

# From liberal to predatory mass media in post-communist Lithuania<sup>1</sup>

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Referring to the concepts, *communicative democracy* is defined as free, open and democratic communication organized around three equally legitimate public sphere actors – politicians, journalists and public opinion, and *populism* is understood as good, entertaining and effective communication with people, eroding basic functions of the political parties (institutionalization of ideological conflicts) and politicians (representation), the paper provides insights about the dangers to quality of democracy if the free mass media gets utterly away from political parallelism. Special attention is placed on the tendencies of media personnel to be active in the political life. The paper conceptualizes a tremendous decrease (by one third) in public trust in mass media in Lithuania, observed from 1998 to 2009 and interprets this change as a cumulative result of the post-communist ill-structured political field under pressing liberalization and democratization coupled with specific patterns of the Lithuanian political culture and public sphere. In the conditions of a still relatively high public trust in mass-media and scarce foreign ownership of the mass-media outlets in Lithuania, the *local media barons* are able to produce and impose their own public-agenda. The Lithuanian mass-media and government relations evolve along the lines of the zero-sum game: they seek to control each other, and at the same time try to avoid being controlled by the other, while any other pattern of inter-relations does not appear as viable and appropriate. INTUNE project survey (2009) shows that the media elite's influence in the national decision making process is significantly higher in Lithuania than, for instance, in Germany or Hungary.

**Key words:** populism, communicative democracy, mass-media ownership, public sphere, public trust.

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## Introduction

The paper firstly addresses developments of the multi-party system and of the free mass media in post-communist Lithuania as two parallel processes, which intersection or overlap (*political parallelism*) at the beginning of the Independent statehood was very strongly pronounced and biased towards the political agenda of national revival, later on it became more polarized, but was temporary and partial and since 1995–1996 became erratic and irrelevant as such, giving a vast leeway to the commercial drives of media and populist parlance in the public sphere. Special attention is paid to dynamics (tremendous decrease) of the public trust in the late post-communist mass-media. With a reference to the concept of *communicative democracy* (defined as free, open and democratic communication organized around three equally legitimate public sphere actors – politicians, journalists and public opinion [Jakubowicz, 2005] and populism understood as entertaining communication with people, eroding basic functions of the political parties (to institutionalize ideological conflicts) and politicians (to represent voters), I argue that there is a danger to quality of democracy when the free mass media gets utterly away from political parallelism.

Presence of journalists and writers in the Lithuanian *Seimas* was constantly going down from 10,5% in 1990 to 3,5% in 2008 what shows strengthening independent mass media. Interestingly, Rimvydas Valatka, the MP of the founding parliament 1990–1992, one of the founders of the Liberal party in post-communist Lithuania actually is an influential public figure who holds a position of vice-editor of *Lietuvos rytas*, the Lithuanian daily with the highest circulation and since 2005 he also is an editor in-chief of the Internet news portal [www.lrytas.lt](http://www.lrytas.lt). It should be noted that in 1990 elected parliament (only) every tenth MP has had some prior experience from the private sector (meanwhile, majority of MPs were not entrepreneurs in the strict sense of the term). Every second of these path-breaking politicians (7) was a journalist acting under the private ownership law of recently liberalized mass media. In retrospective, the occupational category of MPs *former writers and journalists* in 1990 thus was the most polarized in terms of public vs. private ownership over all the post-communist parliamentary terms. Twenty years after, in 2008 elected *Seimas* only 5 former journalists are in the parliamentary

elite and none of them has any experience in the privately owned media. Therefore, divorce of the media and political personnel in post-communist Lithuania might be considered over and it bluntly favors the ex-partners from media.

## The Lithuanian scholarship about relations of the mass-media and politics

The country-case analysis is important and vital in order to understand the post-communist journalism. After all, “Like sailing, gardening, politics and poetry, journalism is a craft of place; it works by the light of local knowledge. (...). This localism, even ethnocentrism, can be differently rendered. *We* can mean we members of a congregation, practitioners of a craft, possessors of a common race, gender, ethnicity, but most often, it refers to ‘we fellow citizens’ of a country, state, or region” [Carey, 2007, p. 4].

Political scientists Krupavičius and Šarkutė say that in 1990–1991 the Lithuanian mass media experienced a rapid process of desovietization, which in essence meant that the Soviet *nomenklatura* lost ability to use the media as an influential instrument of the communist propaganda [Krupavičius and Šarkutė, 2004, p. 156]. After the breakdown of the communist rule, the media people emerged as practitioners of free and independent reporting and presentation. To Krupavičius and Šarkutė further developments in the field of mass media in post-communist Lithuania show evolving democratization of the political-cultural life and on the whole are to be interpreted along the lines of the democratic media success story (for instance, relatively high public trust in mass media, if compared to other public institutions such as a parliament, government or courts, active commercial radio and TV stations, as well as mushrooming internet news portals [*Ibid*, p. 151–155]). According to the authors, the only challenge for the post-communist Lithuanian mass-media yet to be dealt with is related to the demographically small population (with a peculiar language) and a relatively weak economy of the country.

