

(Liberal) mass media and the (multi)party system in post-communist Lithuania



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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to describe and assess the *political parallelism* pertinent to the post-communist Lithuanian mass media; and to show potential risk (for democracy, civil society) of the absence of the political parallelism. Referring to the concepts, *communicative democracy* is defined as free, open and democratic communication organized around three equally legitimate public sphere actors – politicians, journalists and public opinion, and *populism* is understood as good, entertaining and effective communication with people, eroding basic functions of the political parties (institutionalization of ideological conflicts) and politicians (representation). The paper provides insights about the dangers to quality of democracy which the free mass media might present when it gets utterly away from political parallelism. Special attention is placed on the tendencies of media personnel to be active in the political life. The (universal) contemporary *mass society* phenomenon, coupled with the (post-communist regional) ill-structured of the post-communist political field and (local) specific traditions of the Lithuanian political culture and public sphere, gave birth to the peculiar absence of the mass-media and politics parallelism in the country. In the conditions of the relative absence of foreign ownership of the mass-media outlets in Lithuania, the *local media barons* are able to produce and impose their own public-agenda, which hampers development of the civic-minded public sphere and definition of the social and professional responsibilities of the journalism as a profession and as a social category. The Lithuanian mass-media and government relations evolve along the lines of the zero-sum game: they seek to control each other, and at the same time try to avoid being controlled by the other, while any other pattern of inter-relations does not appear as viable and appropriate.

KEYWORDS: political parallelism, populism, communicative democracy, mass-media ownership, public sphere.



INTRODUCTION

Hallin and Mancini (2004) introduce several scales by which they measure the various media systems in the established capitalist democracies. The case of Lithuania – as well as of any other national mass media system of the new post-communist democracies – is beyond the scope of their analysis. The aim of this paper is to: 1) describe and assess the political parallelism pertinent to the post-communist

Lithuanian mass media; 2) show potential risk (for democracy, civil society) of the absence of the political parallelism, which presence is implied as negative to democracy by some researchers dwelling on Hallin and Mancini seminal book and interpreting situation in some established democracies (for instance, Berkel, 2006).

In the paper we firstly describe developments of the multi-party system and of the free mass media in post-communist Lithuania as two parallel processes, which intersection or overlap (political parallelism) at the beginning of the independent statehood was very strongly pronounced and biased towards the political agenda of national revival, later on it became more polarized, but was temporary and partial and since 1995–1996 (depending on the reference point) became erratic and irrelevant as such, giving a vast leeway to the commercial drives of media and populist parlance in the public sphere.

Referring to the concept of communicative democracy (defined as free, open and democratic communication organized around three equally legitimate public sphere actors – politicians, journalists and public opinion, see Jakubowicz, 2005) and populism understood as good, entertaining and effective communication with people, eroding basic functions of the political parties (institutionalization of ideological conflicts) and politicians (representation), we give some insights about the dangers to quality of democracy which the free mass media might present when it gets utterly away from political parallelism.

We pay special attention to the tendency of media personnel to be active in the political life. We also survey politicians' moves into and around the mass media domain. Alongside, we provide elements of the empirical study of the public opinion in construction of the post-communist mass media and politics interaction.

The presence of journalists and writers in the Lithuanian Seimas was constantly going down from 10.5% in 1990 to 2.1% in 2004 what shows strengthening of independent mass media (see Table 1). Interestingly, Rimvydas Valatka, the MP of the founding parliament 1990–1992, one of the founders of the Liberal party in post-communist Lithuania actually is an influential public figure who holds a position of vice-editor of *Lietuvos rytas*, the Lithuanian daily with the highest circulation and since 2005 he also is an editor-in-chief of the Internet news portal www.lrytas.lt (launched in 2005). It should be noted that in 1990 elected parliament (only) every tenth MP has had some prior experience from the private sector (meanwhile, majority of them were not entrepreneurs in the strict sense of the term). Every second of these path-breaking politicians (7) were journalists acting under the private ownership law in the liberalized mass media. In retrospective, the occupational category of MPs former writers and journalists in 1990 thus was the most polarized in terms of public versus private ownership over all the post-communist parliamentary terms. Fifteen years after, in 2004 only 3 former journalists remain members of the parliament and none of them has any experience in the privately owned media. Divorce of the media and political personnel seems to be completed bluntly favoring the ex-partners from media.

Table 1. Occupation of the parliamentary elite prior to entering *Seimas*

Year	Teachers, professors		Journalists, writers		Full-time paid party employees		Higher administrative level servants		Liberal professions (not law)		Lawyers		Agriculture, fishermen		Blue-collar workers		Managers, Businessmen		Not stated		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1990	44	33.1	14	10.5	14	10.5	10	7.5	18	13.5	10	7.5	1	0.8	3	2.3	17	12.8	2	1.5	133	100
1992	52	36.9	12	8.5	14	9.9	9	6.4	14	9.9	4	2.8	1	0.7	7	0.5	26	18.4	2	1.4	141	100
1996	41	29.9	9	6.6	6	4.4	32	23.4	23	16.8	5	3.6	0	0	4	2.9	15	10.9	2	1.5	137	100
2000	24	17	6	4.3	9	6.4	26	18.4	10	7.1	2	1.4	0	0	2	1.4	61	43.3	1	0.7	141	100
2004	17	12.1	3	2.1	7	5	38	27	15	10.6	3	2.1	0	0	2	1.4	54	38.3	2	1.4	141	100

MASS MEDIA AND POLITICS IN LITHUANIA AT THE TURN OF THE 20th AND 21st CENTURIES: A BRIEF INVENTORY OF THE LITHUANIAN SCHOLARSHIP

In Lithuania, as elsewhere in the post-communist Europe, seemingly good grounds were and are for the development of a somewhat mixed type of political media parallelism: elements from both, the Liberal and Polarized political models, as Hallin and Mancini (2004) define them, are applicable. However, only more thorough diachronic analysis might show how specific patterns appeared (emerged and vanished) in the relations of mass media and politics in concrete countries. We claim that a country analysis is important and vital in order to understand the post-communist journalism. After all, 'Like sailing, gardening, politics and poetry, journalism is a craft of place; it works by the light of local knowledge. [...] This localism, even ethnocentrism, can be differently rendered. We can mean we members of a congregation, practitioners of a craft, possessors of a common race, gender, ethnicity, but most often, it refers to "we fellow citizens" of a country, state, or region' (Carey, 2007, p. 4).

