

Chapter 3

Lithuania

Media-politics interaction shaped by benefits-oriented reasoning

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Abstract

This chapter discusses how media and political information sources navigate change and adjust their needs-oriented behaviour to changing conditions. The results presented are based on 20 qualitative interviews with leading political journalists as well as government advisors and spokespersons in Lithuania. Although media and political sources gain power in different situations, both sides function in reciprocal interconnectedness. Formal contacts are quite consistent and professionalised, but they continue to work in the shadow of informal social networks, which create their own power relationships, dynamics and hierarchical structures. Though the findings are contextually fashioned, the views regarding the interaction indicate broader trends of communication professionalisation identified also in other cultures and political conditions.

Keywords: political journalism, government relations, political culture, democratisation, professionalisation, Lithuania

Introduction

By looking at Lithuania, which is one of the smallest countries in the European Union, this chapter aims to shed light on the ways in which politics and media interact in times of uncertainty and reformation on both sides.

There is an extensive literature examining the relationships between media and the political world (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Curran & Seaton, 2003; Downey & Stanyer, 2010; Gross, 2002) and the growing impact of media on politics (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Pfetsch, 2014). The number of studies has skyrocketed in recent years, not least within the framework of mediatisation research. However, what is missing in these analyses is an examination of how the relationship between the two sides is formed and exchanges are orchestrated, and how the interaction between the actors involved in political communication and news making is sustained. Such a view, although there are a few notable exceptions (Pfetsch, 2014), has been largely ignored in the recent studies of media domination and influence.

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In this analysis, we argue that such an approach is crucial, and that the interaction between the wants, needs, goals and methods applied by the two groups – namely, political journalists and their informants – is a process that is vital to explore in its own right.

We approach this objective by considering a number of presumptions. Some are based on the results from previous analyses, most of which follow the perspective of institutionalisation and proclaim the notion of a self-governing (i.e. autonomous) logic within each of the two institutions (see, for example, Hjarvard, 2008). As implied in these studies, both sides in the media-politics relationship rely on routines and habits implicit in this particular field and occupation. Other studies, especially those centred on younger European democracies in southern and eastern Europe, suggest that the two systems function in a very close and parallel dependency. Often, these studies discuss the struggles between political elites who engage media in promoting allies or discrediting opponents (Bajomi-Lázár, 2017; Gross, 2002, 2013; Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008; Sparks, 2012).

In our study, we follow an integrated approach that combines both lines of thinking and also stresses that societal relationships are culturally shaped. Since the whole region of central and eastern Europe (CEE) appears to be moved by various ongoing transformations, tensions and instabilities (Balčytienė, 2015a, 2015b), the broader context is of exceptional significance for our examination of the Lithuanian case.

All thoughts outlined above may be summed up as a concern about the social logic of the media-political leader interaction, and this concern may be decomposed into a number of research questions: How is communication formed and how is power negotiated between the two groups? Whose logics, i.e. whose needs and role-regulated performance and objectives, drive the interaction and the social dynamics between politics and the media? How close is the relationship between the two sides – in other words, is informality inevitable in this interaction? Finally, what can be learned from the Lithuanian experience?

Central and eastern Europe and the atmosphere of change

Though the Lithuanian case is an interesting illustration in its own right, we will start our analysis by sketching a broader depiction of the factors that shape societal change in the CEE region.

The exceptionality of the CEE post-socialist democracies rests in the fact that the building of democracy went hand in hand with constructing capitalism and democratic media systems. Though liberation was intense and at the same time gradual, not all countries succeeded in making systemic changeovers worthy of the democratic name. To be sustained in a longer perspective, newly reformed democratic institutions require a democratic culture (Bajomi-Lázár, 2008; Gross, 2002; Lašas, 2015), and this, it appears, cannot be imported or just added on top of the previous

culture (Balčytienė, 2015b). Instead, a democratic political culture has to grow and mature steadily from within, i.e. through information flows, focused manoeuvres and attentive interactions among politicians, policymakers, citizens, organised interest groups and the media.

In all CEE countries, democratic models were applied in a fairly short and intense period of liberalisation and reorganisation (Balčytienė, 2015a). Many of the structures were applied in an obscure and hurried manner without gradual and full assimilation (Balčytienė, 2013; Rupnik & Zielonka, 2013). Hence, even at present, they appear to be functioning only partially or in an informal and, indeed, obscure way. Though informality, as such, is not illegal or specifically undemocratic, in the CEE countries it is shaped by neo-liberalist reasoning and market radicalism (Greskovits, 2015), weak institutional structures and the absence of accountable and formalised practice (Ekiert & Ziblatt, 2013), regulatory holes and legal inconsistencies (Krygier, 2015). In addition to this, supporting factors such as a resilient civil society, determined professional associations and high journalistic standards are missing.