Another media specialist Balčytienė puts forward a similar short-cutting revolutionary model of the post-communist mass media democratization: “After the restoration of independence in the beginning of the 1990s, the most important goal for the Lithuanian media was to elimi-

nate censorship. (...) journalists [started] (...) to work under conditions of freedom of speech” [Balčytienė, 2006, p. 172]. However, the author recognizes that in the post-communist Lithuania media-politics-economy domain several idiosyncratic solutions with lasting (negative) effects have been adopted. The most critical tasks for the Lithuanian media are yet to be accomplished “[media] should define itself as a public socialization venue in a market driven society. (...) journalism has to change from a purely commercial phenomenon into a societal in scope” [*ibid*, p. 174]. Yet, the author evaluates (highly) positively the media performance in the process of democratization of the country: “Media plays the role of a watchdog and functions as a public eye” [*ibid*, p. 174]. However, the author does not provide any convincing case of such a role performance. Perhaps, it would be more adequate to claim that compared to the promising institutionalization of the media as a true Fourth Estate, playing a watchdog role and consistently offering its audiences a balanced, fair, fact-based journalism devoid of the journalists’ opinions and advocacy, epitomized by *Pravo* and *Mlada Dnes* in the Czech republic, *Nepszabadszag* in Hungary, *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita* in Poland and *Adevarul* in Romania [Gross, 2004, p.123], the Lithuanian media panorama ingenuously lacks precedents of that sort. Balčytienė’s account of the post-communist improvements in the democratic workings of the media is based on her (erroneous) normative stance, which holds that “liberal media model (...) transferring information encourages discussions that form public opinion and influence the actions of citizens” [Balčytienė, 2006, p. 173]. As if any transfer of information encourages discussions, and as if any discussion leads to the collective action... The author fails to address the issue that “the essence of democratization are the value orientations and habitual processes that underline changes in the political, social, economic, and professional cultures and the evolution of vital civil societies. (...) Absent simultaneous systemic and cultural transformations, we are left with the phenomenon of a democratic civic masquerade, meaning the attempt to suggest the real existence of civic commitment and democratic practice through the fulfillment of merely formal criteria” [Lemke quoted in Gross, 2004, p. 113–114].

Social critic Bielinis in scholarly publications describes the global phenomenon of *mediacracy* and reveals its facets in post-communist

Lithuania. Political parties or any other units with political ambitions, based on the organized communities (staff of newspapers, TVs or radio, NGOs, trade unions, associations, etc.) are absent from his analysis. Bielinis addresses macro processes and tendencies (electoral and public relations campaigns) and extensively uses observations of the public behavior and illustrations from publications of individual journalists and politicians: “politicians use services of the mass-media and clenching one’s teeth put up with its critiques, because it looks like it has ambition to be the First Estate” [Bielinis 2005, p. 11]. Bielinis does not attribute this trend to any particularity of the Lithuanian political culture or to its political and cultural elites, but rather views it as resulting from the very phenomenon of mass communication. Political communicative practices render political parties as member-based-organizations irrelevant, and foster images of their leadership, thus promoting their emotional appeal to the audience. Bielinis shows that the upper-hand in communicative battles always belongs to the mass-media rather than to the political elite of late post-communist Lithuania: “Lithuanian viewer/reader most often treats mass-media as a counter-politics. When it appears that the politicians’ actions and decisions do not yield expected results, (...) then the mass-media become the last instance of hope” [*Ibid*, p. 61]. Bielinis goes as far as to generalize (regretfully, without identifying anything or providing any empirical test) that “Many mass-media outlets in Lithuania do not play the role of the intermediary between the politics and citizens and turn themselves into the independent anarchistic political subject, pursuing narrow, selfish, often purely economic purposes, further advancing illusion about the political transparency and impartiality of mass-media” [*Ibid*, p. 61]. Newspapers and TV channels become *erzac-parties* without ideology and without any positive idea [*Ibid*, p. 64]. Journalists in the times of self-politization of mass media and in front of its self-interests, start to a greater extent talk only on their own behalf. According to Bielinis, talking on behalf of the society or community becomes only a formal screen in the pursuit of particular (personal or group) interests of the mass media elite (ratings, profits and handy economic and political decisions [*Ibid*, p. 66].

The three “schools” described above provide differing and complementary approaches to the post-communist mass media in Lithuania.

Macro-political reading [Krupavičius and Šarkutė, 2004] shows the “history written by the winners” and leads to optimistic democratic conclusions and further democracy enhancing expectations. The civic masquerade approach [Balčytienė, 2006] leans to a somewhat more nuanced and socially embedded understanding of an un-easy role played by mass-media in their pursuit of commercial success and democratic quality. Finally, the journalistic corporatism and *mediacracy* approach [Bielinis, 2005] gives practically no hope about mass media as a provider of civic, empowering and enlightening solutions for readers and viewers. Meanwhile, none of the above presented approaches, prominently practiced in the Lithuanian academic research, does not center on mass media and power (political) elite relations as an important background and context, shaping both phenomena and affecting the political (civic) culture and public opinion in the country.

