Lithuanian Parliamentary Election and the Regional Press (2016)

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Jolanta Mažylė
Vilnius University, Lithuania

Abstract:

Although an election campaign is a crucial part of political communication that encompasses much more than just development of media strategies or their implementation during elections, yet most solutions of modern election methods are based on the specifics of mass media. The end recipient of information is misled, if instead of disseminating information about a candidate and his intentions, media outlets provide a distorted image of an election campaign. The image which is created, when politicians seek to attract media attention by using their election methods (such as pseudo-events).

Using literary and source analysis, the paper examines the viewpoints of political scientists, sociologists, media and communication theory experts about the process of public information and its particularities during elections. Legal framework regulating political advertising during the elections in Lithuania is presented and the data of the empirical research – the content of the regional press during the 2016 elections to the Seimas (Parliament) of the Republic of Lithuania – is summarised focusing on the behaviour of the regional press. When analysing regional periodicals published during the election campaign, it was intended to ascertain what roles the regional press chose – that of an observer or a watchdog, a provider of information or an analyst, an evaluator. Content analysis of regional press publications published during the election campaign and a sociological survey of media employees helps to determine what roles the media adopted.

Key words:

Election campaign, press, voters, pseudo-events, partisanship, bias, agenda-setting, media

Introduction

Elections represent a major part of life of democratic countries, a tool that implements the citizens' right to participate in the state governance and to elect their representatives that adopt vital decisions. Since their emergence, the media gradually became an intermediary between the citizens and politicians, created an environment for politicians to convey their ideas to voters, and enabled the voters to learn about the existing alternative choices. Lithuanian political scientists and media experts say that the mass media are the preferred means of informing the voters about the candidates and reveal the full and multifaceted image of the democratic process (Bielinis 2000). However, the end recipient of the information is misled, if media outlets, instead of providing information about a candidate and his or her intentions, give a distorted image about the election campaign, which is created when politicians seek to attract media attention by using their election methods (such as pseudo-events).

The objective of the study is to examine how the regional press followed the main principles of journalism – accuracy, objectivity and impartiality – during the 2016 election to the Seimas (Parliament) of the Republic of Lithuania. Also, to identify what roles were adopted by the regional media –that of an observer or a watchdog, a provider of information or an analyst, an evaluator.

The study consists of three parts. The first one reviews different standpoints of various academicians, political scientists, sociologists, media and communication experts on the particularities of the public information process during elections. The second part describes the legal framework of political advertising during elections in Lithuania and legal regulations of the activities of the regional press. The third part is dedicated to content analysis of the regional press publications during the parliamentary election and summarises the sociological survey of regional media employees.

THE CONTEXT OF ELECTION COMMUNICATION IN THE MEDIA

The role of the media in democratic processes varies. First of all, it is the main source of information for the public, which is the implementer of democratic processes. The media takes on additional roles as well. The quality of information provided in the media, according to Denis McQuail, is directly related to the objectivity of information. Objectivity is an expression of media practice. Denis McQuail emphasises that journalistic objectivity should not be confused

with the notion of truth, even though objectivity is one of its versions (McQuail 2005). In this case the truth is a broader notion that besides of objectivity includes impartiality, freedom and a fair reflection of reality.

In the democratic political system, the media acts as both a transferor of political communication, which is not related to a media outlet itself, and as a sender of a political message created by journalists. In both of these cases the media plays a crucial role. First of all, politicians seek to use the media when sending their message across to the target audience. Political programmes, political statements, election promises, decision-making and political arguments can exist politically and potentially be politically effective depending on the number of messages disseminated and how many of them reach the audience (McNair 2003).

Because political success of parties and candidates is directly related to media attention, all candidates striving for votes seek for the greatest possible access to media channels. This can be done in legal ways, when the media reflects political tendencies justifying them by the principle of balance and impartiality. However, in practice media can digress from its role to provide quality and objective information, and may start painting a positive picture about politicians expecting gratitude, understanding or for any other reasons.

Lithuanian political scientist Lauras Bielinis calls the media a virtual field of political life, events described in which have a different effect on people who perceive the events as a personal experience turning it into beliefs, stereotypes or emotional experience (Bielinis 2003). According to Lauras Bielinis, the media becomes as if the sole medium of political communication, and political activities turn from real into symbolic –into a declaration of decisions. Thus, he says, for politicians it becomes the vital task to involve the media in the processes of an election campaign.

However, direct inclusion of the media in the course of elections has a second dimension to the issue – the media not only does not comply with candidates' whims but frequently adopts a political position itself. It is said that the media does not shy away from taking part in politics, doing this as if "neutrally", informing about politics, criticising it or exalting some of its aspects. According to Lauras Bielinis, because of such actions the mass media becomes the main and often the single instrument developing political consciousness of the people (Bielinis 2003). In order to correctly understand the role of impartial media, one has to consider the conception of objectivity in the theory of communication. Another important aspect of dissemination of news

by the media is agenda-setting, when the mass media formulates the topics on the public agenda based on the news it publishes.