All these flaws create additional “windows of opportunity” for private interests and benefits-oriented reasoning, leading to clientelist arrangements between different power holders within politics, media and business. A consequence is the maintenance of the non-transparent and dubious behaviours that are discussed in this chapter on Lithuania.

Lithuania: Politics, media and public life

Lithuania is a consolidated representative democracy that is shaped by both internal and external influences. Among the conditions that today affect the country are the effects of the global economic crisis, negative effects of emigration, the presence of political corruption and the existence of a “grey zones” economy. These factors have a direct impact on institutional structures, within politics as well as within the media.

Lithuania is a semi-presidential republic. In this model, the rules of the game may be applied somewhat flexibly, i.e. with regard to the particular political situation at hand. Hence, attention should be paid to the peculiarities of the Lithuanian political culture and the way it affects institutional performance as well as the state of democracy.¹ In contrast to a pure parliamentary system, the Lithuanian parliament does not exercise exclusive power over the passage of bills and the durability of the government.

The Lithuanian political culture has its own peculiarities. Historically, there is a clear orientation towards family, apolitical individualism and national patriotism (Norkus, 2011). It is also very personalised, which, correspondingly, affects the political character of parties: political life is centred around strong personalities and individuals whose political ambitions are linked with individual interests. The degree to which Lithuanian politics is personality centred may also explain the large number of polarised and divided parties, and decision-making appears to be determined by oppositional clashes, rivalry and confrontation between different elites (Navickas, 2017).

Table 3.1 The political system and the media system in Lithuania

Characteristics	Lithuania
Political system	Unitary state with semi-presidentialism
Electoral system	Mixed electoral system: The unicameral parliament of Lithuania is composed of 141 members (71 deputies are chosen in single-seat constituencies and the remaining 70 MPs are elected on a proportional basis).
Party system (2016–2020)	Highly fragmented (10 political parties in parliament)
Turnout (national elections)	Parliamentary elections: around 50 per cent*
Government (2012–2016)	Coalition (Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, the Labour Party, the Order and Justice Party and the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania)
Government (2016–2020)	Coalition (Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union and Lithuanian Social Democratic Party)
Public service broadcasting share of time in viewing	Low (10 per cent). The two commercial competitors, TV3 and LNK, have shares of about 15 per cent.**
Daily use of media	77 per cent watch TV on a TV set, 44 per cent listen to the radio, 18 per cent read written press, 61 per cent use the Internet and 47 per cent use social networks every day.***

* This figure is valid with regard to the last parliamentary elections (2016) as well as the last presidential election (2014).

** TNS, 2017.

*** Standard Eurobarometer 88, Autumn 2017.

Despite the fact that the party system in Lithuania was considered to be consolidated already in the mid-1990s (Novagrockienė, 2001), political identification in the country has taken place only in theory, not in reality. As a matter of fact, most of the political parties have emerged as subprojects within the reform movement *Sąjūdis*, which acted as a political power and mobilised the nation between 1988 and 1992. Hence, the parties were born in a very short period of time and without solid ideological backing or policy coherence, which further caused interpretations of political life as a fierce political battle.

While ideological and populist clashes are a reality in many contemporary democracies, the distinctiveness of the Lithuanian case lies in the character and specificity of political linkages and negotiations. In Lithuania, these are shaped by the political winner “taking all” to meet popular (and quite often also personal) interests and goals. This exceptionality is an outcome not only of certain features of multi-party politics, but also of the setting. In Lithuania, as in other CEE countries, transformations have taken place in an economically weak environment (Balčytienė et al., 2015; Štetka, 2012) and attempts to politically control economic capital (and, vice versa, control politics by capital) are still obvious. This type of thinking shapes the daily practices of elites and contributes to a gradual politicisation and oligarchisation of state and society, evidenced not least by the instrumentalisation and colonisation of media.

The political change in Lithuania has not only brought the growing influence of market-oriented thinking, it has also revealed some enduring flaws in the country’s political life. The conflictive political culture combined with profitable economic

interest and, simultaneously, the dominant spirit of marketisation produced specific conditions in which parties, instead of gradually diversifying according to ideological lines, eventually turned out to be rather similar. Indeed, while it appears to be possible, from both their names and election argumentation, to place them along a traditional left-to-right scale, the actual post-election practices of the parties show that this is incorrect. The situation at hand is one of the reasons why public opinion has lost trust in the party system.

Because of these factors – politicisation combined with oligarchisation and marketisation – Lithuania represents a novel type of party politics. Although political responsiveness once occurred through bottom-up participation (predominantly in the early 1990s), the parties in today's Lithuania are professional campaign organisations that are dependent on money rather than popular support.