## An excursus into Soviet times

When Lithuania in 1940 was occupied by the USSR, the media underwent revolutionary changes. The structure of mass media ownership and management changed (many inter-war Lithuanian editors and journalists, were deported to Siberia or emigrated to the West). The ideological profile of media was monopolized by the Communist party. Readership of newspapers exploded (due to state subsidies and wide proletariat literacy programs). Only the language of mass-media (the Lithuanian) has been kept intact, although the Russian language periodicals and programs have been introduced (yet, the Russian language media outlets throughout the Soviet period remained of secondary importance). The Communist media was supposed to be unambiguously serious and its eventual entertainment services were regarded as bourgeois leftovers or results of the Western conspiracies. Only in late 1970s–80s leisure themes and subjects started being diffused and tolerated (by the national *nomenklaturas* [Šepetys, 2005]. Sustained propaganda was the principal goal of the in mass media throughout the whole Soviet times. The Communist media with its presumed superior knowledge and a high social status (yet, without any means of free expression) educated, informed and served “progressive social interests”.

Education (the Communist indoctrination) of journalists in the Soviet times was of primary importance and the powerful concept of *intelligentsia* was at its foundation. Censorship and self-censorship assured a rather smooth fulfillment of the propagandistic media function. Interestingly, the Soviet audience was understood as totally undifferentiated (i.e. very much interested in Moscow led high politics) and at the same time exceedingly fragmented (all-union, republican, regional, local press in various formats had very wide currency, socio-professionally shaped and hobby linked reviews have been cooked up). The Soviet mass media audience indeed was practically confined to the Communist party members and the working class. The dissident press (i.e. famous *Lithuanian Catholic Church Chronicles*, 1972-1989) and the foreign radio programs (*Radio Free Europe*, *Radio liberty*, *Voice from Washington*, etc.) with their graceless critics of the Communist regime neither have had free circulation, nor enjoyed big audiences. Yet, in Lithuania (as in some places elsewhere in the USSR) the Soviet mass media itself managed to voice the misdeeds of the rank and file officials, to raise problems of preservation of cultural heritage, environmental protection, to express workplace modernization-driven ideas, etc. The daily *Komjaunimo tiesa* in 1983-1989 used to organize highly prestigious *School of Young Journalists*<sup>2</sup> where the high school students from all over Lithuania aspiring to the journalism studies at Vilnius university, could gather for the club-like activities (meeting famous journalists, writing reports, editing programs, getting familiar with the journalistic craft and etc.)<sup>2</sup>. The Soviet mass media therefore in Lithuania had an important place in the *pre-* or *para-*political domain, which aired social and cultural topics having to do with common interest and/or collective identities [Jakubowicz, 2005, p. 155-156].

When Gorbachev initiated *Glasnost*<sup>2</sup>, the mass-media freed itself from ideological taboos and became an iconic public institution. In Lithuania, in the pinnacle year of the *Glasnost*<sup>2</sup>, subscription to *Komjaunimo tiesa* grew five times: from 108,000 copies in 1988 to 522,000 in 1989. The weekly *Gimtasis kraštas*, which was aimed at Lithuanians living abroad but was widely read in the country as well, as early as in 1988 published

<sup>2</sup> The author of this paper herself was enrolled into this School in 1985-1986, when it was led by Vitas Lingys, the then *Komjaunimo tiesa* journalist, turned to be the co-founder of the *Respublika* daily in 1989, and he was murdered by the mafia in 1993 because of his investigative journalism reports about the criminal facets of rampant privatization in the country.

the text of the Lithuanian National Anthem *Tautiška giesmė*, which has been banned for five decades. The editor-in-chief of the weekly, Algimantas Čekuolis, became a popular public figure, turned out to be one of the leading figures of the *Sąjūdis* movement and was elected to the Constituent *Seimas* in 1990. On 16 September 1989, the new daily *Respublika* was launched. It was established as a partisan newspaper of *Sąjūdis*, the enterprising, ambitious and motivated journalists composed its editorial and managerial board. In 1989 a group of resourceful fellows in Vilnius opened radio station M1, and this was the first private broadcast station in the Baltic States.

The journalists and the media became heroes of the day, the power of print and broadcast media was recognized, the public space exploded, acting as a facilitator and a consolidating agency, the mass media raised political issues and mobilized society around the most urgent political and social topics [Balčytienė, 2006, p. 78]. However, the democratic and national awakening was taking place in the context of weak political pluralism, ailing tolerance and social trust, parochial personification of the political field and low sense of citizens' responsibility [Senn, 1997]. Nevertheless, the Singing revolution in Lithuania was decidedly successful. Its victory testifies once again to the axiom, broadly discussed in the democratization literature: "Democratic culture is certainly not a precondition for the initiation to democracy" [Diamond, 1994, p. 239]. In addition, most media scholars see not internal, but rather external factors driving the post-communist changes, namely "political, economic and technological factors, as well as internationalization and globalization affect the evolution of the transformation. The Eastern European media systems were transformed to resemble those in the West" [Gross, 2004, p. 114].