Journalistic objectivity in the theory of mass communication

Nowadays, it is universally acknowledged that quality media are objective, impartial and independent. Journalism gains a major part of reliability in the public eye on the condition that it reflects the reality. It would lose its meaning if the distorted images detached from life would become a subject of journalism. The truth and reality comprise the foundations of journalism that are embodied by a journalist's strive for objectivity (Wien 2005).

Nonetheless, objectivity remains the main point of the discussion. Some say that it guarantees the trustworthiness of information and draws the line between respectable and dubious media outlets. Yet others claim that objectivity is an unachievable goal only leading to doubts about the information disseminated by journalists.

Denis McQuail argues that the main characteristic of objectivity is the ability to adopt an impartial position and retain neutrality in relation to the subject about which it is reported. Meanwhile, support and backing are alien concepts because objective journalism supports none of the conflicting sides and must not be biased. He also emphasises that objectivity requires commitment to accuracy and other truthful criteria such as relevance, entirety and the importance of ties. When these standards are followed, there is no precondition for concealed motives or for serving a third party. "The process of observing and reporting should thus not be contaminated by subjectivity, nor should it interfere with the reality being reported on" (McQuail 2005).

Tony Harcup also analyses this issue and offers a practical approach. He believes that objective reporting can be defined as: consistent balance presenting different issues or sides to the topic; attentiveness and truthfulness, revelation of all important related details; differentiation of facts from opinions but deeming opinions to be just as important; reduction of a reporter's personal opinion or involvement; avoidance of malicious or cunning goals. Tony Harcup says that everyday objectivity depends on how various independent facts are separated from subjective values (Harcup 2004).

Tibor R. Machan raises another issue of objectivity in the media – moral obligations of journalists, publishers, academicians and other disseminators of information. He believes that information disseminators are at the very least obliged to supply information. Therefore, they are

obliged to speak truthfully, be accurate, objective, comprehensive and fair. Whereas information that is incorrect, inaccurate, biased or incomplete is not information altogether (Machan 2004). He maintains that inaccurate news could be regarded as causing damage to readers, listeners or viewers and it is a sign of avoidance of professional responsibility.

As we will see later on, when analysing the content of the regional press during the 2016 parliamentary election in Lithuania, the issue of professional dependence is one of the reasons creating conditions for biased political information to emerge in the media. One may also question if a journalist's objectivity, when providing a piece of information (an article, a message or a photograph), can guarantee the objectivity of the entire newspaper whose content is concluded of separate pieces of information about specific events.

The results of agenda-setting and other media effects in the context of elections

Media agenda represents a causal relationship between continuous actions – media reports the news and these reports affect readers' understanding about the importance of issues. Studies suggest that readers' shifting priorities determine changes in politics (Cook et al. 1983). A research by communications theorists Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw on presidential elections concluded that voters believe election debates and not major political issues to be the key topic of elections (McCombs, Shaw 1972).

This is because the media broadcasts debate and voters use them to collect. If during an election campaign the media focuses on such issues as the chances of different candidates to win, on the pretence for candidates to attack one another in debates etc., then voters perceive this as a priority. Whereas candidates aim to create a positive image about themselves and choose to focus on certain issues more than others, this may be foreign policy, law enforcement, social security and so on.

In their study Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw analysed the relation between voter reactions to the amount of news in the media and topics highlighted the most by parties or all political news covered in the media."If one expected voters to pay more attention to the major and minor issues oriented to their own party – that is, to read or view selectively – the correlations between the voters and news/opinion about their own party should be strongest. This would be evidence of selective perception. If, on the other hand, the voters attend reasonably well to all the news, regardless of which candidate or party issue is stressed, the correlations

between the voter and total media content would be strongest. This would be evidence of the agenda-setting function" (McCombs, Shaw 1972).

The study showed that voters who had not committed to a specific candidate at the beginning of the campaign followed all the news. As far as major issues are concerned, correlation was higher between the opinion of voters on major issues and issues reflected in all the news (including the party they favoured) than on the issues relating only to their candidate. Meanwhile, as regards minor issues, the correlation was higher between all the news rather than the news about their favoured candidate (McCombs, Shaw 1972). The result of the study demonstrates that voters decide what is the most important in the election campaign based on what is highlighted in the media, regardless of whether it is related to their favoured candidate or not. This is the evidence of agenda-setting function in the media – because voters view the media as a whole, they form an opinion about major election topics in the order provided for by the mass media.

Circumstances forming media roles during election campaigns

When election time comes, the media's political role increases at the expense of its role as an observer or a watchdog. There is no evidence that information provided by the media or its political position is managed by owners of media outlets because editors and journalists strongly deny that owners interfere with their work or the content of their publications. Still, one can assume that the content of a media outlet depends on subjective opinions of certain people (Page 1996). Benjamin Page says that an editor's subjective opinion may intervene with the content of a media outlet because this person hires and dismisses journalists, edits their articles and approves them for print. Editors may hire journalists depending on their political views and edit stories through their own political prism even if they do not intend to distort information. Such influence may not even contradict journalists' autonomy if the latter are aware that they were hired because of political views and begin to act based on expectations (Page 1996).

