

Factors of political influence on journalistic activities in a post-communist consolidated democracy

Journalism
2026, Vol. 0(0) 1–19
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DOI: 10.1177/14648849261457510
journals.sagepub.com/home/jou



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Abstract

The article examines which factors of journalistic activity, journalists' roles, and attitudes are significant for journalists experiencing political influence in a post-communist consolidated democracy. The analysis is based on data from a representative survey of 302 Lithuanian journalists. The study found that the key factors of political influence on journalism are external informational influences, most often directly related to political entities. Political influences are significantly related to internal organizational factors and procedures that set the boundaries of journalists' autonomy and can potentially absorb and transform political influences into journalistic activity. The links between journalists' perceived political influences and the importance of interventionist, collaborative, and monitorial roles were also identified.

Keywords

political influence, journalists, organizational factors, roles, Lithuania

Introduction

In the era of social media, governments and politicians can reach a part of their audience without the mediation of journalists. However, professional media and journalism still significantly influence the public agenda and perception of what is important (McQuail and Deuze, 2020; Strömbäck and Van Aelst, 2013). In the media systems of countries,

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there are usually specific patterns of cooperation between the government and the media, which are determined by various legal regulations and traditions of political communication. When modelling the media systems of Western countries, [Hallin and Mancini \(2004\)](#) distinguished the nature of state intervention in the media system as one of the dimensions that can manifest itself both in the instrumentalization of journalism and in granting it complete autonomy. [Brüggemann et al. \(2014\)](#) divided this dimension of state intervention in the media into three items: regulation of media ownership, subsidies to private media, and state influence on public service media. When examining state influence on the media systems of the post-communist Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, variables of hybrid political regimes are assessed on a broad continuum between authoritarian and liberal government practices ([Peruško, 2021](#)).

The government, no matter how democratically inclined it may be, seeks to ensure that the media creates the most favourable image of it. Thus, in their activities, journalists, even in consolidated democracies, inevitably encounter various forms of government influence: informational, managerial (where state institutions influence the appointments of heads of media organizations), or economic (by providing subsidies, ordering institutional and political advertising) ([Benson et al., 2017](#); [Koch et al., 2017](#); [Nygren, 2023](#)). Experiencing the influence of government officials and politicians, journalists have different working conditions, organizational pressures, and personal attitudes, and perceive their professional roles differently. Thus, the problematic question arises under what conditions/factors the influence of government (functioning in a consolidated democracy) and politicians on the activities of journalists is more effective, and what factors may be more or less conditioning that influence?

The case of the post-communist country of Lithuania is employed to examine this issue. According to the Nations in Transit Score, Lithuania has been rated as a consolidated democracy for many years ([Freedom House, 2025](#)). Lithuania has not experienced an illiberal turn since 1990, when it gained independence from the Soviet Union. During the 2020-2024 parliamentary cycle, media freedom in Lithuania was rated favourably globally, from seventh to fourteenth place ([Reporters without Borders, 2025](#)). Lithuania's seventh place in the Global Index on Journalists' Safety shows that the country's journalists can work relatively safely ([Safety of Journalists, 2025](#)).

A representative survey of the Lithuanian journalists' population was conducted to examine the relationships between journalists' perceived political and other influences, working conditions, the importance of journalists' roles at work, and personal attitudes. Journalists from all media sectors, working in private commercial (national, regional, local) and public service media, were interviewed.

Literature review

Democracy provides the conditions for the existence of professional and independent journalism, and journalism helps to develop democracy. This symbiosis is quite complex and depends on both the model of democracy, the quality of its functioning, and the vitality of the media system and its ability to properly inform the public and ensure diversity of opinions ([Gans, 2003](#); [Müller, 2014](#); [Strömbäck, 2005](#)). In consolidated democracies, the media systematically monitor those in power and provide the public

with reliable information about them; that is, the media plays the so-called ‘watchdog’ role. In countries with weaker democracy, the media’s ‘watchdog’ role is usually less pronounced, and political pressure on journalism is higher (McQuail and Deuze, 2020). An analysis of survey data from 67 countries conducted by the Worlds of Journalism Study network found that journalists perceive their role as ‘watchdogs’ more strongly when they perceive less government/political influence (Hamada and Abdel-Salam, 2024). Journalists may want to be ‘watchdogs’ and hold governments accountable, but the political realities of their work make such efforts very difficult, as a study of journalists’ activity in small Pacific states reveals (Singh and Hanusch, 2021).