## **From media consecrating events in January 1991 to its commercialization**

"The transition from communist media, and from underground or alternative media where they existed, was achieved almost instantly at the moment the communist regimes disappeared, and the transformation began simultaneously with that occurrence" [Gross, 2004, p. 114]. The new Law on the Press and Other Mass Media was one of the first to be drafted by the Constituent Assembly, after it proclaimed the



Lithuanian independence on March 11, 1990. The founding post-communist Lithuanian legislators (among them, as it was hinted above, were numerous influential journalists) cherished the idea that the State should play an active role in the matters of mass media. For a small country in the insecure geopolitical and cultural environment, the Law made it impossible for foreign citizens to set up a newspaper or broadcast station in Lithuania. In Lithuania, in line with the transformation observed all over the Eastern Europe, in 1990 the one-party media system suddenly became a multiparty media system.

At the same time, the Lithuanian journalists tried to establish their professional community along the lines of a non-governmental organization. These initiatives, supposedly signaling of the incremental transformations of the relations between mass-media and politics and their respective representatives in the public space, in post-communist Lithuania were taking place amidst intensive Vilnius-Moscow political tensions. Early 1991 saw Soviet soldiers' and Lithuanian civilians' bloodshed in the attempted *coup d'état* in Vilnius. On January 11, 1991 the Press house in Vilnius has been occupied by the Soviet military and a temporary government led by Moscow loyal communists was proclaimed in Lithuania. The Lithuanian population mobilized itself to defend freedom and independence. On January 12, 1991 the first issue of *Laisva Lietuva*, prepared under joint efforts of thirteen editorial boards was published. It described the Soviet soldiers' assault against Lithuanian journalists and publishers. Late at night January 13, 1991 the national TV station has been occupied by the Soviet military. Yet, heroically just a few minutes after the closure of the Vilnius TV station, the Kaunas radio and Kaunas TV station started their national broadcasting in Lithuanian and English. Kaunas radio signals reached Poland, Latvia, Estonia and Finland, and then the satellite connection started transmitting the news to the whole world. One day later, the communication services from the USSR managed to block the Lithuanian radio signals emitted to the USA. The Kaunas broadcast could only reach Central European and Scandinavian countries. The broadcast blockade has been breached on January 25, 1991 when a temporary satellite broadcast station has been established in the Parliamentary building, in Vilnius. About 200 foreign journalists have been working in January 1991 in Lithuania.

These were heydays of the Lithuanian national unity and its freedom devoted mass media. After the Moscow led adversary attacks against the independent Lithuania failed in late winter 1991, “things got back to normal”. However, the mass-media carved for itself a terrific niche in the Lithuanian collective memory, it entered the social elites and in the public opinion. Interpretations of the exceptionally high lasting public trust in mass media in Lithuania (although systematically measured only since 1996) unequivocally relate this phenomenal trust to the excellent media performance in January 1991 and to the symbolic role of martyr it was assigned by the ultimate Soviet aggressors.

However, the political devotion for civic freedom and the Lithuanian State prestige in the world of the Lithuanian mass media in early 90ies, changed its course in the following years. Engaged multi-partyism was short in Lithuanian media; it disappeared by the mid-1990s and was replaced by more autonomous, if not politically independent, media. Newspapers lost their decidedly partisan orientation; public broadcasting continued to be manipulated (if not controlled) by governments, and the rest of the predominantly commercial broadcast outlets became entertainment oriented and generally politically biased in their news and public affairs coverage.

The Lithuanian media from an agent of political resistance (1988–1990) has moved in the direction of the ostensibly commercial product. The free market laws entered the alleged free expression domain. Now, a new danger has appeared because the media started creating the national agenda not in public, but in their own commercial interest [Balčytienė, 2006, p. 58].

The number of newspaper titles in Lithuania rose sharply in 1990–1992 and assured its enormous diversity (in 1995 reaching its ever attained peak of 477 newspaper titles). Alongside, the radio and TV market unwrapped. New radio stations aired their music, sports, (Catholic) religion and political information related programs. On April 11, 1993 the first private Tele3 was aired. Professor Liucija Baškauskaitė (a charismatic Lithuanian–American cultural anthropologist, who became famous after her heroic performance at Kaunas TV, broadcasting the January 1991 events to the whole world, CNN included), was one of its founders and feature personalities [Pečiulis, 2007, p. 134]. In 1994, another commercial TV channel LNK (*Laisvas ir Nepriklausomas kanalas, Free and*

*Independent channel*) has been established by the Lithuanian show-biz stars (sold it to the Lithuanian investors MG Baltic in 2003). Yet one more TV channel BTV (*Baltijos TV, the Baltic TV*) was established in Klaipėda (nearby the sea region) region in 1993 (sold to the Lithuania *Achema* investment group in 2004).

