands out as an arena for the symbolic struggle of diverse significant ideas put forward by prominent politicians and intellectuals striving for dominance in the Russian discursive space. This is especially true of the state-controlled TV-channels – an important arena where the current situation and the country's future were discussed in heated debates characterized by collusions of conflicting ideas.



However, it is obvious that this diversity of ideas is manipulated by several discursive mechanisms, so that the outcomes of the separate debates are in line with the ideological orientation of the television channel broadcasting the show.

On the other hand, it is interesting to analyze the selection of facts and experts commenting on Russian current events in the Swedish media, thereby creating a one-sided, biased image of Russian politics and society.

The empirical results are discussed from critical Western theories suggesting that *freedom of expression* in the West is also ideologically structured. As a matter of fact, the critique directed toward Russian media can also be applied, with some adjustments, to the mainstream media in the representative Western democracies.

Therefore, although the analyses deal mainly with Russian media content, the critique also applies to Swedish mainstream media – they are not neutral or balanced sources of information, as they often depict themselves.

Another important observation is that the journalistic field in Russia overlaps with the political, scientific, and intellectual field to a much greater extent than in Sweden. This is an interesting observation that, from Bourdieu's perspective, could mean the three above-mentioned fields are losing a significant part of their autonomy and democratic potential.

At the same time, the struggle of ideas was more prominent in the Russian media, which is also reflected in the results from survey studies (with journalism students and journalists) suggesting that the journalist profession has a higher status in Russia than in Sweden. Could it really be so, that journalism really matters in Putin's autocracy?

N.B. It should be noted that the diversity of political views in several of the state-controlled media's talkshows has decreased after 2013 (in parallel with the political development in Ukraine and Syria, i.a.) at the same time as the number of political shows in the Russian broadcast media has increased significantly and the Russian media system in general has become more polarized. However, it seems that these trends do not affect our conclusions about the relationship between the diversity of the mediated political views and the media's ideological function.

3. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

The project contributes with comparative studies that enable you to see weaknesses in Western democracy where society's elites dominate the media (at the expense of ordinary people, especially the vulnerable groups) and play an ideological role (in a Marxist sense). The comparative analyses of Russian and Swedish mainstream media content (and its evaluation by ordinary people and media experts) enable us to see the Western media from a different, critical perspective that actually characterizes the West's central media theories, but that is quite invisible in the mainstream media's discourses where other countries' (e.g. Russia's) politics and societal structures are unilaterally depicted as undemocratic, with deficient freedom of expression. The concepts of propaganda and freedom of expression are problematized from a discourse analytical perspective.



4. New research questions that the project has led to

Some of the results, especially the material divides' connection to ethnic relations as well as to democracy and freedom of expression, should be further studied with refined analytical tools, expanded samples of media content, preferably including comparative studies in several countries in order to keep track of cultural and economic parameters (such as the country's geopolitical position, material prosperity, and democratic traditions).

In future comparative studies, for example, one could seek to concretize the connection between the prevalence of - and the view of - race and racism (in a Foucauldian sense) in different countries and the media's treatment of them with the countries' economic, political, and historical background. Our analytical basis of the media's treatment of ethnic relations was (unlike issues of material gaps) addressed to a limited extent, including in our interviews with experts and representatives of the public.

The structure and dynamics of social classes in different countries should also be compared in detail in relation to the content of the media. This is a major research question that would give rise to several comprehensive studies.

Our analysis also raises questions about key concepts such as *propaganda*, *freedom of expression*, and *democracy*. The observation that Russia's mainstream media (in 2011-2013) were characterized by ideological diversity should be concretized in a comparative study, focusing on the correlation between ideological diversity and freedom of expression in their connection to the democratic traditions and material prosperity by including larger samples of relevant media content and a broadened theoretical framework in several countries.

In general, comparative studies between countries are associated with methodological problems based on (among other things) the countries' semantic and discursive characteristics – factors that are in themselves interesting to focus on in future studies.

Research and science are important factors in power discourse. Some of our results could be followed up by seeking further connections between the different countries' media discourses on social divides and other democratic parameters (such as freedom of expression), on the one hand, and the involved countries' research on the respective areas of society. In this context, it can be emphasized that Russian social research has ended up in a theoretical anomie after 1991 as it has shifted from a strict Marxist paradigm (which still forms the theoretical basis of many Russian researchers and social debaters) to the theoretical diversity of the West.

5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

There are several books on media in Russia, sometimes compared with other countries, which have dealt with the *media system* in a political and economic context – often in conjunction with assumptions or results about authoritarianism and curtailed freedom of expression/democracy/pluralism, etc. Furthermore, some books of relevance for our project treat (not media, however) people's socio-economic situation in post-Soviet Russia, and similar publications are also available for Sweden.

However, *comparative* studies of such *media contents* in Russia compared to Western countries are hard to find. Our content analyses of human poverty and welfare as depicted in the Russian and Swedish news and popular media – together with opinions from media experts and selected media audience representatives – give a new, comprehensive, and partly unexpected insight into both countries' media output, which is interpreted in a historical and contemporary economic and social perspective.

6. The contribution of research to multidisciplinary knowledge formation

The project is interdisciplinary – with theoretical elements from several disciplines (MCS, sociology, political science, semiology...). Several methods have been used. In many respects, we have really achieved methodological comparability, which is a very difficult task in itself. The results from our and other comparative studies are problematized from a methodological and discourse-analytical perspective.