Political course of the media may be formed similarly at the higher structural level of management. Owners hire editors and directors, thus one should not even doubt if they are selected based on the political taste of the media owner or not. That is the reason why later on they do not have to care about forming the political position of the media outlet day to day. Brian McNair says that there are several main purposes of the media – to inform, to develop the audience's ability to recognise information (to give meaning and significance to facts), to give a

platform for a public political discourse thus consolidating the formation of public opinion, and to give publicity to governmental institutions (McNair 2003).

Political role of the media

Some suggest that the media augments negative impact on the stabilisation of democratic countries, where the democratic order is newly created or re-established. According to Richard Gunther, in new democracies, whose people lack long-lasting experience in the implementation of democratic policies, media negativity may cause mistrust and alienation (Gunther, Montero, Puhle 2007). Even such media that carries out its democratic role perfectly may still contribute to citizens of new democracies distancing themselves from democracy as they lack the required political experience that would help them reconcile with the political picture painted by the news media that plays a role of monitoring and supervision in a democratic country. An alternative hypothesis states that the mass media has democratised political information and made it available to all the people regardless of their status or education. A positive feature of democratically oriented media is that it has a mobilising power unlike biased media (Gunther, Montero, Puhle 2007). Nevertheless, studies by various authors show that during elections a small portion of the media chooses the unbiased approach. It rather actively participates in the democratic election process opting for a not entirely democratic role.

Benjamin Page maintains that media organisations, similarly as other business structures, turn into political agents seeking for ways to steer decision-makers towards a direction that benefits them (Page 1996). For this reason, they can use their influence over the audience – to offer assistance or similar services to politicians when political campaigns are ongoing. On the other hand, the media frequently uses indirect references in their publications that can affect political decision-making and convictions of the mass (or elite) audience. Such indirect actions particularly benefit the media because of the ability to disseminate political information. Benjamin Page describes the media's political role as observational activities that are targeted (often implemented in practice if not deliberate) and somewhat joint so it can be regarded as one player (Page 1996).

Consequently, a question arises if the media is using its publications to achieve a particular political role and what the extent of such actions is. Benjamin Page says that editorials are frequently used to voice a biased opinion about political developments and that is often the

declared role of editorials. Meanwhile, columns and opinion pieces require a separate study in each case, even though Benjamin Page admits that influential newspapers and journals limit the flow of opposing opinions in their publications, and opinions that differ from the ones expressed in editorials or from general political views are not always published (Page 1996).

It is a matter of discussion between journalism theorists and practitioners whether media outlets use articles for their political gain. Benjamin Page adds that most boundaries of objectivity and impartiality have eroded in most media outlets, yet it is doubtful that concrete values are promoted in the news tendentiously instead of chaotic support of one or another side. It should be noted that the main sources of political news are governmental officials and this limits the flow of the news in the media. This raises a question if the media can be regarded as a political player if it only relays the opinions of the government or its representatives. Brian McNair states that during elections the media is not inclined to conceal its bias towards certain candidates. Individual newspapers are even engaged in active campaigns in an openly propaganda manner, something that both the yellow and quality press do not refrain from (McNair 2003).

Political bias of the media in editorials

It is accepted that some journalistic genres allow some amount of subjectivity. In the press these are often articles that are evaluative in nature – editorials, columns, opinion pieces, satire or caricatures. These articles express an opinion of the public, viewpoints of an editor or an opposing opinion and are published in a special section stating that this is not outright factual information provided in analytical articles and messages. An editorial is regarded by media experts as a reflection of values and points of view of the editorial staff. In the time of elections, naturally, editorials provide opinions on the election process and on candidates, they criticise or praise. Following journalistic practice, such openly subjective articles are rarely signed by a specific editor or journalist as it is perceived to be the position and voice of the whole publication. On the other hand, the genre of authorised political journalism is fulfilled in columns and opinion polls, comics and similar pieces. Their influence lies within the author (McNair 2003). The author often is a journalist-expert – an analyst or specialist that has an authority among certain audiences. During elections he or she becomes a source of expert opinion on political events, thus such person has an opportunity to form an opinion and helps

readers to form their own opinions. Frequently journalists-experts give an opinion that is of the identical political course and similar to the opinion of the editorial office (McNair 2003).

Opinion pieces written by journalists-experts are usually published next to editorials, on the same or the next page. The trustworthiness of such texts often lies within the personalities of journalists. They often have confidential sources in top governmental bodies, reveal information only when they are sure that it is reliable and are deemed to be insiders (McNair 2003). Editorials and analytical articles boost circulation of a newspaper and allow the press to reveal its political viewpoint publicly. Readers are aware about the purpose of this genre and support the political direction of the newspaper they read, hence usually supporting the opinion expressed in editorials.