As journalists critically observe those in power, there are ongoing tensions over the boundaries of publicity and oversight. These tensions are particularly evident when journalistic autonomy is challenged by political influence or the strategic interests of media organizations. Journalists may face obstacles in their investigative reporting, including the need to obtain information from state/political institutions or stricter editorial policies (Eriksson and Östman, 2013). In addition, there are topics that limit the watchdog role’s performance even in consolidated democracies, such as reporting on national security. Glazier and Boydstun (2012) found that critical monitoring was lacking in US journalism during the post-9/11 era and the Iraq War. Tensions between the watchdog role and political or organizational influences are more pronounced during political conflicts, in situations of media regulatory change, and in media systems with a higher level of political parallelism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Stepińska et al., 2024).

Political influence on media organizations and journalism occurs within a structure of other influences, theorized by McQuail and Deuze (2020), who identified economic, social, and political, informational, audience, and internal-organizational factors. Shoemaker and Rees (2014) presented a hierarchical model of influences on media content comprising five levels: individuals, routines, media organizations, social institutions, and social systems. When authors compile lists and schemes of influences (factors) on news content and journalism, the nature of the influences, their place in the structure, and the number of layers of influences vary, from three to seven (Ekayanti and Xiaoming, 2018). There is little consensus among researchers on the relative importance of the levels of influence, that is, due to the specific hierarchical nature of this model, as works revealing the influences exerted on journalists (and media organizations) emphasize different levels of influence and their relative importance or intensity (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). However, it should be emphasized that, despite differences in the treatment of the importance of various influences in the creation of journalistic content and in the structuring of sequences of influences, the spectrum of influences under consideration is, in most cases, similar and includes external, internal-organizational, and personal factors.

Studies of journalists’ perceived influences by Hanitzsch et al. (2010, 2019) in 17 and 67 countries, respectively, show that journalists typically experience relatively low levels of political influence in developed democracies, that is, political systems that guarantee journalists high levels of media freedom. However, the authors assume that significant political and economic influences are masked by organizational and procedural influences that are much more significant in everyday journalistic activities. That is, political and economic influences are absorbed and transmitted to journalists by news managers in media organizations.

Public relations structures of the state and other institutions are created, and information (news) management is organized so that the media and journalists transmit/frame information in the way political actors need. Political public relations aim to influence the media, its agendas, and the way it conveys events, issues, and processes (McNair, 2000; Moloney, 2006). Public relations is a transformative mechanism of political influence on journalism, mobilizing professional structures through which political actors, parties, and institutions shape news content, frame issues, and influence public discourse (Lewis et al., 2008). The nature of the interaction between journalists and PR representatives (more conflictual or harmonious) depends on the political and journalistic cultures of the countries (Weaver and Choi, 2017). Furthermore, journalists are not always sufficiently critical in reflecting the government's views in a democratic context. Journalists in the UK parliamentary press gallery have been accused of having too close relationships with politicians, limiting journalists' criticality and independence (Davis, 2009). According to Benett et al. (2007), who studied the US mainstream media and developed the indexing theory, journalists are unable to resist the narratives presented by the government and give government representatives more power to express their opinions publicly. And in the era of global Internet platforms, mainstream media sometimes only repeat what government representatives report on their social media accounts, which increases their importance as informants (Dawson, 2024; Ekman and Widholm, 2015; Metag and Rauchfleisch, 2016).

The PR industry provides quite solid information subsidies to the media (economically beneficial), and journalists practice citing PR information without indicating the source (Lewis et al., 2008). To influence the media agenda, public relations specialists resort to various information methods, and sometimes extreme measures, involving editorial offices in opaque schemes. A study conducted in Central and Eastern European countries (Örnebring, 2016) revealed cases of paid news publications (without indicating that these publications were paid for) initiated by PR companies. In this way, journalists and editors do not play the role of critical observers, hide the promotional nature of the news, and help PR specialists create favourable images of politicians. Such practices not only distort the content of the media but also deprofessionalize both professions: journalism and public relations.