In summary, we suggest that multiple factors need to be considered in order to understand the exceptionalities of the relationship between the media and politics in Lithuania. The timing of the transformations is one such factor, with others including the peculiarities of the Lithuanian political culture and the economic conditions.

In the following sections, an analysis of 20 qualitative interviews with leading political news journalists and government spokespersons and press advisors sheds further light on the Lithuanian case.

Political communication and news management: An empirical insight

In a context that is still heavily influenced by many large transformations, interviews with central actors may provide us with a picture that is not solid. With regard to news making in Lithuania, our empirical study shows that it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw a succinct and summary representation of the political-media relationship.

Given the high fragmentation and hybridisation of modern communications (Chadwick, 2013) and the existence of intense political divergence and polarisation (Davis & Dunaway, 2016; Mancini, 2013), journalistic performance will almost certainly become mixed. Hence, methods of news making and access to political information – and journalists' relationships with political news sources – will be highly varied and difficult to dress according to a single model.

Before going deeper into the accounts given by the Lithuanian journalists and their sources, it should be pointed out that our media respondents, generally, belong to the elite of the profession. Since all of them are mid-career professionals, with either journalistic or editorial experience, they all have extensive networks with different sources. In fact, quite a few of our interviewees might be considered brands of political commentary in Lithuania.

Key questions are how the actual interaction between the two groups is sustained and whether there are specific situations where the overall balance of power is shifted.

In essence, whose logic – that of news journalism and the media in general or that of public bureaucracies and political information sources – initiates and directs the interaction? And to what extent are the observed practices maintained and driven by a trend of mediatisation? Is it with regard to the case at hand more appropriate to see them as a result of political influence and politicisation?

From common goals to separation of the roles

Broadly speaking, our respondents tended to discuss two kinds of changes in the overall relationship: changes linked with increased professionalisation and changes associated with larger societal transformations (e.g., “economisation” and “marketisation” of society and culture). Whereas professional values and norms are remarkably enduring (and most likely stem from the national Lithuanian context), the developments related to technology and commercial imperatives are part of a global trend.

During the interviews, both the journalists and the political sources agreed that media and politics were closer to each other at the beginning of the 1990s than they are now. The interviewees frequently referred to historical reasons and described the relationship between journalists and politicians as no longer being characterised as “fighting for the common goals”. Thus, in the eyes of our interviewees, the present situation is different from the situation of the early 1990s, when both sides thought that it was necessary to communicate new values and goals for the independent state. At that time, it was common for both journalists and politicians to participate in informal clubs or private parties. As one political reporter described it:

Right after the independence, the media had to redefine itself. It had to change. The same applies to the politicians. All of them [journalists and politicians] were friends. All of them were “pro-Lithuania” [...] Politicians were visiting the house of my parents, who were also journalists. They were all striving for the same goal. And the media at that time was not critical, around 1990-1991. Later on, it began: politics, scandals, intrigues. (Lithuanian journalist 1)

Another journalist pointed out that the media landscape today, in comparison to the one 20-30 years ago, is much more scattered and complex:

Back then there were fewer media channels and fewer journalists with whom politicians could communicate. There were maybe a dozen people who saw each other all the time, so the relation was easier to build. In my opinion, the behaviour has changed, especially among politicians. The communication used to be simpler, more familiar. Now it is more Western, more European, and the distance grows [...] It is not the same generation that spent days in the same building [the parliament], journalists and politicians together re-establishing independence. (Lithuanian journalist 2)

According to the interviewed journalists, politicians have become more cautious and less confiding, partly because the media is more critical, and it is difficult to predict what would trigger a scandal, and partly because new technologies mean that every step is documented and on the record and can go viral. The journalists see this growing distinction between journalism and politics as a democratic advantage and a prerequisite for a more professionalised relationship:

Some of today's scandals would not have happened several years ago – they would have been “solved” thanks to personal contacts between journalists and politicians. Today, there are too many journalists, and someone would report on it anyway. (Lithuanian journalist 2)

As in some other countries presented in this book, Lithuanian interviewees pointed out that the distance between journalists and politicians has also grown physically. A decade ago, due to the safety concerns and pressures from political communicators, access was restricted to some parts of the parliament building, government buildings and the president's office. Earlier, journalists had been able to walk freely in the building and knock on basically any door – be it the office of the minister or a public servant. Direct access allowed direct interaction.