Lithuanian political scientists Krupavičius and Šarkutė say that in 1990–1991 the Lithuanian mass media experienced a rapid process of **desovietization**, which in essence meant that then the Communist Party *nomenklatura* lost their ability to use the press, the radio and the TV as an influential instrument of the communist propaganda (Krupavičius, Šarkutė, 2004, p. 156). After the breakdown of the communist rule, the media personnel (journalists) emerged as practitioners of free and independent reporting and presentation. To Krupavičius and Šarkutė, further developments in the field of mass media in post-communist Lithuania confirm the growing general democratization of the political-cultural life and on the whole are

post-communist Lithuania. Political parties or any other units, based on the organized communities (staff of newspapers, TVs or radio, NGOs, trade unions, associations, etc.) are absent from this analysis. Bielinis addresses macro-processes and tendencies (electoral and public relations campaigns), and extensively uses observations of the public behavior and illustrations from publications of individual journalists and politicians. Bielinis notes that 'politicians use services of the mass-media and clenching one's teeth put up with its critiques, because it looks like it has ambition to be the first estate' (*ibid.*, p. 11). Bielinis does not attribute this trend to any particularity of the Lithuanian political culture; political and cultural elite etc. but rather views it as resulting from mass communication. Political parties with an ideology and principles in such a picture are outdated leftovers, to be found on the margins of the political process (*ibid.*, p. 13). Political communicative practices render political parties as member-based-organizations irrelevant, and foster images of their leadership, thus promoting their emotional appeal to the audience. In his analysis Bielinis lets us see that the upper-hand belongs to the mass media rather than to the political elite of late post-communist Lithuania.

Bielinis affirms that the 'Lithuanian viewer/reader most often treats mass-media as a counter-politics. When it appears that the politicians' actions and decisions do not yield expected results, [...] then the mass-media become the last instance of hope' (*ibid.*, p. 61). Bielinis goes as far as to generalize (regretfully, without identifying anything or providing any empirical test) that: 'Many mass-media outlets in Lithuania do not play the role of the intermediary between the politics and citizens and turn themselves into the independent anarchistic political subject, pursuing narrow, selfish, often purely economic purposes, further advancing illusion about the political transparency and impartiality of mass-media' (*ibid.*, p. 61). Newspapers and TV channels become *erzac-parties* without ideology and without any positive idea (*ibid.*, p. 64). Journalists in the times of self-politization of mass media and surfacing of its self-interests, start to a greater extent talk only on their own behalf. Talking on behalf of the society or community becomes only a formal screen in the pursuit of particular personal or group interests of the mass media elite (ratings, profits and handy economic and political decisions, *ibid.*, p. 66).

An example might be appropriate to illustrate the above described phenomenon of the self-contained mass media in post-communist Lithuania. This particularly instructive instance, which occurred in 1991, we claim, in the path-dependent manner, exerts consequences till nowadays.

From the very outset of the democratization, the free mass media became a value in itself. In autumn 1991, a tension between the Lithuanian (sic! nationalist-conservative) government and the editorial boards of the independent press mounted because of the ministerial attempts efforts to get under its control several outlets, which formerly belonged to the *Komsomol* and the Communist Party. The Lithuanian Journalists union (LJU) expressed its worries about the 'preservation of workplaces for its members' (www.lzs.lt/almanachas/, Eilunavičius, the then chairman of

the LJU quoted). The editors of the Lithuanian dailies *Respublika*, *Lietuvos rytas*, *Vakarinės naujienos*, and *Valstiečių laikraštis* signed a protest letter demanding the government not to take out of the money from the newspapers accounts and not to transfer it as intended to the account of the Ministry of Communications (which because of the economic Moscow blockade was in serious financial hardships) and not to introduce the planned VAT on the press. On November 30, 1991 these four newspapers and regional daily *Kauno diena* appeared with entirely blank pages, only on the first page the above described editorial letter to the government was published. Some days later, the journalists' protests have been supported by the ill-defined oppositional *Seimas* center and liberal factions, which claimed that the conservative-nationalist government went too far in application of the *Seimas* decision to establish the inventory of the Lithuanian Communist Party and the Lithuanian Youth Komsomol property (the decision did not foresee any direct redistribution or nationalization). Thus, the emerging *fourth estate* of journalists has been supported by the vocal center-liberal MPs (among whom were 6 out of total 7 former journalists turned MPs: Balcevičius, Iešmantas, Katkus, Ozolas, Rupeika and the above-mentioned Valatka). On December 7, 1991 the governmental decision was broadcast on the national TV which allowed the editorial boards of the municipal newspapers to take on themselves the rights of the newspaper founders and publishers or to pass these rights to the municipal boards. The last word on the issue was with the then Prime minister Vagnorius. Two days later he publicly announced that he favors free and independent press and promised guarantees for its further development (this fact is celebrated in the above provided *evolutionary democratization* version, provided by Krupavičius and Šarkutė, 2004).

Meanwhile, there might be other interpretations of that *blank pages* incident in Lithuania 1991. Personally, these days as a university student I felt cheated by newspapers without any text, except the imposing editorial. At that time the press still has had many readers (subscribers) who legitimately might have had the feeling of being not provided with the expected service (information and analysis) but rather taken as hostages by one of the conflicting sides (the press). Finally, it was a tremendous gambit of the **visual** mass media, appealing not to the rational readers (citizens), but advancing the message through the most effective communication ways, without any consideration to the public good. Even though, in retrospective, the then readers (myself included) may share the 1991 goal of five dailies, yet the means have been doubtful and they created some strong precedent of mass media with an always upper-hand while settling political disputes.

With regard to the above provided example we observe an interesting intersection of the three differing and/or complementary approaches to the post-communist mass media in Lithuania. Macro-political reading (Krupavičius, Šarkutė, 2004) shows the 'history written by the winners' and leads to optimistic democratic conclusions and further democracy enhancing expectations. The civic masquerade approach (Balčytienė, 2006) leans to somewhat more nuanced and socially embedded

understanding of the uneasy roles to be played by the mass media in the pursuit of the post-communist commercial success and democratic quality. Finally, the journalistic corporatism and *mediacracy* approach (Bielinis, 2005) give practically no hope about mass media as able to provide civic, empowering and enlightening solutions for readers and viewers. Meanwhile, none of the above presented approaches influentially practiced in the Lithuanian academic research does not center on **mass media and political parties** (party system) relations as an important background and context, shaping both phenomena and affecting the political (civic) culture and public opinion in the country.

