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"Pandemic and Crisis of Trust in Media: Case of Lithuania"

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Abstract

In order to manage Pandemic of Covid -19, Lithuania started unprecedented campaign of promotion of vaccination. One the main instruments which were implemented by the Government of the Republic of Lithuania were Opportunity passport. This document gave permission for those people who were vaccinated to participate in many activities, which were limited to unvaccinated people including opportunity to go to huge supermarkets. However, different approach on Pandemic management, Opportunity passport and cultural wars created enormous alienation in the society of Lithuania. One of the expressions of this phenomenon was dramatic decrease of trust in Media. By using process trace method I will show how situation of trust in media has changed and why it is not just a result of long term trend of decline of trust in media.

Introduction

For many years, media was seen as watchdog over the government. This mission of mass media was crucial for democracy and a main justification of press freedom. Media as a intermediary between civil society and government should be free and objective at the same time. The function of mediation between different groups was one of the most important sources of public trust in media. Besides, some authors claims, that “The vitality of a representative democracy rests in large part on a voting public that is sufficiently informed about public affairs. Where citizens get their information— and particularly how they view their information sources— is thus a crucial element of understanding the health of a democratic system. Therefore, the freedom of media is one of the most important aspects for effective democracy.”¹ Finally, for many years freedom of media served as the instrument for identification of democracies and autocracies.

Despite the importance of media, public opinion polls reveal the significant decrease of trust in media in the globe. For instance, Gallup’s collected data shows us that the general number of Americans who trust in media decreased from 53 % to 36 % between 1997 and 2021.² The similar trend was found in European Union where the trust in almost all types of media decreased from 2014 to 2019. The only one exception was trust in press media, which slightly increased, but still remained negative.³

This phenomenon attracts scholars’ attention and encourages them to dive deeper to this question. Many studies have been written in order to identify the reasons why trust in media decrease. For instance, David A. Jones in his article *Why American’s Don’t Trust the Media: A Preliminary Analysis* wrote: “many of the respondents who expressed low levels of trust in the government also expressed low levels of trust in the media <...> But the relationship was much stronger than anticipated (Tau-b =-.283). About 63 percent of respondents who said they trust the government either “some of the time” or “never” said roughly the same thing about the media.”⁴ Six years later Tien - Tsung Lee published article *Why They Don’t Trust the Media: An Examination of Factors Predicting Trust*, which described similar reasons of decrease in Media

¹ David A. Jones, “Why American’s Don’t Trust the Media: A Preliminary Analysis”, *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol 9, Issue 2, 2004, 60 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1081180X04263461>

² Megan Brenan, “Americans’ Trust in Media Dips to Second Lowest on Record” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/355526/americans-trust-media-dips-second-lowest-record.aspx>

³ EBU, “Market insights Trust in Media 2020”, 12 <https://www.horizont.net/news/media/33/Trust-in-Media-Studie-der-EBU--323478.pdf>

⁴ David A. Jones, “Why American’s Don’t Trust the Media: A Preliminary Analysis”, 69.

Trust.⁵ Another great work *Individual and Contextual Correlates of Trust in Media Across 44 Countries* was written by Yariv Tsfati and Gal Ariely. Scholars sought to increase our understanding of individual level predictors of trust in media and to investigate macro-level predictors of such trust.⁶

Scholars from Lithuania also analyzed the trust in media. For instance, Gintaras Aleknonis in his article *Measuring the Reputation of Media* tried to apply a general reputation model to the media.⁷ In 2016, the group of authors published book titled *Media Accountability and Journalist Responsibility*, which touched the topic of decline in Media Trust.⁸ It is worth mentioning that Vladas Gaidys wrote a great study *The Dynamics of Trust in Institutions in Lithuania during 1998–2018: Long-term and Ad hoc Factors of Influence*. One of the institutions which were analyzed in this study was media. Author found that average annual trust in media between 1998 and 2018 decreased from 60 % to 37,8 %.⁹ One of main reasons of such decline of trust in media was painful transformation from planned economy to Market economy. Despite the huge advantages of Market economy, transformation days were hard for many simple people, who lost their jobs and lifestyles. During those days, Media was seen as a protector of “simple” people. After significant growth of economy of Lithuania, these Factors lost the importance and trust in media decreased.¹⁰ However, even after such substantial decrease of trust in media, Lithuania remained among European Union countries with the highest trust in media in 2019.¹¹

Despite the historically high trust in media, situation in Lithuania has changed dramatically. The newest public opinion polls show that Lithuanian public trust in media dips to 20-year low.¹² There are two hypotheses which may explain current situation. The first explanation is that current crisis of trust in media is nothing more than just a moment of long term trend. The second is that current situation was caused by believe that media is bias on the concrete policies such as measures of pandemic management, debates on same sex civil unions and Istanbul convention. The main question of my research is what are the most significant reason, which caused current situation of trust in media? In order to answer to this question I will use the data of public opinion polls and process tracing method. Additional question how this dramatic decrease in trust of media may affect Lithuania during long term.