Nowadays, due to the time pressures in their newsrooms, journalists rely on phone calls and emails rather than time-consuming, face-to-face interaction, on-location reporting and long talks with background sources. One senior Lithuanian journalist said:

Internet news media attracts a large audience in Lithuania. Its appearance contributed to a rapid increase in the pace and demand for “fresh” news. One of the risks is that journalists, pressed to deliver a large number of headlines for the online media over a short period of time, will be more likely to copy-paste the information prepared by the PR departments. (Lithuanian journalist 3)

Generally, journalists prefer to receive written information, not least due to the time constraints and the possibility of reusing it, as stated by one of the press advisors:

I sometimes call and introduce a subject for a particular Internet news portal. “Please send it in written form,” they answer. Even the radio – I call and invite them to some event, but they want to get just a written, ready-to-use press release. (Lithuanian press advisor 7)

Interestingly enough, the interviewed political sources pointed out the lack of “serious” media and in-depth reporting even more often than the journalists did. Increasing requests to produce more news in less time weakens journalism. Press advisors often complain that press releases are published without calling, checking up or getting the details straight. A chief of communication from one of the ministries commented:

Journalists come to the president's press conference without preparing a single question. It is advantageous for the source but only in the short term. In the long term, it is a threat to democracy. (Lithuanian press advisor 1)

The press advisors also noted that news based on sentences made quickly and in passing – “somewhere in the corridor” – influenced the relationships between the media and the politicians. This leads to a tendency to focus on small scandals that tend to die out the day after rather than on larger political issues. As summarised by one high-ranking politician:

Due to the IT development, everything is happening so fast in the world, life and the media. Communication is fast. Messages are short, and the journalists appreciate messages that are short. It is difficult to present issues that are more complex, and for journalists to grasp them. I miss the willingness from the media, and thus the public, to understand larger, systematic issues and to hold the audience’s attention for a longer time. (Lithuanian politician 1)

According to the press advisors, many politicians adhere to and follow these rules and, in an attempt to appear friendly, agree to provide quick comments or participate in infotainment shows. The tendency of politicians to adhere to the infotainment formula was lamented by one political advisor:

If a member of the parliament goes on a silly TV show and answers the weirdest questions, can they still be perceived as an authority? (Lithuanian press advisor 2)

In this sense, the media holds power over the politicians:

Sometimes politicians want to seem important or are lacking attention. They then come up with some trivial idea and pass it on to the journalists, who write about it. And the journalists do not feel responsibility for writing nonsense [...] (Lithuanian press advisor 2)

The above quotes suggest a number of changes between the two groups of actors. Among the most obvious is the objective “distanciation” between them. “Fighting for common goals” belongs to the past, whereas “scrutinising each other” appears to be a trend of the current practice.

As specified by various respondents, the significance of the media, generally, has increased. There are more titles and more channels, and the landscape has become more fragmented and scattered. With the increase of information channels, competition has increased, and the need to produce more in a shorter period of time has become a burden for the media. In fact, commercialism and marketisation appear to be strong tendencies affecting the functioning of *both* fields – politics and media.

Government communication: “It depends on a person”

Professionalised political communication can be understood as purposeful and strategic communication for a political purpose. The Lithuanian government began to establish communication departments at the end of the 1990s, but the structure and responsibili-

ties entrusted to those departments depended on the minister. Currently, all ministries have communication departments, and the ministers have communication advisors.

All but one of the interviewed press advisors in Lithuania started their careers as professional journalists. They were not members of political parties and many of them have worked for several ministers from different political parties. In line with this, the task for Lithuanian press advisors is to communicate and frame messages in a way that fits the particular political party or politician; they themselves do not have to support or stand behind the messages. As told by a senior press advisor, who served several of the highest politicians in the country:

You have to narrow your political views according to where you work. I either work for a politician and follow his agenda – or I quit. (Lithuanian press advisor 2)

The functions allocated to press advisors and communication departments are very person-dependent, meaning that different ministers organise the work of their communication departments differently. According to the interviewees who had worked for several decades in the field, attempts to centralise (or decentralise) the government's communication efforts depend on the preferences of the specific government and its constellation. During the period of our research (2014-2016), the government's communication was decentralised. This meant that each ministry could make its own decisions regarding communication, and coordination with the prime minister's office was not strong. As explained by the prime minister's press advisor:

Everything is decentralised, and the ministries make their own decisions regarding communication. If something very important happens, I would talk to the press department of that particular ministry and we would discuss what they will communicate and what will come from us [the government]. But if they want [to communicate something], they do not ask us. (Lithuanian press advisor 3)

The coordination of government communication can be organised for specific issues, such as, for example, the refugee crisis, where several ministries coordinated their communication on a regular basis in order to provide a common message for the public. However, in general, the lack of coordination is the biggest shortcoming in the government's communication. As stated by one of the press advisors:

I do not miss the supervision from the government, but I think that there is too little coordination. There are topics where communication should be more unanimous and less fragmented. There are issues where several ministries work together, but communicate differently [...] (Lithuanian press advisor 4)