Hence, the diversification of media was huge at the outset of the post-communist period in Lithuania. Based on inherited from the Soviet regime high readership tradition and patterns of wide newspaper circulation combined with the unleashed free market forces, vigorous political (party) competition, hearty newly born public figures and media celebrities and hugely symbolic new media initiating events the unprecedented expansion of mass-media operated in early post-communist Lithuania, displaying its overtly liberal character.

### **Mass media in late 1990s: down-to-earth and towards corporatism cum populism**

Developments of the multi-party system and of the free mass media in Lithuania observably intersected at the beginning of the post-communist Independent statehood and were very strongly biased towards the political agenda of national revival. Later on, the overlap between the media and politics became more polarized (nationalist-conservative vs. liberal vs. social-democratic). Yet, it was short-lived and partial; and since around 1996 (we take the third parliamentary elections as our reference point) became erratic and irrelevant as such, giving a vast leeway to the commercial drives of media and populist parlance in the public sphere.

Because of the declining public interest and economic recession in 1996, the circulation of newspapers and journals in Lithuania started to go down. The downward tendencies have been aggravated by the 1998 economic backlash in Russia – the newspapers in Lithuania became prohibitively expensive for majority of population. Several dailies set up their thematic weekly supplements to keep their readership loyal and satisfied with aesthetic and lighthearted contents. A new wave of diversification of the press operates in Lithuania since 2003, with expanding Internet portals cross-ownership on broadcast and print media and the Internet [Balčytienė, 2006, p. 119]. Balčytienė while discussing the eventual effects of the increasing mass-media outlets cross-ownership (on one hand,

higher potential of better journalistic quality and, on the other hand, danger of triggering the down-market trends) tends to diagnose the second one: while most of the media aim at the mass market, they follow a trend towards the homogenization of contents [*Ibid*, p. 119]. Homogenization coincides with the trends in global media, where commercial values and practices of the Liberal Model, described by Hallin and Mancini (2004) are perceived to operate as norms (since a larger market share means more money, the commercial press tries to reach out the mass audience across political lines).

Meanwhile, as Hallin and Mancini (2004) describe, in the Liberal model, not only higher salaries, but also superior ethical practices of journalists may be enhanced by the mechanisms of self-regulation of the profession. In line with this reasoning, in 1996 a new law regulating the Mass media was adopted in Lithuania, and the state control was removed, and the self-regulation of media was introduced. It copied the model of self-regulation from the analogous Swedish institutions and established the Inspector of Journalist Ethics and the Ethics Commission of Journalists and Publishers. In Lithuania, the state intervention in the matters of mass media was dramatically restricted. The role of the state is confined to monitor the public information policy and to promote such abstract values as transparency and equal opportunities. Very liberal media regulation and a prominent role assigned to the free mass media in public authority and power shaping have been enhanced. Journalists, according to the Lithuanian Code of ethics, should not work on behalf of authorities, private structures, or individuals. According to the Lithuanian Law, if a source of information requests to preserve the secret of its name, the journalist in no case is allowed to reveal it. The international experts have concluded that Lithuania has the most liberal post-soviet law regarding media regulation.

Thus, after the introduction of the well-intended Law of Media self-regulation and sobering readership reduction in late 90ties, the free mass media in Lithuania functions as a value-in-itself and is rather deaf to external (civic) criticism. Media practices its self-regulation not to enhance professionalism, but to defend 'the profession'. Bielinis writes about perverse corporatism of journalists in Lithuania: "In support to each other, the journalists pay little attention to the problems arising inside the mass-media. For instance, journalistic reaction to the ethics of politicians and

journalists: it suffice a small *faux pas* of a politician, and he/she is accused, and, on the contrary, a journalist has to constantly and steadily ,commit sins‘ to get mass-media report on him/her or briefly mention him/her as some sort of misunderstanding” [Bielinis, 2005, p. 78]. The case in point might be the series of anti-Semitic publications in *Respublika* daily in early 2004, which attracted attention and indignation of international media and human rights experts, but were rather vaguely discussed in the Lithuanian media (the daily *Lietuvos rytas*, the main *Respublika* rival in the press market, did not seize this “civic opportunity” to publically criticize its competitor!).

Provision of information is considered an economic activity, and the Lithuanian Law on Competition regulates the competition between the media. It uses the concept of the ‘dominant position’ and in principle does not allow any entity to have more that 40 per cent of the market. However, the experts agree that in small media markets, the media concentration is inevitable and in Lithuania the *Lietuvos rytas* and *Respublikos grupe*, two publishing houses well-established in the country market, give evidence that the newspaper market is an oligopoly in Lithuania. It seems that the control of the press by a small number of *local media barons* in Lithuania (contrary to Latvia and Estonia or Hungary) was not a temporary deviance provoked by a small market. Indeed, the *local barons’* phenomenon invalidates the arguments put forward by Krupavičius and Šarkutė (see above) about a sheer macro-structural impossibility to create readership and editorial loyalties and identities in small press markets.