A HISTORICAL APPRAISAL

Peter Gross writes: 'Unfortunately, establishing new cultures is a difficult and slow process, particularly given that Eastern European societies are not a *tabula rasa*, their pre-communist and communist eras having embedded cultural traits inimical to democracy' (Gross, 2004, p. 112). Right after proclamation of the Lithuanian independence on February 16, 1918, the military censorship of the press has been introduced and it lasted until the mid 1920s. The first Lithuanian governments felt that they were obliged to control information because of the unstable social and political conditions. The efforts to control information flows in the country and about the country led to the establishment of the (only later highly praised for its efficiency and professionalism) Lithuanian news agency ELTA in 1920 (by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs). The press has been set free from censorship only for a couple months in 1926, after the parliamentary elections and formation of the leftist government. Yet the military *coup d'état* in December 1926 brought the Nationalist Union to power and it restored censorship. However, the reasons changed: the nationalists imposed a ban on ideologically varied publications (in particular, those produced by the overthrown Christian-Democrat and the Peasants' parties), while the communist press remained clandestine. The ruling nationalists presented information through political lenses (emphasizing patriotism and worshiping the party leader and the president of the country, Antanas Smetona). In the interwar period, journalism was almost equated with nationalist propaganda (Balčytienė, 2006, pp. 68–69).

In terms of circulation, important in Hallin and Mancini (2004) analysis, in early 20th century Lithuania the newspapers and magazines were initially an instrument of erudite circulation created for a well-educated audience that was able to discuss difficult issues. Several cultural journals: *Židinys*, *Keturi vėjai*, *Naujoji Romuva*, entered the public space with their diverging ways of thinking and styles. Yet, none of them enjoyed high readership rates. *Skaitymai* was a cultural review, financed by the Ministry of Education, and it was the only of the kind not to face financial hardships. Yet, its contents were closely monitored (not to say, censored) to fit the ideology of the ruling nationalist-conservative party (1926–1939).

The issue of the political party and press affiliation historically was very important in Lithuania: the twinning of the two was practicable from their very origin. In 1918–1940 in Lithuania, the circulation of the newspapers was mostly assured by the politically designed supply (not by the socially or culturally induced demand). The highest 25 000–20 000 copies morning and evening circulation by the State subsidies has been granted to *Lietuvos aidas*, the nationalistic daily. The 10 000 copies circulation has been achieved in 1938 by national daily of the center-left convictions *Lietuvos žinios*, financed from the party budget. Specialized periodicals, for example, newspapers for farmers or the army were financed through respective ministries (Balčytienė, 2006, p. 71). Subscription rates were very low. Radio, which first broadcasted in 1930s in the capital city Kaunas, from the very outset, became popular, but mostly for its entertainment and not information services. However, radio itself did not generate income either; it was again financed by the public money. Thus, summing up, the Lithuanian journalism historically was closely associated with politics (and literature), but not with the profit-making business. Historically, most of the Lithuanian readers did not make their civically conscious choice about the daily or review they read, since they were provided with the political parties or the State subsidized and run outlets; the Lithuanian journalism was primarily based on the opinionated literary perspectives and the journalistic community (perceptibly patterned by the Catholic clergy and the secular-modernist authors) enjoyed high status and social prestige.

The Lithuanian media markets in the interwar period conformed to Hallin and Mancini's Polarized political (Mediterranean) model, based on one party-one-leader led authoritarian regime, financial hardships of the print media and low literacy rates in the population. The scarce elements from the Democratic corporatist model (Scandinavian) combined into rather Elitist-corporatist and centered on the political right-catholic religious/political left-atheist cleavage and were exclusively observable in the fine-arts and belles-lettres. In the interwar Lithuania, there was no push to capture big audiences as it happened in Scandinavia, where by mid-1930s the omnibus newspapers with their universalistic socio-cultural themes started to blur political boundaries of the mass media. Neither the interwar Lithuania experienced the development of penny press as in the Great Britain or the USA of 18th–19th century. The rural Lithuanian society in early 20th century did not drag commercial press.

When Lithuania in 1940 was occupied by the USSR, the Lithuanian media underwent revolutionary changes. The structure of mass media ownership and management changed, the ideological profile has been monopolized by the Communist party, and accessibility of newspapers has been broadening up. Only the language of mass media (the Lithuanian) has been kept intact, although the Russian language periodicals and programs have been introduced. However, they remained of the secondary value. The Communist media was supposed to be unambiguously serious and its eventual entertainment services were regarded as bourgeois leftovers or

the Western capitalist conspiracy. Only in late 1970s and 1980s such themes and subjects started being diffused and tolerated (by the national *nomenklaturas*, see Šepetys, 2005). However, throughout the whole Soviet period, the principal goal of mass media was observed and practiced; it consisted of the sustained propaganda. The Communist media was supposed to educate, inform and serve the interests of the society relying on its superior knowledge and related high status but without the means of free expression. Education (the Communist indoctrination) of the journalists in the Soviet times was of primary importance and the powerful concept *intelligentsia* was at its foundation. Censorship and self-censorship assured rather smooth fulfillment of the propagandistic media function. Interestingly, the Soviet audience was understood as totally undifferentiated (very much interested in Moscow led high politics) and at the same time exceedingly fragmented (all union, republican, regional, local press in various formats had its wide currency, socio-professionally shaped and hobby linked reviews have been cooked up). The Soviet mass media brutally and stylishly socialized the audience, which indeed was mostly restricted to the Communist party members and the working class. The dissident press (i.e. famous *Lithuanian Catholic Church Chronicles*, 1972–1989) and the foreign radio programs (*Radio Free Europe*, *Radio Liberty*, *Voice from Washington*, etc.) with their gracelessly Communist regime adversary messages neither have had free circulation, nor enjoyed big audiences or were of vivid social interest. The Soviet mass media managed to play a ‘tribunary’ role (to voice the misdeeds of the rank and file officials, to voice the problems of preservation of the cultural heritage, environmental protection, to express workplace modernization-driven ideas, etc.). The daily *Komjaunimo tiesa* in 1983–1989 used to organize highly prestigious *School of Young Journalists*’ where the high school students from all over Lithuania aspiring to the journalism studies in the only Vilnius university, could gather for the club-like activities (meeting famous journalists, writing reports, editing programs, getting familiar with the journalistic craft, etc.).¹ The Soviet mass media therefore in Lithuania had an important place in the pre- or para-political domain, which aired social and cultural topics having to do with common interest and/or collective identities (Jakubowicz, 2005, pp. 155–156).