Indeed, much of the government's communication works on an ad hoc basis. There are few written strategies or documents that are actually used when planning government communication, and the ones that exist are treated more as a formality. All press advisors referred to constant change and were doubtful whether more long-term planning would even be possible:

The minister does not have such a thing as a separate communication strategy. We have annual plans, although nobody but us cares about them. Our work is operational. It is a shame, but that is the situation. (Lithuanian press advisor 1)

An important factor when professionalising communication is whether the manager (in this case, the political executive) is willing to hand over the responsibility for communication to the communication specialists, and whether these specialists are included already on the strategic decision-making level. In other words, the question is whether communication professionals are taking part in the strategic planning or if they are trusted only with the “technical” tasks. The interviews with the press advisors illustrate how the politicians in Lithuania, especially in tense situations, do not work hand in hand with their communication staff, but tend to act independently, and their staff are left with a secondary, reactive role:

And at the end of the day, he [the prime minister] would be personally taking care of communication, which was often hard to predict. He would trust only himself, and the result would be that he knows best what the PR should be and what should be said and when. In most of the cases he was right, but on the other hand, because he took on this hard responsibility, everyone in Lithuania started seeing him as a symbol for the difficulties of the financial crisis. (Lithuanian press advisor 5)

Politicians’ temptation to answer media inquiries personally, without consulting the communication department, was brought up even by a public official representing another government:

The prime minister might pick up the phone and answer the journalists’ questions. It would be better if he did not do so. PR is a system. This does not mean dissociating from the media, but following the rules is important. All the questions should reach you via the press advisor, and the press advisor should relieve the executive from some of the questions, problems and workload and handle the criticism. (Lithuanian press advisor 2)

This proves that the press advisors working for the Lithuanian government are still in the process of legitimising their profession in the eyes of both their organisations and the journalists. The interviewed press advisors admitted that most of their tasks consist of answering media inquiries, preparing press releases and organising events. As explained by one press advisor:

I have to admit that the minister manages the biggest part of the information. My main tasks are to know what we are doing, what we have done, what the new initiatives are, events, what we communicate today and why, to coordinate, to find the details for the media, etc. A lot of technical work, like inviting the journalists. (Lithuanian press advisor 4)

The press advisors even mentioned some elements of tactics and advisory roles in everyday work, like prioritising certain media or topics:

I need to screen the media. There is gutter press, which is not advantageous to the minister. In those cases, we suggest that the deputy minister, some advisor or even I answer their inquiries. The most important thing is to discuss how much information we can reveal and what information would be received negatively. Maybe some news should wait or be presented differently. (Lithuanian press advisor 4)

Long-term, strategically oriented work was seldom mentioned. However, some of the press advisors often viewed their broader functions, such as that of influencing and working off the record, as a way for journalists to make sense of certain situations. One of the press chiefs explained:

We really communicate with journalists a lot. I talk to the editors, one of my colleagues to the reporters, another colleague with radio journalists [...] We all have journalists as “friends” on social media. We chat with them and try to explain quickly, or we just talk. (Lithuanian press advisor 6)

Even though journalists think that it is important to maintain a good relationship with press advisors, only a few of the advisors were perceived as useful sources. In many cases, journalists see the press advisors as coordinators and an unnecessary link to the politicians. Many journalists expressed that it is the beginners who call press advisors. If an experienced reporter calls a press advisor, it is for smaller, factual inquiries, for example statistical data.

The above examples suggest that political communication in Lithuania is not fully professionalised, but only semi-professionalised. Overall, there is an obvious absence of structurally coordinated communication between different governmental bodies. Communication departments at different ministries are preoccupied with technical and managerial tasks rather than strategic roles. Personal authority and personality characteristics still play a central role regarding communication.

It would be too soon to conclude that this means that media leads the tango. However, always in a rush and hungry for sensational stories, the media can easily become a tool to mediatise small, internal political fights and thus provide an image of uncoordinated, inconsistent government communication. This, we know, is an effective way to distract attention from more important political coverage.