Maurer (2019), who studied the activities of French and German political journalists, found that a firm adherence to the role of neutral and impartial information provider (observer) should increase perceived political influence. In addition, when looking at whether similar views of politicians and political journalists have a political influence on news content, no significant relationships were found. However, in a study of Austrian political journalism and the attitudes of journalists and politicians (Maurer and Beiler, 2018), it was found that similar views of politicians and journalists help politicians to exert greater influence on the content of news prepared by journalists. According to the researchers, this is determined by the different cultural contexts and specific political systems of these developed democracies. Similarly, Van der Goot et al. (2021) found that Dutch political journalists respond more often and positively to politicians with whom they personally communicate and those with similar political views.

A study of the influence of journalists in Spain found that journalists working in both traditional and emerging digital media outlets perceive political influence in a similar way

(Berganza et al., 2016). However, journalists' perceived political influence may be determined by the geographical scope of their media outlet. Studies conducted in Nordic countries and Slovenia (Hovden and Väliverronen, 2021; Vobič et al., 2025) have shown that journalists working in local communities experience more substantial political influence than their colleagues in other media outlets.

Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011) found that journalists' perceived political influence is clearly related to indicators of political freedom and media ownership structures in the countries where they work. Comparing the weight of political influence in private commercial and public ownership structures, it was found that journalists working in public service media in Germany and France do not experience greater political pressure than their colleagues working in private commercial media (Maurer 2019). While in Slovenia, journalistic autonomy is most widespread in public service media (Vobič et al., 2025). However, research by Reich and Hanitzsch (2013) showed that public service media journalists in some democratic countries experience greater government/political influence than their colleagues in commercial organizations. On the other hand, such intervention is less tolerated by those journalists who associate higher expectations with public service media. Moreover, among all types of media ownership, public media was positively and significantly correlated with journalists' assessments of the 'watchdog' role (Hamada and Abdel-Salam, 2024).

The political influence experienced by journalists may also be determined by editorial hierarchy and financial factors. Journalists in lower positions in Slovenian newsrooms perceive political influence as more intense than those who perform certain managerial (operational or strategic) functions (Vobič et al., 2025). Analysis of data from a survey of journalists in the Philippines (Tandoc, 2018) showed that journalists with lower incomes experience greater political influence in their work.

If the main element of journalistic activity is the role of 'watchdog' in monitoring the government, journalists must fight hard for important information from relevant sources (Berkowitz, 2019). In their role as observers of those in power, journalists can sometimes influence the outcome of politics, based on which news reports will then be prepared. A study of political journalism in Denmark showed that journalists influenced political decisions through off-the-record cooperation with politicians, providing political actors with clues about the priorities of the media agenda, information about other political actors, and offering strategic cooperation in specific cases (Dindler, 2014). When examining the formal and informal influence of the government and politicians at various levels or their representatives as sources for journalists, it was found in Sweden and Lithuania that formal invisible (not disclosed in publications) sources act as gatekeepers, while informal invisible sources act as agenda setters (Malling, 2023).

Discussion of the relationship between political influences and media self-censorship in liberal democracies is relatively rare, as the media in such countries usually apply self-censorship not out of fear of specific political measures, but out of an ethical understanding of not violating anyone's rights and not causing any informational harm (Mortensen, 2018). Countries in the post-communist CEE region, especially those where the development of democracy has not been smooth or has completely stalled, have not lacked the attention of researchers on this topic. The relationship between political censorship and journalists' self-censorship has been studied sufficiently (Schimpfössl

et al., 2020). Among the consolidated democracies in CEE, the relationship between political influences and self-censorship has been examined in Latvia, whose journalists use self-censorship as a main strategy to avoid political and economic pressures while trying to reconcile professional principles (Rožukalne, 2020). When covering Russia's war in Ukraine, Latvian PSM journalists use self-censorship, encouraged by attacks from politicians or audience members (Rožukalne et al., 2024). Politically motivated attacks on journalism in Estonia 'may promote unperceived self-censorship' (Himma-Kadakas and Ivask, 2023: 359).