The broadcast market in post-communist Lithuania is still expanding: in 2000 there were 29 radio broadcasters and they are 47 in 2009; respectively cable TV grew from 47 to 55 operators, MDTV (MMDS) from 3 to 4 operators and TV from 21 in 2000 to 31 broadcasters (7 national) [Veidas, 2009.11.09, p. 6]. The broadcast market in Lithuania has a peculiar entity called the Lithuanian National radio and television (LRT), which is meant to be the Public broadcaster. The LRT runs several radio and TV programs. The LRT has a supreme regulating body, the LRT Council. The LRT Council is rickety and during 16 years the LRT outlived as many as 14 general directors. An obvious intrusion of politicians into the work of LRT is confirmed by the fact that LRT managers leave their position due to political reasons [Balčytienė, 2006, p. 83]. However, in relation to the LRT organizational developments and the very notion *Public*

*broadcaster*, perhaps not only pernicious roles of the politicians have to be discussed. The commercial TVs and radios are in prickly competition with the LRT over audience and income. In late 2006 the Constitutional Court came forward with a Salomon's decision that commercial public-ity is compatible with the Public Broadcast Television, since it assures the financial TV independence from the government (politicians) and provides equal market competition opportunities vis-à-vis commercial stations. Whether it is the best recipe to serve the public interest remains a rhetorical question.

The Lithuanian media is striving to function as a watchdog and a critical public eye and mostly so in its self-defensive interest. Meanwhile, understanding of the media powers as the *fourth estate* is mythologized, visibly exaggerated and enjoyed by itself in an unreserved manner [Bonckute 2009]. The media is supposed to perform as a substitute (of a political class, of the system of justice, of the intellectual analysis, etc.) role. Such a substitution process might thrive if media credibility is high [Gross, 2004, p. 120]. This condition is still amply met in Lithuania (although with decreasing preponderance). This extremely high trust in the TV broadcasted news was approaching the situation where the press and TV screen with its ever changing content becomes the most important morally substantial part of the public life [Kavolis, 1997, p. 13–15]. It had to happen some new political and social values re-ordering events, to make public trust in mass media decrease from high trust ranging from 57–70% in 1996–2003 (distrust ranging from 8 to 15%) to more common in democratic surroundings trust in media ranging from 42 to 54% in 2003–2009 (distrust ranging from 16 to 27%). In Lithuania it occurred in late 2003-early 2004 when President Paksas has been impeached because of his allegedly corrupt practices and illegal political campaign finances [Norkus 2008]. In the presidential scandal the mass-media played an amazingly controversial role. Majority of the dailies and TV stations allied themselves against President Paksas (they joined the accusing part of the established elite, widely criticized in the populist president statements). Meanwhile, numerous segments of the mass-media displayed the strangest anti-Semitic, xenophobic and other attention distracting pieces of information. This dualistic mass-media milking of a story for all its worth, where the journalists were taking sides along the lines of competing political elite and avoiding to produce any public-interest related analysis, finally led to rela-

tive disillusionment of the audience vis-à-vis the mass-media (which still remains a rather well trusted public institution in Lithuania).

However, apart of the fact that media credibility is a complex social phenomenon, difficult to measure and interpret, the media credibility is only a temporary and partial background for substitution function to be performed in a society by the media. After all, the substitute role suggests that the media are more powerful, more independent, and more determined to pursue their own interests through a professional culture of their own making than is clearly the case [Gross, 2004, p. 120]. Yet, from the observations exposed above follows that in post-communist Lithuania the journalism professional culture is still in its nascent phase (if at all), and public actions and messages of the media are rather determined by leading media personalities, free market impulses and contingent political opportunities than by their professional culture. Therefore, the Lithuanian mass media functions in favorable conditions where it can set the news agenda according to their own political and /or business interests. In a way, the success of mass-media to self-portray positively and impose itself as a trustworthy authority is partially due to the absence of structural barriers which failed to be produced because of the early uncoupling (too loose coupling?) of the political party – mass media systems.

Data from the international survey INTUNE conducted in 2009 show (see Table 1) that the Lithuanian media elites have an exceptionally big role in the national decision making. In the ranking of influential elite's segments, the Lithuanian media elites come on the second place (just after the experienced politicians). For instance, in Germany it is rated 6<sup>th</sup> (according to the country elites themselves, the German media elite's influence on the process of national decision making lags far behind of the influence exercised by leaders of the German banks, experienced politicians, leaders of big enterprises, leaders of big employers' organizations and is sidestepped by the leaders of trade unions). In parallel, in Hungary the media elites' influence on the national decision making process is ranked 4<sup>th</sup> (after, again, influence exercised by leaders of Hungarian banks, big enterprises and big employers' organizations). The fact that the Lithuanian media elites themselves evaluate their impact very highly (on 100 point scale, mean average of the Lithuanian media group evaluation of its own influence is 55,6 compared to 58,7 of the Lithuanian national elites' total evaluation, compared to, respectively, 34,2 versus 46,5 in Germany and 32,6 versus 41,5 in

Hungary) highlights the specificity of the big power of Lithuanian media elites on national decision making agenda.