Our results could be of interest to scholars as well as upper-level undergraduate and graduate students in media and communication studies, social sciences, and humanities. Hopefully, they will have an international appeal, especially for Russia, Sweden, and other European countries.

7. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

An anthology is accepted for publication at Routledge.

In addition, the results of the project have been presented at several conferences and higher seminars and have given rise to several shorter academic articles and papers; They have also been included in the P. Petrov's teaching at several Swedish universities (2015-2018).

The collected material has resulted in several (qualitative and quantitative) databases that can be subjected to renewed secondary analyzes in future research projects.

Below is a list of the more important publications and conference contributions

Forthcoming anthology:

Von Feilitzen C & Petrov P. (eds.). *Mediated Social Space in Russian and Swedish Metropolises. Representations of social and ethnic divides* (Preliminary title)

Contents (preliminary list)

Introduction (Cecilia von Feilitzen & Peter Petrov)

Poverty and material divides in the news (Cecilia von Feilitzen & Peter Petrov)

The ordinary person in news media of St. Petersburg (Sergey Korkonosenko & Marina Berezhnaya)

News media and social class (Cecilia von Feilitzen & Peter Petrov)

Ethnicity, identity and media discourse (Peter Petrov)

The diversity of political views on Russian television and its projection in Western media (Peter Petrov)

Social divides in popular media (Peter Petrov & Cecilia von Feilitzen)

**Separate articles and conference presentations of Cecilia von Feilitzen & Peter Petrov, Södertörn University**

Von Feilitzen C. (2012). "Media Discourse and Material Gaps in St. Petersburg and Stockholm. Results and prospects", pp 13-22 in *Media and Mass Communication, Volume 1*. Info Invest, Bulgaria (Presented at an international conference, Sunny Beach, September 2012.)

Petrov P. (2012). "Freedom of expression. Ideals and realities", pp 108-122 in *Media and Mass Communication, Volume 1*. Info Invest, Bulgaria (Presented at an international conference, Sunny Beach, September 2012.)

Petrov P. (2013). "Scientific research as a power instrument in the global context (Научные исследования как инструмент власти в глобальном контексте)", pp 46-63 in *Russian research of mass media and journalism in the international context. Papers for the All-Russian scientific and practical conference. 23 to 24 May 2013*. St. Petersburg State University

Peter P. (2016). "The diversity of political views on Russian TV and its projection in Western media. The Swedish case" . *5th ECREA Conference "Communication for Empowerment", 12-15 November 2014*. Lisbon

Unpublished conference presentations

Von Feilitzen C. & Petrov P. "Popular media and material divides. A comparative approach". Presentation at the *4th International Media Readings in Moscow: Mass Media After Post-Socialism: Trends of 2000s*. 15-16 November, 2012. Moscow State University.

Petrov P. Debate with Prof. S. M. Vinogradova, SPbSU. "The polemic hour: Russia and Europe: different worlds in culture and journalism?" (In Russian: "Час полемики. Россия и Европа: разные миры в культуре и журналистике?" Полемисты: С. М. Виноградова, СПбГУ и П. Петров, Университетский колледж Сёдерторна, Швеция) at *All-Russian scientific and practical conference 23-24 May 2013*, St. Petersburg State University

Petrov, P. Speaker in the panel discussion "Social journalism and the social mission of journalism" at the *International seminar on "Social journalism as a civic activity: experience and research in Russia, the USA and the Nordic countries*, 17-18 March 2014, St. Petersburg State University (In Russian: *Социальная журналистика как общественная деятельность: опыт и научные исследования в России, США и странах Северной Европы*)

Petrov P. "Defining social journalism from an audience perspective". *International seminar on Social journalism as a civic activity: experience and research in Russia, the USA and the Nordic countries* (In Russian: *Социальная журналистика как общественная деятельность: опыт и научные исследования в России, США и странах Северной Европы*), 17-18 March 2014, St. Petersburg State University

Petrov, P. "Media Discourse and Identity" at *Third Annual International CCCS Conference 2015 "Identity and Culture"*, Skopje

Von Feilitzen C. "Media Discourses on Material Divides and Poor People" at *Third Annual International CCCS Conference 2015 "Identity and Culture"*, Skopje

Petrov P. "Comparative study on Russian-Sweden media systems and content" at *MCS-Student-Conference, Malmö University, 4-5 September 2018*

Petrov, P. Participation at the *Workshop on Journalism of Central and Eastern Europe*. St. Petersburg State University, 23 May 2013 (organized by Uppsala University)

Von Feilitzen C & Petrov P. Presentation of the project at BEEGS seminar on *Contemporary Research into the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe*. Södertörn University, 14 April 2016

Von Feilitzen C & Petrov P. Two resentation of the project at MCS, Department of Culture and Education, Södertörn University

Petrov P. Presentation of the project at a higher seminar Department of Humanities, Gävle University 2016

**Articles and chapters by Marina Berezhnaia and Sergey Korkonosenko, St. Petersburg State University**

Korkonosenko S.G. (2014). "Russian journalism: whose faces and what kind of life?" in *Journalism of the XXI century: towards the truth of life* (pp. 76-86). SPb.: St. Petersburg, state un-t; Higher. shk. zhurn. and masses. communications. (in Russian: Корконосенко С. Г. (2014). "Российская журналистика: чьи лица и какая жизнь?" in *Журналистика XXI века: к правде жизни* (сс. 76-86). СПб.: С.-Петерб. гос. ун-т; Высш. shk. журн. и масс. коммуникаций.

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