When discussing the situation of investigative journalism in nine CEE countries, that is, how seriously the media and journalists play the role of 'watchdog', it was found that after the global financial crisis of 2008, investigative journalism in this region was relatively weak. However, in five countries (Estonia, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia), the media were assessed as relatively autonomous from political or business influence (Stetka and Örnebring, 2013). A study of the discourse of journalistic freedom conducted in two CEE countries that have reached different stages of democratic development showed that journalists from the Czech Republic, a country of consolidated democracy, perceive political influences as weaker compared to the assessments of these influences by journalists from Serbia (a country with a transit or hybrid regime) (Rupar et al., 2021; Freedom House, 2025). A study conducted in Lithuania (Balčytienė and Malling, 2019) showed that formal contacts between politicians and journalists are pretty consistent and professionalized. Still, shadowy informal social connections are often developed to shape power relations and hierarchical structures. In addition, leaders of political structures make great efforts to maintain close ties with journalists.

Guidelines for Lithuanian democracy

At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, democratic models were adopted in the former communist CEE countries during a relatively short period of liberalization and reorganization (Balčytienė, 2015). The consolidation of the Lithuanian party system took place in the 1990s, when polarization was reduced and relevant political parties began to converge towards the middle of the political spectrum, which created conditions for the development of consolidated electoral democracy (Novagrockienė, 2001). Lithuania became one of the few post-communist (and even fewer post-Soviet) states that successfully consolidated and maintained liberal democracy. In addition, calculations of the liberal democracy perception index indicate a relatively high level of democracy perception among the Lithuanian population (Jastramskis, 2022; Norkus, 2008).

Regarding political rights, civil liberties, and the level of democracy in the country, Lithuania was ranked as a consolidated democracy in 2020–2024, along with five other post-communist CEE countries: Estonia, Slovenia, Latvia, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Over the past 5 years, Lithuania's democracy percentage has fluctuated between 77 and 79 (Freedom House, 2025), which means there may still be considerable potential to converge to the best situation (100%). Lithuania was ranked 23rd among the world's countries regarding government openness and citizens' right to information, and 20th in freedom of expression in 2024 (World Justice Project, 2025). Examining the

elements of the functioning of democracy in more detail, it can be said that political rights were very well guaranteed in Lithuania, especially in the electoral process and in ensuring political pluralism and participation in politics. However, when assessing the functioning of the government, one can see insufficient protection against corruption and insufficient openness and transparency of the government (which is very important for the topic we are examining). Lithuania also has reserves to ensure civil liberties. Although individual and academic freedom of expression are rated highly, media freedom and independence received a lower score (3 out of 4). Also, certain obstacles to democracy are indicated in assessing the implementation of laws in Lithuania ([Freedom House, 2025](#)).

Thus, starting from the discussed context of post-communist consolidated democracy, in which there is still sufficient room for improving democratic mechanisms, the following research questions are formulated to assess the relationships between the influences, conditions, and factors of journalistic activity.

Research questions

- (1) How many Lithuanian journalists experience (perceive) the influence of government representatives and politicians in their work, and to what extent?
- (2) How significantly is the perception of the influence of government representatives (politicians) related to journalists' working conditions, internal organizational factors (owners, managers, advertising and promotional decisions), external informational influence (access to information, public relations), journalistic roles, journalists' personal beliefs/attitudes, and self-censorship?
- (3) How does the relationship between the perception of the influence of government representatives (politicians) and journalists' working conditions, internal organizational factors, external informational influence, journalistic roles, journalists' personal beliefs/attitudes, and self-censorship differ between public, private national, and regional/local media?

Methodology

The research used the methodology of the [Worlds of Journalism Study \(2024\)](#) network. 302 journalists representing the Lithuanian journalist population (total 1220, demographic profile in [Table 1](#)) were surveyed, giving a response rate of 53.6%. The maximum margin of error for the data is 4.9%. The survey was conducted from October 2022 to February 2023.

According to the [Worlds of Journalism Study \(2024\)](#) methodology, a journalist is defined as someone who regularly seeks, describes, analyses, interprets, contextualizes, edits, produces, presents, or portrays fact-based information about affairs of potential interest to the general public (news). Professional journalists are considered those who earn at least 50% of their income from journalistic work or spend at least 50% of their working time on journalistic activities.

First, a list of media outlets administered in Lithuania that disseminate journalistic content was compiled. When calculating the journalist population, media outlets were

Table 1. Distribution of respondents ($N = 302$).