With the Gorbachev initiated *glasnost*’ the mass-media freed itself from ideological taboos and became an iconic public institution. In the pinnacle year of the *Glasnost*’, subscription to *Komjaunimo tiesa* grew five times: from 108 000 copies in 1988 to 522 000 in 1989. The weekly *Gimtasis kraštas*, which was aimed at Lithuanians living abroad but was widely read in the country as well, as early as in 1988 published the text of the Lithuanian National Anthem *Tautiška giesmė*, which has been banned for five decades. Its editor-in-chief, Algimantas Čekuolis, became

¹ The author of this paper herself was enrolled into this School in 1985–1986, when it was led by Vitas Lingys, the then *Komjaunimo tiesa* journalist, turned to be the co-founder of the *Respublika* daily in 1989, and he was murdered by the mafia in 1993 because of his investigative journalism reports about the criminal facets of rampant privatization in the country.

a popular public figure, turned out to be one of the leading figures of the *Sąjūdis* movement and was elected to the Constituent *Seimas* in 1990. On 16 September 1989, the new daily *Respublika* was launched. It was established as a partisan newspaper of *Sąjūdis*, the enterprising, ambitious and motivated journalists composed its editorial and managerial board. In 1989 a group of resourceful fellows in Vilnius opened radio station M1, and this was the first private broadcast station in the Baltic states.

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

POST-COMMUNIST BEGINNINGS: MEDIA RELATED LEGISLATION, MEDIA TRANSFORMATION AND MEDIA CONSECRATING EVENTS IN JANUARY 1991

'The transition from communist media, and from underground or alternative media where they existed, was achieved almost instantly at the moment the communist regimes disappeared, and the transformation began simultaneously with that occurrence' (Gross, 2004, p. 114). The new Law on the Press and Other Mass Media was one of the first to be drafted by the Constituent Assembly, after it proclaimed the Lithuanian independence on March 11, 1990. The founding post-communist Lithuanian legislators (among them, as it was hinted above, were numerous influential journalists) cherished the idea that the State should play an active role in the matters of mass media. According to the Law, apart from registering the media, the Department of Media Control (in 1990–1992 at the Ministry of Interior, since 1992 it was transferred to the Ministry of Justice) had to monitor whether the media meets the requirements of the Law. Symptomatically to the small country in the insecure geopolitical and cultural environment, the Law made it impossible for foreign citizens to set up a newspaper or broadcast station in Lithuania (Balčytienė, 2006, pp. 96–97).

Thus, in Lithuania, in line with the transformation observed all over the Eastern Europe, in 1990 the one-party media system became multiparty media system until it too disappeared by the mid-1990s, replaced by more autonomous, if not independent, media. Newspapers retained a decidedly partisan orientation; public broadcasting continued to be manipulated if not controlled by governments, and the rest of the predominantly commercial broadcast outlets remained entertainment oriented and generally politically biased in their news and public affairs coverage.

The Lithuanian media from an agent of political resistance (1988–1990) has moved in the direction of the ostensibly commercial product. The so-called free market laws had to enter the alleged free expression domain. Now, new danger has appeared because the media started creating the national agenda not in public, but in their own commercial interest (Balčytienė, 2006, p. 58). Many professional journalists became managers and owners (of the commercial newspapers, public relations companies, etc.). In most cases, it was a closed privatization, when shares were divided among the staff, what spurred many vocal conflicts. New owners (former journalists) lacked money and knowledge how to manage their job and how to compete in the wild mass media field. At the same time the poorly defined by laws advertising market emerged and vigorously entered the broadcast and printed media domains. Yet some other journalists turned (at least, temporarily) to politics *par excellence* or went abroad to study the Western journalism. In a way, a multi-layered de-professionalization of the journalistic craft occurred during the first years of the independent Lithuanian statehood.

At the same time, the Lithuanian journalists tried to establish their professional community along the lines of a non-governmental organization. On December 11, 1990, the board of the Lithuanian Journalists' Union (LJU) adopted the statutes of the Independent Press Support Fund, which later was approved by the Lithuanian government and which stipulated that the Fund consists of voluntary contributions from the physical persons and legal entities as well as the State grants. The LJU itself underwent internal conflicts, because of the pronounced political affiliations of its several members. In December 1990, a group of journalists from the LJU published a public letter in the (conservative) daily *Lietuvos aidas*, asking editors-in-chief of all the Lithuanian dailies and journals to suspend their party-membership and asked for a critical evaluation of the activities of the previous board of the LJU, insinuating its secretariat of following not the majority will, but the principles of one party (the ex-communists, from the Lithuanian Democratic Labor party).

These debates, supposedly signaling the incremental transformations of the relations between mass media and politics and their respective representatives in the public space, in post-communist Lithuania were taking place amidst huge Vilnius-Moscow political tensions. Early 1991 saw Soviet soldiers' and Lithuanian civilians' bloodshed in the attempted *coup d'état* in Vilnius. On January 11, 1991 the Press House has been occupied by the Soviet military and a temporary government led

by Moscow loyal communists proclaimed in Lithuania. The Lithuanian population mobilized itself to defend freedom and independence. On January 12, 1991 the first issue of *Laisva Lietuva*, prepared under joint efforts of thirteen editorial boards, was published. It announced about the armed Soviet soldiers' assault against Lithuanian journalists and publishers. At the late night January 13, 1991 the national TV station was occupied by the Soviet military. Since such course of events was expected, just a few minutes after the closure of Vilnius TV station, the Kaunas radio and Kaunas TV station started their national broadcasting in Lithuanian and English. Radio signals first reached Poland, Latvia, Estonia and Finland, and then the satellite connection started transmitting the news to the whole world. One day later, the communication services from the USSR managed to block the radio signals emitted to the USA. The Kaunas broadcast could only reach Central European and Scandinavian countries. The broadcast blockade has been breached only on January 25, 1991. A temporary satellite broadcast station has been established in the Parliamentary building, in Vilnius. In January 1991 in Lithuania about 200 foreign journalists have been working.