Pseudo-events as a tool affecting public opinion

The goal of political communication is to persuade people. Irrespective of whether it is US presidential election or lobbying aimed at certain MPs or Cabinet members, the communicator is seeking to affect political behaviour of the recipient of the message in such a way that benefits the former. However, in different media spheres, including those related to political communication, it is difficult to determine the connection between the audience and the message as well as the impact of the piece of news.

Lauras Bielinis says that candidates can use media as a mechanism of manipulation. This is because of the human factor in journalism, when every fact is presented through the eyes of a journalist, editor or owner (Bielinis 2000). He notes that politicians frequently attempt to take advantage of personal acquaintances with individual journalists who would help the required information to be published by a media outlet. Another precondition for publishing biased information is coinciding interests of a politician or a political party and corporate media. In such case a media outlet may support a political force because of business reasons (Bielinis 2000). Although the media often seeks to control the flow of information and regulate its quality, it is still dependent on sources. Election candidates may use this to create media opinion that benefits them by invoking information dramaturgy that is based on the supply of specific information at the right time and place (Bielinis 2000). One of the goals of such information is to adjust the agenda of the media by removing competitors from the field of information and overshadowing

them with neutral events of facts, replacing information about them with information benefiting the candidate or the party.

Daniel Boorstin notes that political communication is just unilateral exchange in which attention is devoted to meaningless messages. He says that the number of reports on fake, fabricated and artificial news is growing rapidly in the media. He calls such news "pseudo-events" (Boorstin 1992). They are not spontaneous, they are often planned and orchestrated by electoral campaign managers. They are organised with a goal to gain immediate media attention and are planned in such a way that is best suiting for the media. The success of a pseudo-event is measured by how widely it is reported in the media. Its relation with time is often fictitious and not factual, while relation with the real situation is ambiguous. They are often dedicated to praise a certain personality or an institution.

The phenomenon of pseudo-events emerged in the 19th century and was related to media growth and the need to fill newspaper pages. The media's need to turn events into news coincided with politicians' need to gain publicity and thus mutual dependence was created. It should be noted that such tendency still remains – events exist that are created by politicians and indulged in by journalists. The former provide material to the latter, whereas the latter grant publicity.

Information sources as factors affecting voter preferences

In modern elections voters receive political information about candidates and parties from a variety of very different sources. Information that reaches the electorate is rarely unaltered. Important features of the political communication process during election campaigns include the distribution of information to different intermediary sources, the types of information that is prepared to be disseminated to voters and the extent to which voters' personal political preferences coincide with messages that are being communicated (Gunther, Montero, Puhle 2007).

The flow of political information in the media, of course, is not the single factor impacting voter preferences because an important role is played by individual standpoints, values, interests and perception. The most widely noticeable information sources in the time of political campaigns – newspapers and television – have direct contacts with the world of political candidates and parties, and act as if information pipelines laid from the political elites to voters

(Gunther, Montero, Puhle 2007). The media is so important when disseminating information about politics that it often dominates in the entire information flow and hence alternative sources of information can hardly match it.

LEGAL REGULATION OF PUBLICITY OF POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS IN THE MEDIA AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS OF REGIONAL PRESS

At present, publicity of political campaigns in the media is regulated by the Republic of Lithuania Law on Funding of, and Control over Funding of, Political Parties and Political Campaigns, as well as by the Law on the Provision of Information to the Public and by the Code of Ethic of the Media. This demonstrates that not only a political party or a politician may be interested in disseminating political advertising, but a disseminator of public information (a media outlet).

The aim of the Republic of Lithuania Law on Funding of, and Control over Funding of, Political Parties and Political Campaigns (PPPKFFI) is to guarantee that political campaigns are democratic, funded legally, transparently and publicly; to regulate the procedures of funding of political campaigns and monitor funding. It should be said that prior to the adoption of the law (in 2004) the term "political advertising" existed in the Lithuanian public discourse "de facto" but was not defined. The law stipulates that "political advertising" is information that is disseminated during election campaigns by a state politician, political party, or its member, a participant of a political campaign, on behalf and/or in the interest thereof, in any form and through any means, for payment or without return consideration, where such information is intended to influence the motivation of voters when voting at elections or referendum, or where it is disseminated with the purpose of campaigning for a state politician, political party, its member or a candidate.

The law stipulates that political advertising has to be marked in accordance with legal procedures by indicating the source of funding and visibly separating it from other disseminated information. If during a political campaign such information is not marked in accordance with the law, it is regarded as surreptitious political advertising and is prohibited. Furthermore, the law states that political advertising is prohibited from being disseminated on the front page of regional publications. There also are additional restrictions related to political advertising. Producers and disseminators of public information are legally prohibited from disseminating

political advertising for free, with an exception of discussion shows on television, except discussion programmes and campaigning-related videos of not less than 30 seconds duration in which a political campaign participant informs about his political programme or speaks on issues topical to the public.