Type of media, %	
National private commercial media	50,0
Regional/local private commercial media	30,5
Public service media	13,9
Other	5,6
Editorial position, %	
Top management role	17,1
Middle management role	17,7
No management role	65,2
Gender, %	
Female	62,6
Male	37,4
Age, years	
Under 35	36,0
35-50	34,0
From 50	30,0
Average	43,2
Ethnic group, %	
Lithuanians	92,0
Poles	4,0
Russians	2,3
Others	1,7

divided by main content platform (TV, radio, websites, newspapers, magazines, and agencies).

The study used proportional stratified random sampling. Strata were formed, taking into account the platform for creating media content. Each stratum was divided into larger editorial offices (at least 20 employees), where systematic random sampling was conducted, and smaller editorial offices (fewer than 20 employees), where it was conducted across different editorial offices. The sampling was conducted proportionally among journalists (with no management role, middle management role, and top management role) working across different media platforms. In addition, proportional representation was taken into account: 1) in private and public media, 2) in national, regional, and local media, and 3) in media operating in ethnic minority languages (Table 1).

The income received by journalists from their professional activities was assessed by comparing it with the national average salary fixed at the time of the survey and establishing 10 income categories (“In which of the following categories does your monthly salary as a journalist fall after taxes?”).

To determine the influences experienced by journalists, they were asked a general question (“How much influence each of the following has on your work as a journalist”), followed by named influences: “government officials”, “politicians”, “owners of news organization”, “business managers of news organization”, “advertising considerations”,

“access to information”, “public relations”, “self-censorship”. Journalists rated these influences on a scale from 5 = “extremely influential” to 1 = “not influential”.

To assess journalistic and organizational ethics, the question was: “How do you think whether producing content that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature may be always justified, or justified on occasion, or would you not approve it under any circumstances?”

To clarify how journalists perceive their professional roles, a general question was asked (“How important is it to do each of the following in your daily work?”), followed by the items: “be a detached observer”, “monitor and scrutinize those in power”, “set the political agenda”, “support government policy”, “convey a positive image of political leaders”. Journalists rated this on a scale from 5 = “extremely important” to 1 = “not at all important”.

To find out journalists’ personal beliefs about the influence of government in shaping their opinions about what is the truth, the question was asked: “How strongly do you agree or disagree that truth is inevitably shaped by those in power?”. Journalists rated this on a scale from 5 = “strongly agree” to 1 = “strongly disagree”. When determining the political views of journalists, the question was: “On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is left, 10 is right, and 5 is center, where would you place yourself?”

When assessing the extent of political influence perceived by journalists on their work, two variables were selected: “government officials” and “politicians”. The latter variable was additionally selected to assess not only the influence of the government, but also the influence of other state institutions, municipal institutions, and representatives of various political parties. This is especially significant when assessing the perceived influence of journalists in regional/local media, where government representatives may be much less important than local municipal administrations and party representatives in the regions.

To assess which factors of journalistic work, journalists’ roles, and personal attitudes/beliefs may be significant for their professional activities in the context of political influence, the Spearman Correlation coefficient was calculated to assess the statistical significance between variables.

The research was carried out in accordance with the ethical requirements of social research. The research questionnaire and the research procedure were approved by the Joint Committee on Research Ethics of the Faculty of Philosophy of Vilnius University (October 13, 2022, Prot. No. 9).

Results

Almost two-fifths of Lithuanian journalists stated that they experienced political influences of varying intensity in their work, while one-fifth of journalists indicated that the political influences they experienced were relatively weak (Table 1) (Table 2).

The study (Table 3) did not find that journalists’ working conditions (position in the editorial hierarchy and salary) were a significant factor that could have a more serious impact on the political influence experienced by journalists. Among internal organizational factors, the strongest correlations (with both political influence variables) are with the influence variable of the managers of media organizations. However, the influence of organization owners does not significantly correlate with that of government

Table 2. Intensity of government officials/politicians' influence, %.

Intensity	Not influential	Slightly influential	Moderately influential	Very influential	Extremely influential	Not relevant to work	Total (from slightly to extremely influential)
Government officials	52,0	20,5	11,3	6,6	1,3	8,3	39,7
Politicians	56,0	20,5	10,3	5,0	1,7	6,6	37,5

officials, but it does correlate with that of politicians. Such a difference may be explained by the specifics of media organizations' ownership structures, as the owners of some local media organizations in Lithuania are municipal politicians or their relatives ([Chief Commission on Official Ethics, 2025](#); [VIRSIS, 2025](#)).