Process tracing method and hypotheses

⁵ Tien Tsung –Lee, “Why They Don’t Trust the Media: An Examination of Factors Predicting Trust”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol 54, Issue 1, 2010, 17-18.

⁶ Yariv Tsfati, Gal Ariely “Individual and Contextual Correlates of Trust in Media Across 44 Countries”, *Communication Research*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, 2014, 773, DOI: 10.1177/0002764210376308

⁷ Gintaras Aleknonis, “Measuring the Reputation of Media”, *Societal Studies*, Vol 1, Issue 5, 2010,7

⁸ Jolanta Mažylė, *Media Accountability and Journalist Responsibility*, Vilnius Lithuania: Mykolas Riomeris University Press, 2016.

⁹ Vladas Gaidys, “*The Dynamics of Trust in Institutions in Lithuania during 1998–2018: Long-term and Ad hoc Factors of Influence*”, *Philosophy. Sociology*. Vol.30. Issue 4, 2019, Lietuvos mokslų akademija, 287–294.

¹⁰ Ibid, 289

¹¹ EBU, “Market insights Trust in Media 2020”, 12 <https://www.horizont.net/news/media/33/Trust-in-Media-Studie-der-EBU--323478.pdf>, 7

¹² Ramūnas Jakubauskas, “Lithuanian public trust in media dips to 20-year low”, *LRT* <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1533510/lithuanian-public-trust-in-media-dips-to-20-year-low>

Historically the lowest public trust in media is caused either by long term trend of decrease of trust in media, which was seen between 2000 and 2021 (Figure 1), or by believe that media is bias on the most sensitive questions such as civil unions of same sex couples, convention of Istanbul and questionable measures of the management of pandemic. I order to find the truth I will use process tracing method.

David Collier from University of California, Berkeley, argues that “Process tracing can contribute decisively both to describing phenomena and to evaluating causal claims”.¹³ He suggests to focus on tests, which help us to check the hypotheses. He offers four types of tests. The First group is Straw in the Winds Tests can increase the plausibility of a given hypothesis or raise doubts about it, but are not decisive by themselves. Straw-in-the-wind tests thus provide neither a necessary nor a sufficient criterion for accepting or rejecting a hypothesis, and they only slightly weaken rival hypotheses.¹⁴ These tests are the weakest one and I will not use it in my research.

The Second group is Hoop tests. David Collier wrote: “Although not yielding a *sufficient* criterion for accepting the explanation, it establishes a *necessary* criterion. Hoop tests do not confirm a hypothesis, but they can eliminate it.”. However Figure 1 do not permit us to eliminate none of the hypotheses.