The PPPKFFI law states that not only its requirements apply but so do those listed in the Law on the Provision of Information to the Public. This means that certain aspects of political advertising are regulated by the Law on the Provision of Information to the Public (VVI), too.

A declaration of public information producer or disseminator requires to declare what political advertising is published during a political campaign. Article 25 of the PPPKFFI law states that the Central Electoral Commission (VRK) monitors political campaigns and has to constantly publish such supervision data on its website. What is more, the law enables producers and disseminators of public information to refuse to publish political advertising that contains information discrediting other candidates or political parties, if it is refused to bear potential expenses related to dissemination of a counter opinion. Dissemination of political advertising is prohibited if it violates the Constitution and laws of the Republic of Lithuania.

As mentioned, the Law on Funding of, and Control over Funding of, Political Parties and Political Campaigns (PPPKFFI) stipulates that media outlets participating in the process have to follow the Law on the Provision of Information to the Public (VVI). Therefore, it is highly important that this law defines what is advertising and surreptitious advertising. Based on the VVI, surreptitious advertising means information disseminated in any form and by any means about a producer of goods or a provider of services, the name or activities, or the trade mark thereof presented in a way that the user of advertising might fail to perceive as advertising or may be misled by the true aim of advertising. Presentation of information is considered to be surreptitious advertising in every case when it is done for payment or similar consideration. All of the above applies to political communication entities during the process of a political campaign. Moreover, these provisions are substantially expanded by Article 22(11) of the VVI stating that producers and/or disseminators of public information may not distort correct and impartial information and opinions and use that for sordid purposes. In other words, this would be surreptitious advertising (or defamation) for which a journalist or information disseminators might receive illegal proceeds. The same article stresses that public information disseminators must be objective and impartial, provide as many opinions as possible on controversial issues

relating to politics, economy and other issues of public life. They must not publish unfounded, unchecked accusations that are not based on facts. Article 39 of the Law on the Provision of Information to the Public (VVI) states that requirements for political advertising, its publishing and marking procedures it in the media are established by the Law on Funding of, and Control Over Funding of, Political Parties and Political Campaigns (PPPKFFI) as well as other legal acts. Responsibility for misleading and prohibited comparative advertising is set out in the Law on Advertising. The VVI requires information producers and disseminators to have their ethics code and follow it.

Accordingly, when the election campaign began (on 9 April 2016), taking into account provisions of the aforementioned laws, political advertising in Lithuania, including that published on social media, had to be marked in accordance with legal regulations, indicating the funding source, and clearly distinguished it from other disseminated information. During the political campaign, political advertising that is not marked based on requirements of the law, or is marked in violation of the requirements, is regarded surreptitious advertising and is prohibited. Dissemination of unmarked political advertising and other violations are subject to liability provided for in the law. In addition, as discussed, during this period the press was prohibited to disseminate political advertising in the front page of publications. Whereas public information producers or disseminators had to publish political advertising under the same price rates and conditions for all participants of the political campaign submitted to the Central Electoral Commission (VRK) by 9 April 2016. Once the political campaign began, rates and conditions that applied could not be amended or submitted to the VRK.

Advertising is the main source of income for the Lithuanian media, particularly for the regional media. Consequently, the wish to generate as much income as possible from advertising sales may create conditions for editorial content to become dependent on advertisers. Media organisations face a dilemma in such a situation, whether to retain the freedom of content or create content that is favourable to advertisers.

The influence of customer generated information on political communication

One may notice that during election campaigns there is a considerable amount of information unrelated to politics. Political campaigning may be frequently concealed as information about a politicians' personal life or as similar messages. During elections, politicians

or institutions in the jurisdiction of the state or municipalities are not necessarily the ones that create or commission political messages. There is plenty of information in the current day media that is created by public relation agencies or officials of state or municipal institutions. In this case, the roles of the media and politicians overlapping the discussed process and the media turns from a producer of information into its publisher. Being aware that the media not only filtrates reality when selecting the news but also modifies it, politicians that are concerned about immaculate public relations often seek that as much as possible positive political information would be published about them in the press. Studies carried out by responsible institutions prove this and show that in 2009-2010 state institutions were the biggest commissioners of advertisements in the press (Jastramskis 2012). Perhaps the term "an advertiser" is not the best fitting one for political entities as products are not showcased in the case of commissioned political communication, yet it should be called advertising because such information serves public relations of a state institution or a politician and help them achieve certain goals.

The more a media outlet is dependent on advertising, the more it may be influenced by advertisers. In some publications it is even difficult to distinguish editorial content from customer produced advertising, even though surreptitious advertising is prohibited and has to be marked (Jastramskis 2009). Striving to benefit advertisers to the maximum extent, media outlets use certain techniques. It must be taken into consideration that in order to curry favour with advertisers, media outlets may use not only direct advertising but can also favourably treat in their editorial content interests of clients or products that are being advertised. They may avoid publishing information that is unfavourable to advertisers, they can promote a mood to buy, cater to higher earning audiences, create special sections or pages motivating advertisers to provide information about themselves or their goods (Jastramskis 2009).