These were heydays of the Lithuanian national unity and its freedom devoted mass media. After the Moscow led adversary attacks against the independent Lithuania failed in winter 1991, things got back to normal. However, the mass media carved for itself a terrific niche in the Lithuanian collective memory, among its social elites and in the public opinion. Interpretations of the exceptionally high lasting public trust in mass media in Lithuania (although systematically measured only since 1996) unequivocally relate this phenomenal trust to the excellent media performance in January 1991 and to the symbolic role of martyr it was assigned by the ultimate Soviet aggressors (Balčytienė, 2006, p. 111).

The number of newspaper titles rose sharply in 1990–1992 and assured its enormous diversity (in 1995 reaching its ever attained peak of 477 newspaper titles in Lithuania). Alongside, the radio and TV market unwrapped. New radio stations aired their music, sports, (Catholic) religion and political information related programs. On April 11, 1993 the first private Tele3 was aired. Prof. Liucija Baškauskaitė (a charismatic Lithuanian-American cultural anthropologist, who became famous after her heroic performance at Kaunas TV, broadcasting the January 1991 events to the whole world, CNN included) was one of its founders and feature personalities (Pečiulis, 2007, p. 134). In 1995 the channel was bought by the Swedish media company and changed its name to TV3. In 1994, another commercial TV channel Litpoliinter/LNK (*Laisvas ir Nepriklausomas kanalas*, Free and Independent channel) has been established by the Lithuanian show-biz stars. In 1995 it was bought by another Swedish media company, which sold it to the Lithuanian investors (MG Baltic) in 2003. Yet one more TV channel BTV (*Baltijos TV*, the Baltic TV) was established as a regional (Klaipėda, nearby the sea region) channel in 1993. Till 1999 it was owned by the US media company, and then it was bought by the *Polsat*, the Polish media company, and then sold to the Lithuania *Achema* investment group in 2004.

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

MASS MEDIA IN POST-1996: DOWN-TO-EARTH AND TOWARDS *CORPORATISM CUM POPULISM*

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

Because of the declining public interest and for economic reasons as well approximately in 1996, the circulation of newspapers and journals in Lithuania started to go down. These downward tendencies have been extremely aggravated by the 1998 economic backlash in Russia – the newspapers in Lithuania became prohibitively expensive for majority of population. From soaring 477 titles in 1995, for instance, in 2001 and 2002 there were respectively only 368 and 395 newspaper titles in Lithuania (*Demokratinės...*, p. 3). Balčytienė explains these changes by the pure free-market laws: after 1995, the edition of dailies decreased visibly and the process of press concentration ran up (Balčytienė, 2006, p. 118). Meanwhile, the growth of reviews and journals was more incremental and sustained: from some 74 titles in 1990 to 212 in 1995 and later on to 370 in 2001 and 354 in 2002. Several dailies set up their thematic weekly supplements to keep their readership loyal and contented with more aesthetic and lighthearted contents.

Yet, these tendencies not only reflect that the Lithuanian mass media follows the free-market reasoning, but they are revelatory of deeper cultural processes, typical in times of post-modernism and global insecurity, when there are no longer any secure identities and true belongings. For Bauman (2001), it becomes possible to enjoy the belonging to a community around media celebrities without the discomfort of feeling restricted in one's individuality. These kinds of communities which are constituted by the media, can be characterized as flexible, ready-made communities, or instant-communities, which are consumed and then disposed. Bauman also uses the term 'aesthetic community' to stress that these forms of communities are not based on ethical principles, but on the particular styles (of heroes, of media outlets). We can find a comparable development when we look at political parties

in general. There is an increasing tendency towards the break down of the old party loyalties which are based on family traditions of supporting a particular political party. Instead, politicians are now faced with the challenge to create attractive communities (Hipfl, 2005, pp. 67–68).

Ten years after the start of post-communist transformation, the printed media market apparently reached its saturation and equilibrium in Lithuania. The telling fact is that the number of newspaper and journal titles is almost equal (368 to 370 in 2001 and 395 to 354 in 2002): it proves that the Lithuanian readers are selective and like entertainment driven publications (journals and reviews). Every second Lithuanian reads the local newspaper (municipal). The most popular Lithuanian national daily *Lietuvos rytas* is read by 23.4% of population, other four Lithuanian dailies reach 14.6% of the population (Krupavičius, Šarkutė, 2004, p. 152).

Balčytienė claims that a new wave of diversification of the press operates in Lithuania since 2003, with expanding Internet portals cross-ownership on broadcast and print media and the Internet (Balčytienė, 2006, p. 119). Balčytienė while discussing the eventual effects of the increasing mass media outlets cross-ownership (on the one hand, higher potential of better journalistic quality and, on the other, danger of triggering the down-market trends) tends to diagnose the second one: while most of the media aim at the mass market, they follow a trend towards the homogenization of contents (*ibid.*, p. 119). Homogenization coincides with the trends in global media, where values and practices of the Liberal Model, described by Hallin and Mancini (2004) are perceived to operate as norms (since larger market share means more money, the commercial press tries to reach out the mass audience across political lines).

Meanwhile, as Hallin and Mancini (2004) describe, in the Liberal model, not only higher salaries, but also superior ethical practices of journalists may be enhanced by the mechanisms of self-regulation of the profession (in parallel, to better training, which boosts journalism ethics in the Corporate model, in the Northern Europe). In 1996 a new law regulating the mass media was accepted in Lithuania, and the state control was removed, and the self-regulation of media was introduced. It copied the model of self-regulation from the analogous Swedish institutions and established the Inspector of Journalist Ethics and the Ethics Commission of Journalists and Publishers. In Lithuania, the state intervention in the matters of mass media was dramatically restricted. The role of the state is confined to monitor the public information policy, and promote such abstract values as transparency and equal opportunities. Very liberal media regulation and a prominent role assigned to the free mass media in public authority and power shaping have been enhanced. Journalists according to the Lithuanian Code of ethics should not work on behalf of authorities, private structures, or separate persons. According to the Lithuanian Law, if a source of information requests to preserve the secret of its name, the journalist in no case is allowed to reveal it. The international experts have concluded that Lithuania has the most liberal post-Soviet law regarding media regulation (Balčytienė, 2006, p. 98).