“I can call the prime minister directly, and he can call me”

The Lithuanian journalists described access to the politicians as very good; only the ministers and other very high politicians are contacted through the press advisor (and even with regard to these, there are some exceptions). Thus, having direct contact with the political leaders is still considered a common practice (but, of course, among journalists with relevant experience and know-how). Some senior journalists even said they would call directly the mobile of the prime minister or “drop by” the prime minister’s office – or that the prime minister would call them. As one of the journalists said:

You know, when I do not have a theme, I invite the prime minister. The higher the position the person occupies, the easier it is to invite them to the news hour. The prime minister is the one who can easily redistribute work and postpone things. My colleagues laugh at me, but I've been doing this for 10 years. If you do not have a theme at 1 pm, call the prime minister. (Lithuanian journalist 5)

In Lithuania, the politicians seem to accept the situation. For example, one of the most popular and highest political executives in Lithuania was described in this way by an interviewed press advisor:

It is [this person's] strength – trying to find time for everybody and be open. [This person] was the same way even before becoming a politician. Therefore, the media loves [this person]. Not only due to expert skills, but also due to human skills – answering the phone and calling the journalists back. [This person] even has the journalists' phone numbers saved. (Lithuanian press advisor 4)

“Journalism by the phone” plays a significant part in the daily routines in the newsrooms. Contacting their sources on the telephone or via email rather than being “on the spot” is normal to most journalists, and the trend is the same in many countries (Davis, 2010). Lithuanian journalists confirm this picture – there are fewer journalists walking in the corridors of parliament and chatting with sources in search of potential news. While the journalists still try to visit parliament a few days a week, attend press conferences or participate in informal meetings with potential sources, they note that these types of contact were more frequent before:

I noticed that it is the editors-in-chief who walk around and drink coffee with the potential sources, and also some of the print journalists. Most likely they get something out of it [...] but we do not have the time. If we meet for a coffee, we need to know that we will have something to write about. We do not have time for this kind of source work. (Lithuanian journalist 1)

On the other hand, some sources are more open when talking on the phone, one of our interviewees noted (Lithuanian journalist 8). Political news quite easily becomes a tool in political battles, and some sources may therefore prefer not to be visible to others. Having these kinds of sources, obviously, requires an already established relationship. Therefore, the journalists emphasised the importance of building a network of “own” informants, i.e. sources who have known the journalist for a long time and with whom the relationship is built on mutual trust and cooperation.

Social media is increasingly used by both journalists and politicians, even though levels of activity and engagement vary from person to person. Few of the interviewed press advisors could name specific strategies or target audiences for the social media profiles of the politicians whom they represented. Those who could do so said that politicians' social media profiles are supposed to show their “more human” and playful side for the vaguely defined audience – from journalists and colleagues to the elec-

torate. According to our interviewees, this kind of communication produces mainly one-way conversations where dialogue is largely absent.

When it comes to the journalists, some of them used their social media profile mainly as observers. This meant that they followed politicians on social media primarily to find opinions and views that are better formulated and more exact than those that can be found in traditional news stories. In this way, the opinions and views that politicians express in social media, especially scandalous statements, become the news in the traditional media, and vice versa.

Other journalists are much more active. Their social media profiles are a part of their personal brand and a platform to steer the public discussion. The news or opinions posted by these journalists often become a part of the broader political and traditional media agenda:

Some journalists who used to be known just as TV or web journalists are today active on social media, and they are more daring. The opinions can be strict, negative and rough, and it seems that the public likes it [...] We react to these opinions. [...] We analyse the situation outside the social network and then we write an official press release. This way, we raise the discussion to a more formal level, but it also becomes more visible. (Lithuanian press advisor 8)

Can informal talks be professionalised?

Relations between journalists and sources may be quite standard, so-called “conventional practices”, where journalists ask for information and receive it. Yet there are cases where political interests try to actively promote some specific issues, and in these cases, the news often comes from the political side. Basically, there are two ways of “feeding” the media with news: either all journalists are approached or a select journalist is contacted. In the latter case, an obvious expectation is that this approach will result in a more advantageous coverage from the source’s perspective.

Just like in some of the other countries discussed in this book, Lithuanian journalists reported that informal contacts are a necessity and an asset in their professional work – in this way, they are not only able to get information faster, they also get more exclusive information. One of the reporters put it like this:

You will know nothing if you do not have friends. [Through friends] you will be the first to know, and you will know more. You get important topics. You can dig deeper or at least are able to avoid saying nonsense, which is otherwise easy to do if you only rely on the official information. (Lithuanian journalist 6)

The range of the informal relationships varied from “professional friendships” to, in some cases, “personal friendships”. There are several reasons as to why journalists found the informal sources to be especially important.

First of all, background talks with lower-ranking public officers help the journalists when they report on different policy areas. Even with long experience within the field, it is not possible to know all the details without actually “being in the system”. As one journalist said:

For example, the energy policy is very complex and sometimes not very interesting for journalists. It requires intellectual investment; hence, there are only a few experts and in the media we see only a facade of the theme. But, of course, all the corruption and evil hide in the details [...] You have to know people who worked or advised there previously, and can pass on some sort of contact who is willing to share that information. If you try going according to the vertical logic and subordination in the system, you will get nothing [...] You have to look for another way. (Lithuanian journalist 5)

Secondly, informal sources are essential for finding exclusive news. In this case, the print media reporters were the ones who were most dependent on exclusive information, not least since they find themselves in a tough competition with the “faster” online news media, news agencies and broadcast journalists. Informal sources were perceived as particularly important when it comes to issues such as hiring/firing, government formation, putting together the lists for the elections, and party leader elections.