Some of these techniques apply to the regional media as well. For example, in some cases the regional press provides sections offering municipalities to publish information about themselves, whereas it is difficult to notice that an outlet avoids reporting information unfavourable to a customer. Nonetheless this may be noticed as far as major clients are concerned.

An opinion prevails in the public discourse that the regional press features the biggest amount of information commissioned by governmental institutions. This is generally preconditioned by several reasons:

1. In most rural areas newspapers are still the main source of information after television, hence it is very handy for local politicians to "address voters" via a local newspaper.
2. Circulations are small and so is the market, there also are other limitations characteristic to the periphery, whereas the regional press is looking to somewhat improve its situation.
3. Content is generated by and received from governmental institutions and this is convenient for the media, election campaigns or publicity tenders mean that information is prepared by other people and newspapers do not have to use their own human resources to produce information.

Clearly, both the media and politicians benefit from as high as possible amount of customer generated political communication in the media. This proves that in the regional press political communication is strongly affected by certain economic factors. Regular and major customers exist, while reluctance to lose steady income diminishes the objectivity of a media outlet.

The influence of media ownership on political communication

It is important for politicians to maintain ties with the public and one of their main goals is to communicate their message about activities and decisions taken. The objectives of political relations with the public may be described in two aspects. First of all, it is a need to inform the public about key decisions undertaken by governmental bodies. Second objective is to garner support for their activities as political entities. Renata Matkevičienė writes that regardless of these goals politicians mostly use the media to maintain contacts with the public (Matkevičienė 2015). Seeking to foster effective public relations, politicians and institutions headed by them quite strongly affect the country's media. Politicians influence the media not only as legislators or advertisers but even as media owners.

In 2013, non-governmental organisation combating corruption Transparency International – Lithuania (TILS) announced that in the last five years before that there were cases when politicians owned media outlets by themselves or via third parties. Two of them were members of municipal councils and at the same time owners or co-owners of media outlets. The freedom of speech is determined by a number of social, political and economic factors. Exposed to them, media owners adopt decisions. Because of this, it is necessary to monitor in certain ways not only the content of the media but also to apply certain legal restrictions on media ownership.

Emphasis and importance on media ownership is placed for a reason – most theorists agree that owners or shareholders of the media, affected by economic factors, influence the content of the media. After all, the content is affected the least when a media outlet is co-owned by several people and the board makes decisions on strategic and capital management issues. Meanwhile, editors and other journalists create content without any particular control. For instance, some major participants of Lithuania's media market (online, press, television) are owned by limited liability companies. This reduces the likelihood that a narrow group of persons may be represented – shares are traded publicly and both the law enforcement and the public have greater chances of learning about the company's activities. Besides of this, major media outlets that are managed in a modern way and have self-regulation mechanisms that specifically define who is responsible for the management of financial and other resources and who is responsible for the content. The situation in Lithuania's media market is rather interesting. Apart from several major media market participants owned by joint-stock companies or international corporations, the major part of Lithuania's media outlets is limited liability companies owned by small number of legal or natural persons (Jastramskis 2009).

As far as the regional media is concerned, the situation is again different – there are almost no major corporations, and sole proprietorships operate next to limited liability companies. According to Deimantas Jastramskis, when a natural person owns more than 50 percent of authorised capital, it means that his interests will be easily guaranteed even without him actively involved in running the company (Jastramskis 2009).

As already discussed above, the regional media features a large amount of customer generated material that is produced by governmental institutions via communication tenders. In regional areas, responsibility for managing the content of an organisation or a media outlet is often in the hands of a single person or a small group of shareholders. Political communication is often acquired because owners frequently do not distance themselves from the content produced by regional media outlets and due to the great demand of purchased-sold political information. Business relations existing between political parties, politicians and owners of regional media outlets lead to them being involved in each other's activities. Media owners are looking for services to be ordered by politicians, while the latter wish to promote themselves in the media. To add to this, as mentioned, responsible institutions inform from time to time that in certain districts politicians used to own or still own media outlets.

Based on the legislation regulating activities of the Lithuanian media, only legal persons registered in Lithuania or branches or foreign legal persons or other organisations may produce and/or disseminate information, with an exception of managers of information society media. State and municipal institutions and agencies, banks and political parties cannot be producers of public information. With an exception of cases when parties produce non-periodical publications to inform about their activities. Such legal regulation of media activities means that officially politicians do not have direct control over the media. However, perceiving the inevitability of the effects of political relations with the public, politicians are still allowed to non-periodically inform people in the press or online about their activities.