Table 1: Influence of different segments of national elites on decision making in a country. Comparison of Lithuania, Germany and Hungary

Evaluation rating scale: 0 – no influence at all, 100 huge influence. National elites' survey data, January-March 2009. Group means (in the brackets mean of the self-evaluation of the reference group itself).

Segment of the national elite	Lithuania	Germany	Hungary
Experienced parliamentarians	63,1 (62,8)	56,3 (69,0)	39,9 (40,4)
Leaders of mass-media	58,7 (55,6)	46,5 (34,2)	41,5 (32,6)
Leaders of employers' organizations	57,2	53,9	44
Leaders of banks	56,9	68,5	53,5
Leaders of big enterprise	54,9	54,2	47,8
Leaders of trade unions	43,3 (45,1)	47,6 (49,7)	39,4 (40,1)
Unexperienced parliamentarians	42,4 (46,6)	44,4 (39,5)	27,1 (26,2)
European parliamentarians	39,5	39,2	30,2
Ordinary citizens	23,5	26,8	13,1

Source: FP6 INTUNE project survey January–June, 2009. A sample of media, trade union and political elites in 17 EU countries and Serbia (for a full list of interviewed countries see [www.intune.it](http://www.intune.it)) were asked to give their answers to a pool of structured questions related to elites' perceptions of decision making in national and European arenas. In each country elite sample consisted of 70 incumbent national lower house MPs, 35 representatives of media elite and 15 leaders of national trade unions. The sample of media elites included the leaders of the largest (by audience or readership) dailies, weeklies, TV and radio stations, internet news portals, influential public intellectuals and political commentators as well as key figures of the media professional representation in the country. The sample of political elites was selected proportionally according to seniority, gender, age, party and tenure in the parliament. At least 15–25 senior (frontbench) politicians such as (former or present) ministers, junior ministers, presidents and vice presidents of the house, parliamentary groups and standing committees as well as (former or present) EU commissioners were included in each country's sample. In countries having smaller parliaments, such as Estonia, Lithuania or Belgium, the quota of 70 political elites was achieved by approaching each and every MP starting from the senior politicians.

Instead of contributing to the *societal democratization* (Splichal 1994), i.e. motivating marginal and de-privileged groups and individuals to participate, to engage with the social matters, and to make their views reflected in media's discourse, the Lithuanian media people are known for coining and firmly introducing into the public discourse the dichotomy of *elite vs. beets* (*elitas vs. runkeliai*), plainly favoring those speakers and interlocutors who have established social (political and media) positions



vis-à-vis those disadvantaged and/or aspiring to be heard and listened to. The Lithuanian media is far from the ideal democratic with the definitive goal of openness, which in journalism means broad public empowerment. It is not by a chance that the media elites in Lithuania see their impact on national decision making process 2.4 times bigger than the impact of ordinary citizens (compared to 1.3 difference in Germany, see Table 1<sup>3</sup>).

Further, on the presumed substitute role of the mass media, Gross writes: “the counter-power role is far removed from an adversarial role in the Western sense of the concept (...) Eastern European media’s adversarial role is generally politically partisan rather than independent” (Gross, 2004, p. 120). Indeed, debates and publically displayed arguments of the post-communist Lithuanian mass-media are clearly bounded to multiple economic and political interests. In waters of the ill-structured political field in Lithuania twenty years after the break-down of communism [Ramonaitė 2009], the mass media, criticizing each and every step of the politicians, is fishing its best prey.

Yet, there is a huge failure in logics of the media is to claim and be a counter-power in every situation. The very notion is absurd, for if things really happen in this way, and if the governments invariably deserve to be opposed and confronted, it would stand for a sufficient reason to despair of democracy, for it would mean that a democratically elected government is always mistaken, and therefore that the people electing it are afflicted with a congenial, incurable idiocy [Revel, 1991, p. 237]. The above mentioned President Paksas’ impeachment scandal was the closest approximation of such a mass media led counter-power action in Lithuania. It significantly contributed (mostly, through the above analyzed decrease in the public trust in media) to the ever-confused media mingle, generating its own patterns of social action, enjoying and expanding its autonomy from the representative politics.

The media plays less than a salutary role in the political, socio-cultural, and commercial realms by contributing to confusion, a sense of uncertain-

<sup>3</sup> As to the specificity of the Hungarian civic disempowerment, which leads that ordinary citizens’ impact on national decision making is evaluated – similarly to the Lithuanian pattern – as 2.5 times lower than the Hungarian media elite’s influence, yet the Hungarian citizens’ impact on national decision making in general is considered being much lower (twice, if compared to Lithuania and Germany), see academic analysis of the *democratic elitism* developments in the country, for instance, Matonyte and Varnagy (2008).

ty, and misunderstanding of what democracy and market economy are given their tendentious, politicized (yet, without any clear political affinities) reporting and analysis. Such media stances are vividly counterproductive to helping establish new cultures of tolerance, trust, and respect for facts [Gross, 2004, p. 121]. Civil society's growth in such conditions might only be provoked (but not stimulated) by the mass media as a civil self-defensive reaction against all kinds of demagoguery (be it political leadership and media people driven). This is not a 'normal' civil society evolution under conditions of democracy.