Government officials' influence is also positively correlated with the influence of advertising decisions on the work of journalists, as well as with the justification for the publication of hidden advertising when content is produced that mimics news stories but hides its promotional nature. This shows that some editorial offices and journalists are financially connected to government advertising orders when, in some cases, professional ethical norms are also undermined. Additionally, a significant relationship was found between the influence of politicians and the practice of regional/local media to imitate news stories and hide its promotional nature. This is clearly linked to the aforementioned ownership of some local media by politicians or their relatives.

The strongest correlation was found between government officials' and politicians' influence and the influence of public relations on the work of journalists. This confirms that public relations actors are critically important in shaping the media and public agenda. Related to this, another significant relationship was found between government influence and the influence of access to information on the work of journalists. The survey answers showed that almost a fifth of journalists in state or municipal institutions sometimes encounter situations where information (that needs to be known to the public) is not provided or is delayed. Additional comments from journalists during the survey revealed that this often happens on the grounds of personal data protection under the EU General Data Protection Regulation and through abuse of the information provision procedure.

In the survey, more than 90% of journalists said that it was more or less important for them to be detached observers and monitor, scrutinize those in power. When measuring the correlation between the importance of the monitorial role perceived by journalists and political influence, in no case ("be a detached observer", "monitor and scrutinize those in power") was a significant relationship found with the influence of government officials. However, the importance of a detached observer was negatively and significantly related to the influence of politicians. Thus, the more important the role of a detached observer of political life is perceived to be, the weaker the political influence is assessed to be.

Table 3. Spearman Correlation (* $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$) between variables.

	Government officials	Politicians
Position in editorial hierarchy	–	–
Income	–	–
Owners	–	,164*
		,012
Managers	,215**	,193**
	,001	,002
Advertising decisions	,147*	–
	,022	
Promotional nature of news	,146*	,226* (r/l)
	,017	,037
Access to information	,148*	,125*
	,015	,039
Public relations	,357**	,369**
	,000	,000
Be a detached observer	–	–,194**
		,001
Monitor and scrutinize those in power	–	–
Set the political agenda	,181**	,279**
	,003	,000
Support government policy	,219**	,203**
	,000	,001
Convey a positive image of political leaders	,176**	,176**
	,004	,003
Truth is inevitably shaped by those in power	,224**	,159**
	,000	,009
Political views	–	–
Self-censorship	,170**	,148*
	,006	,017

r/l - regional/local private commercial media.

The influence of government and politicians is significantly positively correlated with the interventionist (setting a political agenda) and collaborative (supporting government policy, conveying a positive image of political leaders) roles of journalists. Thus, government (politicians) influence is more significant when journalists seek to influence the political agenda or demonstrate loyalty to the political entities. The influence of politicians and journalists' intentions to influence the political agenda is clearly related in all media segments: national private, regional/local, and public media. However, the connection between the importance of collaboration with political entities and greater political influence is palpable only in the private national media segment. This suggests that the relatively strong intentions of regional/local media journalists to collaborate with politicians may not necessarily depend on the strength of politicians' influence. It is precisely the regional/local journalists' beliefs that the truth is inevitably shaped by those in

power that are statistically significantly related to the importance of the perception of the influence of government officials and politicians.

The study results show that Lithuanian journalists' political views are, on average, slightly to the right (5.6 on a scale of 0 to 10). At the time of the journalist survey, in late 2022 and early 2023, the Lithuanian government was formed by a coalition of center-right parties (Freedom House 2024). However, journalists' political attitudes do not significantly correlate with government officials' and politicians' influence on journalists' work. It can be assumed that journalists do not feel greater political weight on their professional activities in a favourable ideological context. However, additional research would be needed to confirm or refute such an assumption.

Additionally, a significant statistical relationship links the political influence with the influence of self-censorship on journalistic work. This relationship is primarily characteristic of national private media. The influence of self-censorship, which is recognized to varying degrees by almost three-quarters of Lithuanian journalists, potentially accumulates the discussed organizational and informational influences.