Thus, after the introduction of the well-intended Law and sobering readership reduction in 1966, the free mass media in Lithuania continues to function as a value-in-itself and is rather closed to external criticism. Lack of introspection and reserved un-communicativeness of the journalism in Lithuania distorts the very idea of its professional self-regulation: in this way, the self-regulation is used not to enhance professionalism, but to defend 'the profession.' Bielinis writes about perverse corporatism of journalists in Lithuania: 'In support to each other, the journalists pay little attention to the problems arising inside the mass-media. For instance, journalistic reaction to the ethics of politicians and journalists: it suffice a small *faux pas* of a politician, and he/she is accused, and, on the contrary, a journalist has to constantly and steadily "commit sins" to get mass-media report on him/her or briefly mention him/her as some sort of misunderstanding' (Bielinis, 2005, p. 78). The case in point might be the series of anti-Semitic publications in *Respublika* daily in early 2004, which attracted attention and indignation of the international media and human rights experts, but were rather vaguely discussed in the Lithuanian media (the daily *Lietuvos rytas*, the main *Respublika* rival in the press market, was also rather silent and busy with other issues). In such an environment the 'professional culture of media organizations as well as the values and attitudes of single journalists are relevant' (Balčytienė, 2006, p. 37). However, none of the Lithuanian mass media outlets (press, radio, TV) is known for its introspection and corporate social responsibility actions. *Ad rem*, the best TV journalism nominations (the best news program, the best video-script, the best TV commentators, etc.) have been awarded for several years, up until 2000, when one TV channel (the LNK) withdrew from the competition, accusing the organizers of partiality and incompetence. Here the conflict broke in the purest version of the market-driven rivalry: although much appreciated by the public, *Ad rem* competition and nominations started to be perceived by the owners and managers of the Lithuanian TV channels as doing the good marketing for some (those who get nominations) and putting in shadow the others (those who are not discerned with the awards).

Provision of information is considered an economic activity, and the Lithuanian Law on Competition regulates the competition between the media. It uses the concept of the 'dominant position' and in principle does not allow any entity to have more than 40% of the market. However, the experts agree that in small media markets, the media concentration is inevitable and in Lithuania the *Lietuvos rytas* and *Respublikos grupe*, two publishing houses well-established in the country market, give evidence that the newspaper market is an oligopoly in Lithuania (Balčytienė, 2006, p. 43). It seems that the control of the press by a small number of local media barons in Lithuania (contrary to Latvia and Estonia or Hungary) is not a temporary deviance provoked by a small market. Indeed, the local barons' phenomenon invalidates the arguments put forward by Krupavičius and Šarkutė (see above) about macro-structural impossibility to create readership and editorial loyalties and identities in small press markets.

The broadcast market in post-communist Lithuania is still expanding: in 2000 there were 29 radio broadcasters and they are 41 in 2003; respectively cable TV grew from 47 to 55 operators, MDTV (MMDS) from 3 to 4 operators and TV from 21 to 27 broadcasters (3 national). The broadcast market in Lithuania has a peculiar entity called the Lithuanian National Radio and Television (LRT), which is meant to be the Public broadcaster. The LRT has radio and TV programs (2 and 2 in 2006). The LRT has a supreme regulating body, the LRT Council. Its 12 members are appointed by 3 bodies: President of the country (4), parliament (4), 1 is delegated by the Lithuanian science council, 1 – by the Lithuanian education council, 1 by the Lithuanian creative artists association, and 1 – by the Lithuanian bishops' (*sic!*) conference. The law does not foresee any right to recall a LRT Council member, in order to avoid that changes occur because of the electoral shifts in the aforementioned institutions' leadership. However, the LRT Council is rickety and during 14 years the LRT outlived as many as 13 general directors. Balčytienė says that an obvious intrusion of politicians into the work of LRT is confirmed by the fact that LRT managers leave their positions due to political reasons (Balčytienė, 2006, p. 83). However, in relation to the LRT organizational developments and introduction of the notion Public broadcaster, perhaps not only the pernicious role of the politicians is to be discussed. The commercial TVs and radios are in prickly competition with the LRT over audience and income. In late 2006 the Constitutional Court came forward with a Salomon's decision that commercial publicity is compatible with the Public Broadcast Television, since it assures the financial TV independence from the government (politicians) and provides equal market competition opportunities *vis-à-vis* commercial stations. Thus, it seems that the public finance (allocated by the politicians) and commercial income based Lithuanian Public TV will be free of charge for its viewers for a long time to come. Whether it is the best recipe to serve the public interest remains a rhetorical question.

The Lithuanian media is striving to function as a watchdog and a critical public eye and mostly so in its self-defensive interest. Meanwhile, understanding of the media powers as the fourth estate is mythologized, visibly exaggerated and enjoyed by it in an unreserved manner. The media is supposed to perform the substitute (for political class, for justice system, for intellectual analysis, etc.) role. As Gross states, the primary condition for such a substitution process to thrive is high media credibility (Gross, 2004, p. 120). This condition is met in Lithuania (although with decreasing preponderance). Vytautas Kavolis, a cultural anthropologist, put it plainly that extremely high trust in the TV broadcasted news does not mean that in post-communist Lithuania the TV screen with its ever changing content has become the most morally substantial part of the public life (Kavolis, 1997a, pp. 13–21). To Kavolis, these appearances are only temporary aberration, produced in the society with low interpersonal trust and long-term poor performance of other public institutions, which are supposed to function to the benefit of all the members of the society (army, police, banks, courts). Even though the public trust in the all-society serving institutions in post-communist Lithuania recovers little by little, still the spirituality of the trust (in

Church and mass media), detached from the fact-based measurement of institutional performance, persists, thus revealing the post-communist problematic healing and slow emergence of the full-fledged democratic rational public sphere and civic culture (where spirituality would not bypass sociality, Kavolis, 1997b, p. 23).