## Conclusions

The revolutionary role of the post-communist mass-media in Lithuania is undeniable. The revolutionary years (1988-1992) were those when the media closely mirrored the political climate in place. In that period political mass mobilization exploded, so did the appeal of the various mass-media outlets and political entrepreneurs. The mass-media frankly conveyed the bewildering array of socio-political and cultural choices, open for a country under democratization. However, the Lithuanian mass-media soon embarked upon the liberal (mostly understood, as commercial) model of development.

The contemporary *mass society* phenomena, coupled with the ill-structured post-communist political field and peculiar traditions and contingencies of the Lithuanian political culture and public sphere, gave birth to the odd situation where mass-media in unclear waters is fishing its commercially based (interest group defined) profits. In the conditions of the relative absence of foreign ownership of the mass-media outlets in Lithuania (striking in the context of press and TV hugely 'colonized' by the foreign owners in other post-communist countries), the *local media barons* in Lithuania produce and impose their own agendas, which hamper development of the civic-minded public sphere and obstruct definition of the social and professional responsibilities of the journalism as a profession and as a social category.

In a strikingly un-civic manner, when clashes between media promoted and political elite supported ideas and principles occur, the Lithuanian journalism comfortably portrays the politicians as the main threat to the freedom of speech, and thus provokes desirable shifts in public opinion,

favorable to the mass-media. Social success of those manipulative actions of mass-media is grounded in weak civil society, fed by post-traumatic social memories, (latently) present in a society, recovering after years of censorship and narrow interpretation of politics as a battle-field. The Lithuanian mass-media and government relations are defined along lines of the zero-sum game: they seek to control each other, and at the same time try to avoid being controlled by the other, while any other pattern of inter-relations does not appear as viable and appropriate. The media elite is skeptical about the whole government media policy and intolerant to discussions of its own role. The post-communist Lithuanian media freedom remains distorted by those aggressively seeking to dominate in the public sphere, without contributing to its pluralism and public-mindedness.

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## Lietuvoje: nuo liberalios – grobuoniškos žiniasklaidos link

### Santrauka

Komunikacinė demokratija suvokiama kaip laisva, atvira ir demokratiška komunikacija tarp trijų vienodai legitimų viešųjų aktorių – politikų, žurnalistų ir viešosios nuomonės. Populizmas suprantamas kaip gera, teikianti malonumo, paveiki (efektyvi) politinė komunikacija su žmonėmis (liaudimi), pažeidžianti esmines politinių partijų (politinių konfliktų institucionalizacijos) ir politikų (atstovavimo) funkcijas. Straipsnyje pateikiamos išvalgos apie tai, kokie pavojai kyla demokratijos kokybei, jei laisva žiniasklaida visiškai išvengia politinio paralelizmo (Hallin, Mancini). Akcentuojamos Lietuvos žiniasklaidos elito tiesioginio aktyvumo politikoje tendencijos. Didelis pasitikėjimo žiniasklaida nuosmūkis (trečdaliu) per pastarąjį dešimtmetį (1998–2009) interpretuojamas kaip bendras rezultatas pokomunistinio menkai struktūruoto politinio lauko, veikiamo liberalizacijos ir demokratizacijos procesų, kuriuos Lietuvoje sustiprino savitos politinės kultūros ir viešosios erdvės patirtys ir tradicijos. Lietuvoje dėl santykinai aukšto pasitikėjimo žiniasklaida ir menko užsienio kapitalo dalyvavimo žiniasklaidos versle, *vietiniai baronai* gali kurti ir primesti žiniasklaidos interesus atspindinčią viešąją darbotvarkę. Lietuvos žiniasklaidos ir politinės valdžios *par excellence* santykiai rutuliojasi pagal nulinės sumos žaidimo principus: vieni kitus mėgina kontroliuoti ir tuo pačiu metu siekia išvengti būti kontroliuojamais ir tuo tarpu kiti žiniasklaidos ir politinės valdžios tarpusavio santykių modeliai neatrodo nei įmanomi, nei priimtini. INTUNE projekto apklausa (2009) rodo, kad Lietuvoje žiniasklaidos elito įtaka nacionalinių sprendimų priėmimo procesui yra žymiai didesnė negu, pavyzdžiui, Vokietijoje ar Vengrijoje.

**Raktiniai žodžiai:** populizmas, komunikacinė demokratija, žiniasklaidos nuosavybė/savininkai, viešoji erdvė, pasitikėjimas viešosiomis institucijomis.