Discussion and conclusions

The activities of journalists in the chosen post-communist consolidated democracy are significantly related to the informational and financial influence of the government (politicians). Since political PR structures are designed to subsidize media content (Lewis et al., 2008), it is consistent that this study found a strong connection between how journalists perceive PR and political influences in their work. The not always smooth access of journalists to information and its connection with political influence, under the guise of the EU General Data Protection Regulation, demonstrates the specificity of information filtering by Lithuanian state and municipal institutions, which international organizations have identified as insufficient openness and transparency of the government (Freedom House, 2025; World Justice Project, 2025). In this study, we also found links between the importance of legal and hidden advertising for journalists' work and the level of political influence in private commercial media. This complements Örnebring's (2016) research, which revealed non-transparent commercial relations between PR representatives and editorial offices in the post-communist CEE countries.

Formally consolidated democracy, especially in a post-communist context, does not necessarily eliminate political influence on journalism. The legal framework in a mature democracy may create conditions for media freedom, but political actors can influence journalists through institutional communication practices. Moreover, in the case of poor economic sustainability of media organizations, which is typical of post-communist countries, information access and public relations influences can be aligned with opaque clientelist practices in the distribution of public funds by state institutions, thus preventing some media from playing a critical monitoring role.

Analyzing the data of the conducted research, we can agree with Hanitzsch et al. (2019) insights about the transformation of political influence on journalists through organizational and procedural influences. The influence of media managers, correlating with political influence, indicates an indirect managerial influence on journalism, possibly experienced from government institutions and individual politicians through media

managers. In turn, political influence on journalists can also be transmitted through media owners, who in some regions of Lithuania also have specific political affiliations or positions in municipal institutions.

External (political) influence on journalists has internal correlates related to the monitorial, interventionist, and collaborative roles perceived by journalists. The ‘watchdog’ element of the monitorial role is strongly expressed in the Lithuanian journalist population – 75% of journalists consider monitoring and scrutinizing those in power extremely/very important in their activities. This is typical of a stronger democracy (McQuail and Deuze, 2020). And the absence of a significant correlation between the perceived importance of the ‘watchdog’ role and political influence shows that in the Lithuanian (post-communist consolidated democracy) context, the ‘watchdog’ role is an internalized professional norm that persists despite perceived political influence, rather than being inversely affected by it. This is related to research conducted in Lithuania and Sweden, where the “watchdog” role is reinforced by the persistent emphasis on autonomy when journalists operate in environments of political influence, although the professional role is fluctuating and sensitive to the social relationship context (Malling, 2024).

The study’s finding of a negative relationship between the impartial observer role and the perception of political influence (the more important the impartial monitoring role, the weaker the political influence is perceived) contradicts the conclusion of Maurer (2019), studying analogous perceptions of French and German journalists, when the hypothesis was confirmed: the more journalists see themselves as having a duty to inform the public impartially, the more political influence they perceive. On the one hand, this difference in results may be partly due to differently designed research samples, as Maurer (2019) surveyed only political journalists, while our survey represents the entire journalist population. On the other hand, this difference may be influenced by differences in journalistic cultures and the conditions for journalists’ autonomy to serve as impartial observers (Hanitzsch, 2007; Reich and Hanitzsch, 2013).

The data obtained confirmed the links between interventionist roles and the importance of political influence. When journalists try to set the political agenda, they naturally exert some political influence and can also influence political decisions themselves (Dindler, 2014). The collaborative role, although relatively poorly expressed, is also significantly related to political influence. Some journalists tend to support government policies or create positive images of politicians, and as previously identified in Lithuania, in certain cases, shady connections and power relations are developed between journalists and politicians (Balčytienė and Malling, 2019). Since a significant correlation between political influence and collaborative roles has been established only in the segment of national commercial media, which absorbs the largest amount of publicizing funds from state institutions through PR agencies (VIRSIŠ, 2025), it can be stated that some journalists (editors) participating in the dissemination of PR content associate the fostered image of politicians and support for the government with political-commercial influence. In addition, previous research has shown that in relations with politicians (government representatives), Lithuanian mass media can be not only objects but also active subjects of corrupt practices (Lašas, 2019). Thus, the direction of the relationship between political influence and collaborative role tends to be reciprocal.