However, both sides have an interest in having informal access to the other side. In the eyes of the press advisors, one of the most important advantages with informal sources was linked to opinion formation and the setting of the agenda:

You can control what journalists know regarding the issues. When a situation occurs, they will write what they have known from before. That is why it is important that the message reaches them. (Lithuanian press advisor 1)

Indeed, in order to influence the agenda, the political sources can themselves initiate informal conversations, and since the practice is a part of the “strategic communication toolbox”, it can well be referred to as a form of “formalised informality”.

Another reason for informal meetings is to make sure that journalists interpret situations correctly. One of the press advisors put it this way:

We invite the journalists to off-the-record conversations with [one of the political leaders] when there are processes that cannot be explained in front of the camera [...] We do so in order to avoid incorrect interpretations. (Lithuanian press advisor 6)

The interviewees emphasised that informal contacts require a long-term engagement and a balancing between professional and “friendly” roles. Thus, the cooperation is based on expectations from both sides.

Moreover, attempts to maintain informal access to key sources occasionally result in compromises and ethical dilemmas, not least from the journalists’ perspective:

It happened, and more than once, that I considered the source's wish that I should not write [about a topic]. If you receive information, if you are the first, the only one who received it, you cannot "go on the attack" full-speed. (Lithuanian journalist 6)

In addition to this, in order to protect a source, some of the journalists said they might suggest not quoting the source (even if the source him- or herself had previously agreed to be quoted) (Lithuanian journalist 1). Yet another advantage from the sources' perspective is that journalists may choose not to report in cases where the source says something coarsely or scandalous by mistake (i.e. if a mistake would place the source in a ridiculous, comic situation and the issue itself is not very high on the agenda) (Lithuanian journalist 2). Consequently, the professional role boundaries are more blurred in informal situations than in formal ones.

The following excerpt illustrates how the journalists can be used as informants for the politicians and their advisors:

The close relationship is important, so we may ask the journalists for their opinion. We often ask how they evaluate certain events. To know the insider opinion from the media is both interesting and important. We ask, and they answer. (Lithuanian press advisor 6)

This leads to a situation where some journalists become not only watchdogs, but also actors in the political arena. Some journalists' willingness to show their loyalty to the source even surprises one of the press advisors:

Once a journalist called and mentioned that another media outlet was interested in some specific topic. We had time to prepare for it. And it was true – a few days later I received a phone call from that media outlet! So the journalist did not work on this topic but warned us [...] I agree that journalists try to gain our confidence, but it should not be so. (Lithuanian press advisor 4)

At the same time, both parties tend to maintain a certain "coldness", at least as reported in our interviews. The journalists emphasised that willingness to maintain access to the source should not influence their reporting, and the press advisors expressed that they should always be careful and selective when talking to the media. Consequently, both parties agreed that the provision of inside information should not protect a source from critical treatment in the media. One of the press advisors indicated that first and foremost it is the tone that changes with informal relations:

The minister meets some journalists, they shake hands and have a friendly, everyday catch-up talk, and one can see that they are friends. But in the programme, the tough question will still be asked, but maybe in a nicer tone. (Lithuanian press advisor 1)

To summarise, informal relationships between journalists and their political sources are an important part of Lithuania's political communication culture, and both sides are aware of the advantages and disadvantages of these relationships. Politicians and their press advisors perceive that being able to pass on information informally can

benefit their political goals, and therefore they try to feed the media with attractive, specially tailored news bites for select journalists. This serves two purposes: on the one hand, it helps the political side to set the agenda; on the other hand, it helps to maintain and build the trust that is necessary for future cooperation.

From professional logic to brand logic

In general, the interviewed journalists are driven by professional ideals. They are professionally determined and highly ambitious, as revealed in the following sequence:

Journalist: If I see a systemic problem, I talk to [my sources] as another human, not as a journalist: “Look, this should be changed,” I say [...] I try to make it so that what in my opinion is wrong reaches those who make decisions.

Interviewer: You tend to not only monitor, but also to change?

Journalist: Change and moving on is the best result of my work. If you saw something was wrong and changed it – then you did a good job. (Lithuanian journalist 4)

As demonstrated in this example, the journalist is motivated by the idea of the journalist as an activist. However, such a civic vision is not shared by all professionals; the norms of professional journalism have evolved and are now cherished by all interviewees for this study.