It had to happen some other political and civil value shaking events, to make public trust in mass media to decrease from high 60–65% (distrust 8-10%) to more common in democratic surroundings 45–50% (distrust 20%, see Figures 1 and 2,

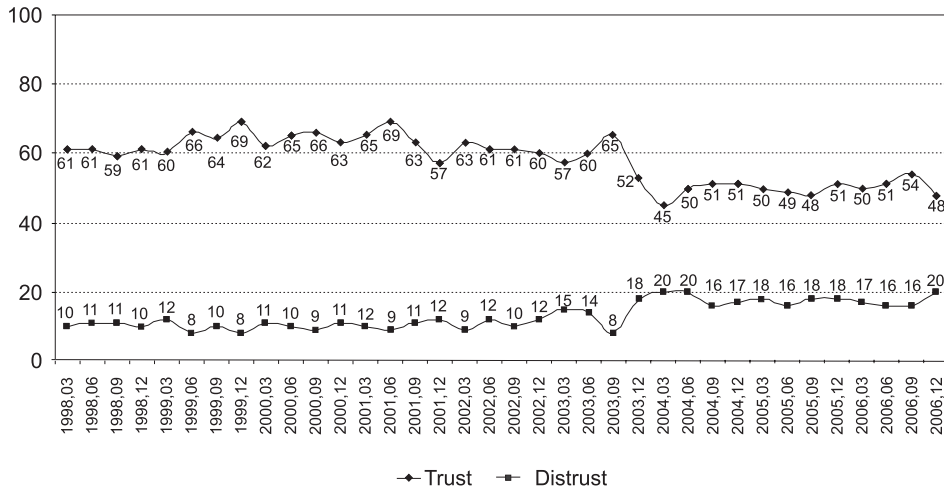


Fig. 1. Public trust in mass media in Lithuania, 1998–2006 (%)

Source: Public opinion research company Vilmarus

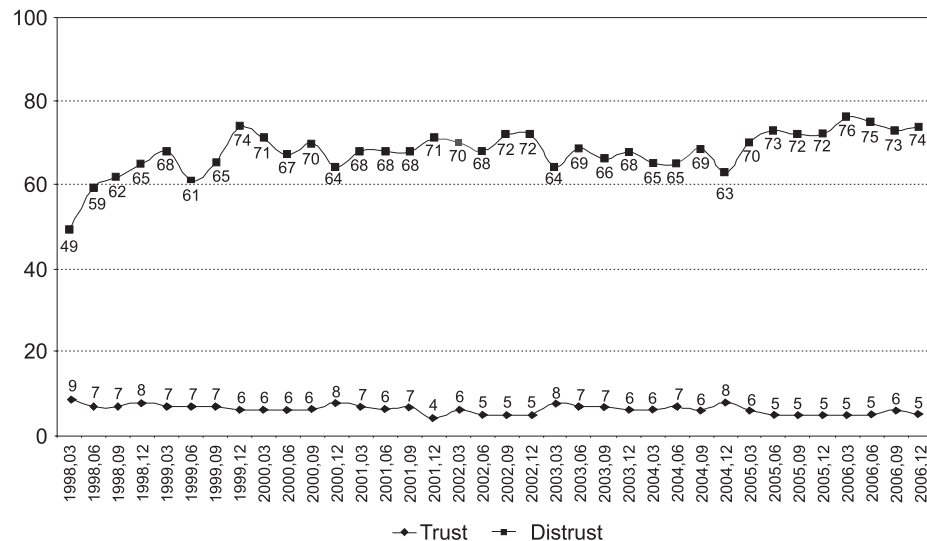


Fig. 2. Trust in political parties, 1998–2006 (%)

Source: Public opinion research company Vilmarus

and Table 2 for a comparison with a dramatically low public trust in various institutions in Lithuania). In Lithuania it occurred in late 2003 and early 2004 when President Paksas has been impeached because of his allegedly corrupt practices and illegal political campaign finances. In the presidential scandal the mass media played

Table 2. Trust in public institutions (N=1000, March 27–April 1, 2007), %

Institution	Trust	Distrust
Army	56.1	12.5
Banks	59.2	15.2
Church	55.3	13.3
Parties	4.9	73.4
Police	31.6	31.0
President	56.9	19.1
Municipalities	30.1	31.8
Parliament	9.5	64.6
Social security (Sodra)	71.4	6.5
Health system	43.8	28.1
Courts	19.3	26.1
Government	20.5	44.5
Mass-media	45.8	20.1
Education	55.4	8.6
Constitutional court	39.7	17.4
State audit (control)	29.3	19.9

Source: Public opinion research company Vilmorus

an amazingly controversial role. Majority of the dailies and TV stations uncritically allied themselves against President Paksas (they joined the accusing part of the established elite, widely criticized in the populist president statements). Meanwhile, numerous segments of the mass media displayed the strangest anti-Semitic, xenophobic and other attention distracting pieces of information. This dualistic mass media milking of a story for all its worth, where the journalists were taking sides along the lines of competing political elite and avoiding to produce any public good related analysis, finally led to relative disillusionment of the audience *vis-à-vis* the mass media (which yet is rather well trusted public institution in Lithuania).

However, apart from the fact that media credibility is a complex social phenomenon, difficult to measure and interpret (Schweiger, 2000), the media credibility is only a temporary and partial background for substitution function to be performed in a society by the media. As Gross writes, ‘substitute role suggests that the media are more powerful, more

independent, and more determined to pursue their own interests through a professional culture of their own making than is clearly the case [in post-communist Europe]’ (Gross, 2004, p. 120). Yet, as from the observations exposed above follows, still in post-communist Lithuania the journalism professional culture is in its nascent phase (if at all), and public actions and messages of the media are rather determined by leading media personalities, free market impulses and superficial political opportunities. Balčytienė claims that the Lithuanian mass media functions in favorable conditions where it can set the news agenda according to their own political and/or business interests (Balčytienė, 2006, p. 169). In a way, it is also to be argued that the success of mass media to self-portray positively and impose itself as a trustworthy authority is partially due to the structural barriers (absence of the sort of checks and balances) produced by the too early uncoupled (too loosely coupled?) political party – mass media parallelism.