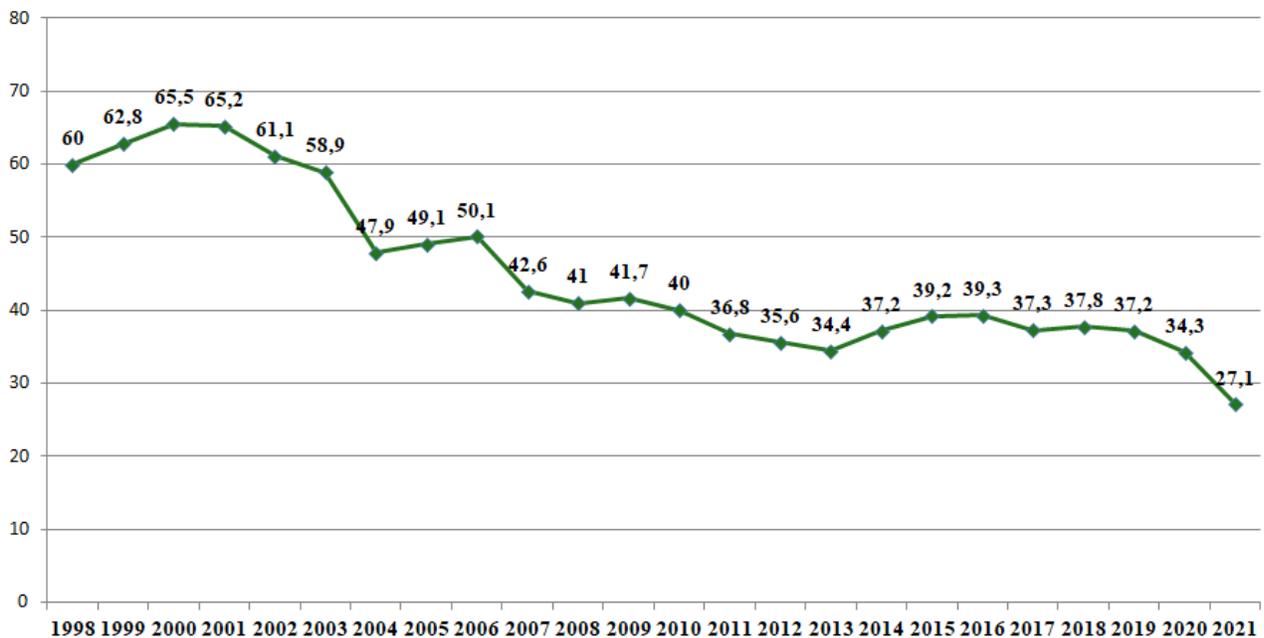


Figure 1 Trust in mass media (% of trust - average by year). Source Data collected by Market & Opinion Research Centre "Vilmorus"

Smoking gun test

The Fourth group is “smoking gun” tests. “Smoking gun” tests provide to us a sufficient but not necessary criterion for accepting the causal inference. It can strongly support a given hypothesis, but failure to pass does not reject it. If a given hypothesis passes, it substantially

¹³ David Collier, “Understanding Process Tracing”, *Political Science and Politics*, Vol 44. Issue 4, 2011, 823

¹⁴ Ibid. 826.

weakens rival hypotheses. Figure 2 shows that from 1998 to 2021 there were only three times when average annual trust in media decreased more 7 percent. The first time it happened between the 2003 and 2004, the second time such decline happened between 2005 and 2006. Finally the last huge decline happened from 2020 to 2021. The fact that such huge declines happens rarely strengthens hypotheses that the historical crisis of trust in media is caused by concrete ad hoc factors.

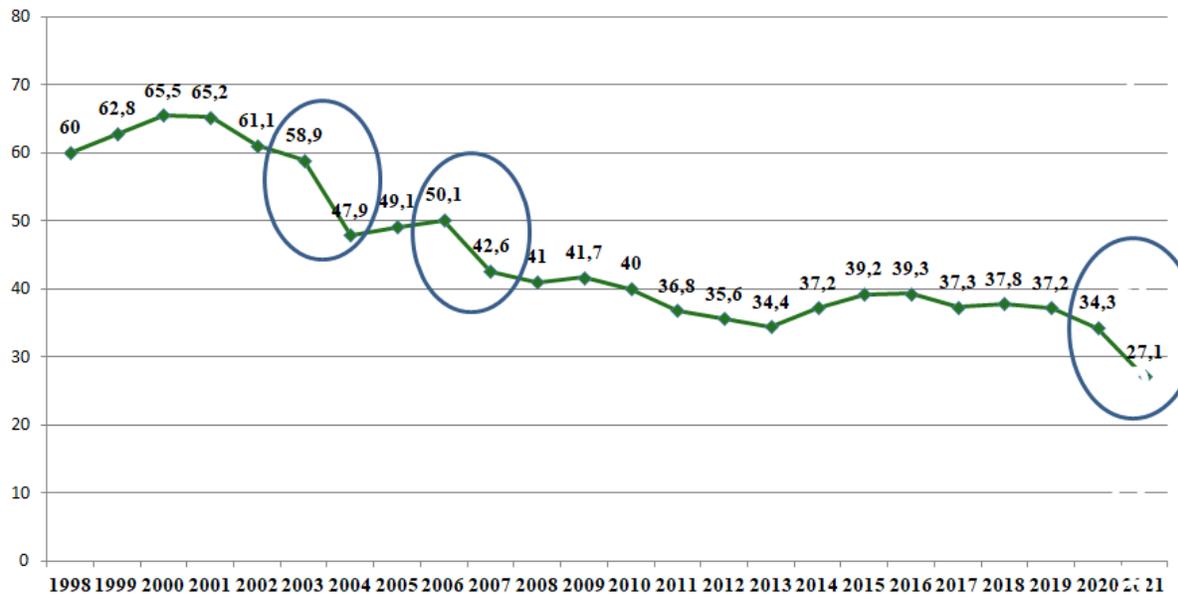


Figure 2 Trust in mass media (% of trust - average by year). Three biggest declines of trust. Source: Data collected by Market & Opinion Research Centre "Vilmorus"