That there are other aims that guide journalistic decision-making becomes apparent in the next quotes. As revealed in the answers of our interviewees, many journalists are preoccupied and consciously thinking about their own professional brand, i.e. their own visibility and popularity:

You are calling the most interesting speaker, the one who talks about the most interesting topic. Your programme should remain the most viewed, most quoted. After all, you will not invite a boring person just because you go out for a beer with him. You’re trying to make the best show of all. (Lithuanian journalist 5)

The journalists disclosed features of their own distinctive reporting style, i.e. personal and authentic features. In other words, each of the interviewed journalists suggested their own unique way of communicating. As indicated by one political journalist:

I never cut off, never edit the taped conversations, even in those times when I come to the site as a reporter. For example, if I have only four minutes, I stop the speaker, I do not hesitate to interrupt. It saves time. Nothing should be abbreviated, ever. That everyone knows. It is also a plus. (Lithuanian journalist 5)

In general, the above examples signal that political-media relationships are focused on polite posturing from both sides. Nevertheless, despite calm politeness, both partners in the relationship want to keep control of their own “territory”, and both actors

therefore remain sceptical toward each other. Politicians are frustrated with overtly commercialised media, whereas journalists claim that politics has turned out to be increasingly less appealing and interesting over time.

These tendencies and observations draw our attention to the impact of networked communications on shifting institutional and personal roles in politics-media interaction. As noted by all respondents, political interaction via social networks has intensified in the past few years. While greater financial investments and more coordinated communication have taken place on the side of politics, political journalists appear to have greater success in their uses of social media for self-representations and the building of celebrified brands.

Conclusions

Even though the above analysis opens only a narrow window to the complex relationships between the media and politics, it nevertheless clarifies certain trends.

While some of the discussed patterns appear to be the product of cultural practices specific to Lithuania, others are likely to result from general developments and transformations in the sphere of political communication.

Having access to politicians of the highest rank appears to be an exceptionality of the country. This is attributed not only to the smallness of the market (and hence interpersonal closeness), but also to the fact that Lithuanian politics is often tied to personal interests. Moreover, since the very history of the country has established a context for the unusual proximity between politicians and journalists— in the early 1990s, politicians and journalists were “fighting for the common goals” – explanations based on history must also be considered.

While the official communication between the two sides is friendly and appears to be honest, it is also rather suspicious – on occasions quite tense and even sceptical. The overall relation between the two groups of actors is sustained and regulated by needs-oriented performance.

Political journalists from the leading news media organisations are generally highly experienced, professionally ambitious and driven to function according to the ideals of classic journalistic professionalism (where the citizens’ right to know is often expressed as serving the public good). However, the chapter has discussed some problems affecting political communication in Lithuania, not least with regard to information management, instrumentalisation and manipulation of the media.

Officially, there is a distance between the two sides of the relationship, but there are situations when the official facade of institutionally established and professionally organised communications is overlooked and even ignored. As shown with our examples, there are occasions when politics adapts to the logic of the news media (mostly through involvement in informal occasions), but informality is often planned and used strategically.

On the whole, it is possible to suggest that we are entering a new phase in the transformation of political communication in Lithuania. As was anticipated in a number of previous analyses of political makeovers in the CEE (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Rupnik & Zielonka, 2013; Sükösd, 2014; Voltmer, 2015; Zielonka & Mancini, 2012), the lack of a sound social and ideological basis (resulting in fragile organisational structures) made the political parties in former communist countries particularly reliant on media. It was not so long ago that media appeared to be an indispensable resource for politicians since it was viewed as the only adequate means that could be extensively used by parties to reach their voters and to publicly “validate” the choices made. It is precisely on this basis that a close political and business linkage – and hence colonisation and instrumentalisation of the media – emerged (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Štetka, 2012).

Though media and politics continue to remain in close contact, there is a development towards increased “distanciation” between them; both sides are also characterised by increased professionalisation. On the one hand, this is determined by the growing needs and requirements for strategic management of information, hence politicians are more inclined to communicate through press representatives and, especially during election time, to rely on political consultants and marketing specialists. On the other hand, there is a counter-tendency with politicians who are more reluctant to communicate through institutionalised channels. As revealed, political executives highly value and personally invest in the maintenance of close relationships with journalists. Predominantly, these customs contribute to a practice defined here as “authentication of political communication”.

In conclusion, this study, once again, proves that cultural legacies tend to persist regardless of substantial political, economic, organisational or technological changes. As demonstrated here, formal affiliations and relationships between the two groups of actors continue to work in the shadow of informal power centres, hierarchies and personally maintained networks. Though new communication practices are applied, and new technologies are intensively used on both sides of the relationship, it is the local culture that gives the true character and meaning to more general and global trends.

Note

1. Whereas the prime minister is the head of the government, the president has substantial power over constitutional matters.

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