Concerning the substitute (the fourth estate) role of the media in post-communist Europe, Gross continues its negative assessment: 'nor is there any indication that the media are purposefully taking on political functions, formerly performed by party and party-controlled media, such as political socialization' (Gross, 2004, p. 120). Indeed, analysts conclude that the Lithuanian mass media has not yet accepted the political/public socialization as its new function. Slavko Splichal contends that the ultimate function of mass media in any democratic environment is to contribute to the societal democratization (1994), i.e. motivating marginal and de-privileged groups and individuals to participate, to engage with the social matters, and to make their views reflected in media's discourse (Balčytienė, 2006, p. 149). The democratic media should have the definitive goal of openness, which in journalism means public empowerment (*ibid.*, p. 49). Meanwhile, the Lithuanian journalists are known for coining and firmly introducing into the public discourse the dichotomy of elite versus beets (*elitas versus runkeliai*), plainly favoring those speakers and interlocutors with established social (political and media) positions *vis-à-vis* those disadvantaged and/or aspiring to be heard and listened to.

Further, on the presumed substitute role of the mass media, Gross writes: 'the counter-power role is far removed from an adversarial role in the Western sense of the concept [...] Eastern European media's adversarial role is generally politically partisan rather than independent' (Gross, 2004, p. 120). Since the party-system in Lithuania is still a blurred reality, it is difficult to discern mass media-party parallelism lines. Yet, arguments in the post-communist Lithuanian mass media are clearly bounded to the (multiple economic and political) interests.

Finally, as Jean-François Revel points out, 'the media have no business claiming to be a counter-power in every situation. The very notion is absurd, for if things really happen in this way, and if the government in power invariably deserved to be opposed, it would be sufficient reason to despair of democracy, for it would mean that a democratically elected government is always mistaken, and therefore that the people electing it are afflicted with a congenial, incurable idiocy' (Revel, 1991, p. 237). The above described President Paksas impeachment was the closest Lithuanian approximation of such a mass media led counter-power action. Yet, in the Lithuanian multi-party semi-presidential system of 2003–2004 it did not produce any clear-cut bi-polar disorder in the media model, but rather contributed to the ever-confused media mingle (we borrow the term of bi-polar disorder from Luke-tić' article (2001) where she analyses the Croatian media case after departure of Tudjman).

In terms of quality of democracy, the media (some wittingly and others unwittingly) play less than salutary roles in the political, socio-cultural, and commercial realms by contributing to confusion, a sense of uncertainty, and misunderstanding of what democracy is and what a market economy is given their tendentious, politicized reporting/analysis. And the media un-professionalism is counterproductive to helping establish new cultures of tolerance, trust, and respect for facts (Gross,

2004, p. 121). Civil society's growth appears to be provoked by the mass media as a self-defensive reaction of the latent civic-immunity system. This is not a 'normal' civil society evolution under the conditions of democratization. This beneficial side-effect is also comparable to the reinvigorated party-system crystallization process, spurred by the political populist rhetoric.

CONCLUSIONS

Political parallelism is an extension of the earlier term party-press parallelism, and refers to the extent to which the structures and affiliations of media parallel political orientations and affiliations. In other words, for Hallin and Mancini (2004), to study political parallelism means to identify to what degree each media system mirrors the political climate of the country. That is a difficult and complicated task, since the very terms 'mirror' and 'political climate' are problematic to approach operationally.

Yet, if to proceed with formal references and indicators and to study media and politics of the same (comparable) level, i.e. on one side, the national dailies, TV channels and radio stations and, on the other side, the presidential-parliamentary politics, the discrepancy of the two is hugely manifest. The mass media selects, creates and kills political personages, and it avoids telling the 'true every-day story'. Historically, in the interwar years in Lithuania, the tendentious reporting was an authoritarian contingency of the nascent Nation-state. However, in 1920s and 1930s the nationalist-conservative bias in the Lithuanian media was partially remedied by the small (underground) circulation of other mass-media outlets. Low readership tradition and a rather limited social role of the mass-media in the first half of the 20th century turned the Lithuanian inter-war press and radio into good disciples and partners of the political elite (and counter-elites). In the early Soviet times, mass media was an unbending communist party loud-speaker, which did not produce any independent content. In late Soviet times, the mass-media became a better-groomed, but still an efficient instrument of the political 'mature socialism' propaganda. Yet, in the turning years of 1980s the mass media personnel emerged as a sub-elite of the Soviet power elite and with its professional ethics and loyalties started to distance itself from the Communist party apparatus. The most significant publications of the historical truth and decidedly mass media critical assessment of the political state of affairs in late 1980, brought the new era in the East-Central Europe. The revolutionary role of the then mass media is undeniable. Also, the revolutionary years (1988–1992) are to be qualified as those when the media closely mirrored the political climate in place. In the revolutionary post-communist period, mass mobilization (and readership) exploded, so did the appeal of the various mass media outlets and political entrepreneurs. Yet, all these entities have been poorly structured. The mass media frankly conveyed the bewildering array of socio-political and cultural choices. However, the mass media soon embarked upon the liberal (mostly understood, as commercial) model of development.

The (universal) contemporary mass society phenomenon, coupled with the (regional) ill-structured of the post-communist political field and (local) specific traditions of the Lithuanian political culture an public sphere, gave birth to the peculiar absence of the mass media and politics parallelism in the country. The political parties do not provide appropriate lenses to better understanding of the late post-communist political landscape in Lithuania. The mass media in such unclear waters is fishing its commercially based (interest group defined) profit. In the conditions of the relative absence of foreign ownership of the mass media outlets in Lithuania (striking in the context of the 'colonized' by the foreign owners press and TV in other countries of the post-communist region), the local media barons of the Lithuanian mass media are able to produce and impose their own public-agenda, which still hampers development of the civic-minded public sphere and definition of the social and professional responsibilities of the journalism as a profession and as a social category.

In a strikingly remote from rational analysis manner, if the clash of media promoted and political elite supported ideas and principles occurs, the Lithuanian journalism comfortably portrays the politicians as the main threat to the freedom of speech, and thus provokes the desirable shift in the public opinion, favorable to the mass media defended positions, and such action is mostly based on the successful media manipulation of fears and post-traumatic social memories, (latently) present in the society, recovering after years of censorship and parochial interpretation of politics. The Lithuanian mass media and government relations are defined along the lines of the zero-sum game: they seek to control each other, and at the same time try to avoid being controlled by the other, while any other pattern of inter-relations does not appear as viable and appropriate. The media industry is skeptical about the whole government media policy and intolerant to discussions about its own role. The result is that the post-communist Lithuanian press freedom is distorted by those aggressively seeking to dominate the public sphere, without contributing to its pluralism and public-mindedness or legibility through the political (parliamentary) party lines.

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