Although in the summer of 2015 the President and the Parliament debated in the public sphere about the need to amend the Law on the Provision of Information to the Public (VVI), yet restrictions concerning the assets of politicians, as private persons, were not introduced and they can still acquire and manage media outlets themselves or via third persons. Moreover, there are comparatively few limitations in Lithuania preventing the media from being amassed in the same hands. One person is allowed to manage 100 percent of shares of a media outlet irrespective of its market share. The same person is allowed to own television, radio and other types of media. What may also lead to media bias is the fact that the law does not prohibit politicians, as private persons, from owning a media outlet.

Consequently, legislation that has to regulate media freedom to avoid political influences allows client-patron relationships to exist. State institutions and municipalities are not prohibited from informing about their activities in the press or their own non-periodical publications, and are allowed as private persons to manage them. The regional media is strongly financially dependent on contracts that are in the hands of political powers, as a result, the media may become more biased during political campaigns.

SELECTION OF POLITICAL NEWS AND FRAMING IN THE REGIONAL MEDIA DURING THE 2016 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION IN LITHUANIA

Review of the study of the regional press

The term “the regional media” alone suggests that proximity is the main criterion when selecting relevant news. Its extent depends on the type of the piece of news. People want a

regional newspaper to publish news about local political events, local politicians as well as other prominent local personalities and their achievements. In other words, political communication of local significance is predominant in such media.

As one is aware that local media focuses on political news within close proximity, one should consider the threshold determining when the regional press publishes national or foreign news. Coverage of national political news and events in the regional press is commonly provided in small segments filling a third of a page and titled "Briefly" or "Yesterday in Lithuania" etc. These often contain dry facts provided by news agencies. What is more, news is filtered based on its importance – information related to taxes, pensions or regulation of prices are selected. That is to say, information important for every person is chosen.

Another rather important criterion for regional journalists is negativity. Examining the regional press one can see even without any in-depth analysis that a substantial amount of coverage is dedicated to negative political information. Local newspapers devote much attention to news about corruption, conflicts of interest and crime.

It should be noted, too, that many stories are filtered using the criterion of personalisation. A simple example of information selected this way is a daily question on a political (but not necessarily) issue and responses of several passers-by. Pictures of the interviewed people are taken and published together with the article including an interviewee's name and age. Another example of personalisation is when political scandals are revealed through a personal story of a specific person. Journalists tend to approach people that allegedly fall victim to maligned actions of local government and are willingly unravelling such personal stories.

Another aspect to a degree related to personalisation includes news about the elite. Due to geographical reasons that elite is usually of local importance. Furthermore, a visit of a high-ranking official may also become the most important news. It is true that such criteria in the regional press should be valued with reserve as there are people regarded to be part of the elite who themselves seek to be featured on front pages of local newspapers whatever the price just to be praised. This is especially noticeable during elections, when candidates running for municipal councils or parliamentary candidates competing in single-member constituencies appear in publications not only because of their position or the ongoing election.

One more criterion particularly characteristic for the regional media comes to existence when politicians want local newspapers to cover stories about them favourably. That is the financial criterion. It can be distinguished as numerous studies show that parties, state and municipal institutions and their representatives are the main advertisers in the press. Thus journalists that have to filter news face a dilemma – should they be critical of politicians when their newspaper prints plenty advertisements commissioned by the aforementioned bodies? Editorial staff that operate transparently probably do not face any issues, but there are cases suggesting that some regional newspapers have turned into a platform for politicians.

Thus regional and local newspapers use more or less all of the news selection criteria taking into account what is more important for a specific region. The press does not hesitate to publish financially beneficial articles. Although news framing applies more for television, yet its certain aspects can be easily identified in the printed media, too. Various frames are predominant depending on the type of news and its audience. So a person that reads all local periodicals can learn about a political event in terms of different aspects.

When reporting about finances and prices, certain aspects of such news are distinguished as well. Due to the amount of customer generated information, local media may be of a particular interest in terms of differences in framing customer generated and media generated material. It is likely that thematic framing will be used more often striving to emphasise good deeds of a client. However, episodic framing is also used for customer generated information. When the press publishes its own original material it often uses episodic framing in the news looking for sensationalism or negativity. For example, in the case of fraud or corruption it is often focused on the significance of consequences and on culprits, while reasons and prevention of such crimes are ignored.

Analysing regional newspapers published during the 2016 Lithuanian parliamentary elections, it is apparent that editorial staff of nearly all regional newspapers used the aforementioned filtering criteria and framing techniques. Delving deeper into media ownership it is possible to clearly identify which representatives of political parties enjoyed particular attention of which media outlets. By the way, apart from political advertising that is marked as required by law, newspapers also use various journalistic genres to provide information about candidates that participate in festivities or meetings with town and village communities etc. This

way pseudo-events are created by editorial staff seeking to raise audience's interest about certain personalities.