When assessing individual segments of the media system (national, regional/local private commercial and public media), the least significant correlations between the variables in question were recorded in the responses of PSM journalists. Only PR influence and journalists' intentions to set a political agenda were positively and significantly correlated with political influence. This indicates that journalists from an essential element (PSM) of the consolidated democracy's media system operate in a much smaller circle of significant influences compared to journalists from commercial media, which is also found in Germany, France, and Slovenia (Maurer, 2019; Vobič et al., 2025).

Although studies conducted in Nordic countries and Slovenia (Hovden and Väliverronen, 2021; Vobič et al., 2025) have shown that journalists in local editorial offices experience more substantial political influence than journalists in national media, the data of the current study show that more significant connections with government/politician influence were found in the national private media segment than among the assessments of journalists in regional/local media. However, the specificity of the activities of journalists in regional/local editorial offices may be more conditioned by the connection between the epistemological belief (truth is inevitably shaped by those in power) and the perception of political influence. This is related to the specifics of the regional/local media ownership structure, where some organizations are owned by local politicians or individuals close to them. In addition, many regional/local media organizations are economically fragile and often dependent on orders for advertising and publicity services from municipal institutions (VIRIS 2025, Chief Commission on Official Ethics 2025).

The study did not find a significant relationship between journalists' perceived political influence and their position in the organizational hierarchy, unlike the work of Slovenian researchers who conducted a similar survey (Vobič et al., 2025). We can state that in the two consolidated democracies of the post-communist CEE region, we have different situations: in one of them (Slovenia), this influence is hierarchized (journalists perceive more substantial political influence than their managers), while in Lithuania, it is distributed more or less evenly between managerial levels. According to Hanitzsch et al. (2019), this would mean that political influence on journalists in Lithuania may be more transformed through their managers.

The result of the absence of a significant relationship between journalists' political views and political influence on their activities joins a group of analogous but contradictory studies, where, for example, in Austria and the Netherlands, similar views of journalists and politicians create conditions for increasing political influence on journalism (Maurer and Beiler, 2018; Van der Goot et al., 2021), while in France and Germany, opposite conclusions were obtained (Maurer (2019)). The Lithuanian case signals that the 'apolitical' professional norm established in the Lithuanian Code of Ethics for Public Information (2020) (a journalist's professional activity is incompatible with work in state and local government institutions, as well as with participation in the activities of political parties) is important in shaping the relations of the journalistic community with subjects of the political system.

As in other studies conducted in CEE countries examining the problems of self-censorship and political influence among journalists (Himma-Kadakas and Ivask, 2023; Rožukalne, 2020), a significant relationship between political influence and journalists'

perceived self-censorship was found in Lithuania. A relatively high extent of self-censorship was also found (not only due to political influence). What is new is that the self-censorship perception variable correlates with the perception of political influence only in the national private commercial media segment. Such a relationship is not found between the assessments of journalists in local/regional or public service media. In these segments, organizational or professional-procedural factors may have a greater influence on journalists' self-censorship. Since the perception of self-censorship is the cumulative consequence of various negative influences (factors) of journalistic work, most of which were found to be significantly correlated with political influence in the national private media segment (compared to public and regional/local media), it is consistent that self-censorship is also significantly related to political influence in this segment.

It can be summarized that the essential factors of political influence on journalism in the selected post-communist consolidated democracy are external informational influences, most often directly related to political entities. The institutions of each consolidated democracy have reserves to help journalism be more informed and provide citizens with more information to make the necessary decisions, and at the same time, develop democracy. Also, very important correlates of political influence are internal organizational factors or procedures that set the limits of journalists' autonomy and often absorb and transform external political influences. Finally, the factor of political influence is the professional behaviour of journalists, their perceived roles (being impartial, interventionist, or collaborator), and personal beliefs about the extent to which the government can allow the implementation of the journalistic principle in their activities to seek the truth.

When identifying the limitations of the presented study, it is worth noting that the work is based on measuring the perceived influences of journalists, which may not necessarily fully reflect objective reality but rather their professional perspective (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). However, this is also an opportunity, based on the collected data, to continue the study by employing additional qualitative methods and using regression analysis to verify certain assumptions. Also, the research is limited to proposing a distinct, testable model of political influence on journalists' activities in post-communist consolidated democracies, but our findings can serve as a groundwork study to develop such a model, which would be valuable for other post-communist and illiberal countries.

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Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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