Following the law, the Central Electoral Commission (VRK) monitors political advertising and its reports are made available to public. The data provided by the VRK demonstrates that in the regional media there were only 14 cases when political advertising was only partially or inadequately marked and 44 cases when it was unmarked altogether. The supervision is carried out by territorial committees established by the VRK that operate in constituencies. Still, the results are not objective because it is not information and communication professionals who monitor the situation but members of electoral committees who personally interpret the information provided and its content. In the 2016 election period, 56 more instances were identified in the regional press when political advertising was unmarked or partially marked.

It is also interesting to note that the party Order and Justice (TT) disseminated the highest amount of unmarked advertisements (22 cases). Most of them were published by the local newspaper *Šilales Artojas*. 11 such violation cases in the regional press were related with political advertising of the Labour Party's (DP) candidates, 8 – with the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP), 6 – with the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (LVZS).

In essence, regulations on political campaigning defined by the law are violated during every election. Most violations are observed on the Election Day. While violations related to political campaigning occur in the media the most often a day before elections. But such violations are few. For example, prior to the last parliamentary election newspaper *Taurages Žinios* on its website advertised two candidates running for parliament in the single-member constituency in the town of Taurage. Even though the VRK ordered the political advertisement to be removed from the website it was still displayed until 11 a.m.

The results of the survey of editorial staffs

In April-May 2016, after the parliamentary election campaign had already begun, the author of the study carried out a survey of Lithuanian regional press employees – editors and journalists. The sample size of the survey is 10 editors and 20 journalists of regional newspapers (N30). The study aimed to ascertain, based on the opinion of the polled, the level of media

integrity in a region/district when reporting about political events occurring in the region/district, news on the election campaign and political advertising.

It is noteworthy that replies to many questions given by the two polled groups varied greatly. For instance, as many as 72.5 percent of editors stated that media integrity was not an issue at all, whereas by 34.5 percent fewer journalists held such an opinion. The opinion of editors and journalists about the ethics of publications differed substantially, too. 43.75 percent of journalists and just 17.5 percent of editors indicated that the press of their region/district featured publications that violated ethics and a person's right to privacy. What is more, as many as 60 percent of editors believed that unethical publications were not published in the press of their region/district, additional 22.5 percent of the editors did not provide answers to the question.

The study attempted to determine causal ties, i.e. to identify the reason of unethical behaviour of regional/district periodicals. Perceptions particularly stood out that unethical behaviour is conditioned by cheap sensationalism and poor professional ethics of the modern-day media. When evaluating the aspects of modern-day journalist ethics, the majority of the respondents of the two groups noted that the standards of ethics, the tone and some models of activities were spreading to the regional press from the national media. Speaking about the inclination of media owners to dictate to editorial staffs what topics to write about, the opinion of editors and journalists varied. 86 percent of editors stated that owners did not intervene in the content of their outlets, whereas only 42 percent of journalists thought that owners did not dictate to their editorial staff what the content should be. The result of the political survey somewhat signals that certain threats exist for the regional media, especially during elections.

Summary of the survey results

Summarising the content analysis of the regional media during 2016 parliamentary elections in Lithuania and the results of the political research – sociologic survey of editors and journalists of the regional press, it can be concluded that:

- During elections the media not always published objective and unbiased information about the candidates.
- The viewpoint of a regional media outlet on specific political candidates depends on political views or political preferences of the owner of that outlet.

- In turn, politicians are looking to take advantage of the media as a tool to form public opinion.
- The regional media can influence voter priorities and understanding about key political events.

Conclusions

The analysis of scientific literature shows that even though objectivity and impartiality remains the main dimension of the quality of journalism, yet it certain circumstances these values remain in the background. In crucial moments of democratic processes, the media strives for direct or indirect benefit and manipulates the audience's opinion.

Political powers – both parties and individual candidates – have mastered ways that allow them to take advantage of the media's attempts to become a political player. Their goal is to shift the flow of information in the direction that benefits them, to consolidate and broaden their voter base. In the case of elections, political parties are not bound by objectivity or honesty, they deem the media to be a useful channel enabling to influence the audience and strive towards their goals whatever the case.

The media does not provide the complete information – limited amount of time, sources, newspaper space and human resources affects the content of news. The media sets the agenda for the audience which perceives it to be a set of key topics without questioning their importance.

The audience, however, is not directly influenced by politicians or the media. Immeasurable changes of a message in its sending and receiving process makes estimating its precise impact complicated – even after the end of elections or when the votes are counted it is impossible to determine what determined the winner of elections: a well-executed political campaign or mistakes of the competition, a broad base of long-time voters or voter support resulting from political changes observed during the last campaign.

Even though dissemination of political advertising is regulated, there nonetheless are cases when political campaigns try to avoid this and supply unmarked advertising. After the qualitative content analysis of publications of regional media outlets it is possible to say that although the amount of unmarked/partially marked advertising has decreased in the media, yet separate regional media outlets violate legal provisions and thus distort the fundamental principles of journalism, even though their activities are well regulated (the Law on Funding of,

and Control over Funding of, Political Parties and Political Campaigns; the Law on the Provision of Information to the Public; the Code of Ethics of the Media).

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