However, Vladas Gaidys argues that a fundamental change is a situation when one concrete incident change trust in institution at least 10 % per one or two months.¹⁵ Figure 2 reveals only one year when trust in media declined more than 10 %. This period was related to the historical process of the impeachment of President Rolandas Paksas. The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Lithuania Concluded that Rolandas Paksas illegally granted Lithuanian citizenship to Yurii Borisov in exchange for financial and other important support and grossly violated the Constitution of the Lithuanian Republic.¹⁶ This political drama divided nation into two groups and made an enormous negative impact on public trust of media. Despite the fact that Figure 3 shows the dramatic decrease of trust in media from September 2003 to April 2004, the general increase of mistrust in media was smaller than 10 %, therefore, even historical event could not be seen as fundamental change of trust in media. However, It emphasizes that trust in media may change significantly during the relatively small period of time.

¹⁵ Vladas Gaidys, “*The Dynamics of Trust in Institutions in Lithuania during 1998–2018: Long-term and Ad hoc Factors of Influence*”, 290

¹⁶ The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Lithuania, *Conclusion on the Compliance of actions of President Rolandas Paksas of the Republic of Lithuania against whom an impeachment case has been instituted with the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania*, Vilnius, 2004. https://www.lrkt.lt/data/public/uploads/2015/08/2004-03-31_i_conclusion.pdf

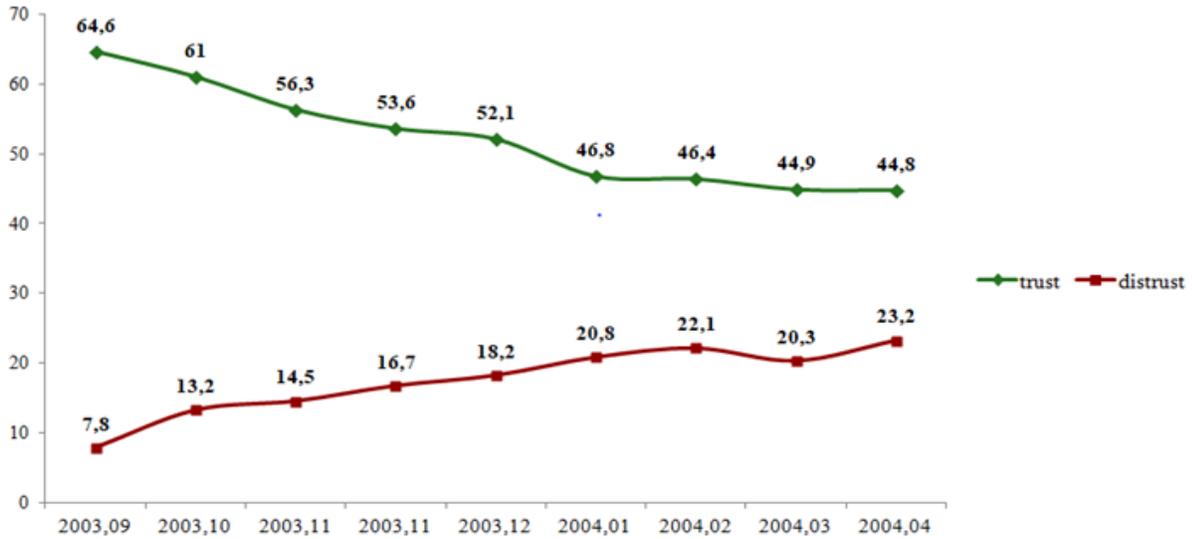


Figure 3 Trust in mass media in 2003-2004 by month: Process of impeachment. Source: Data collected by Market & Opinion Research Centre "Vilmorus"

The similar situation has happened between 2020 and 2021. Figure 4 reveals that general trust in media decreased from 52 % to 42 % during several months. The mistrust in media became higher than trust in media first time in the history of Lithuania.

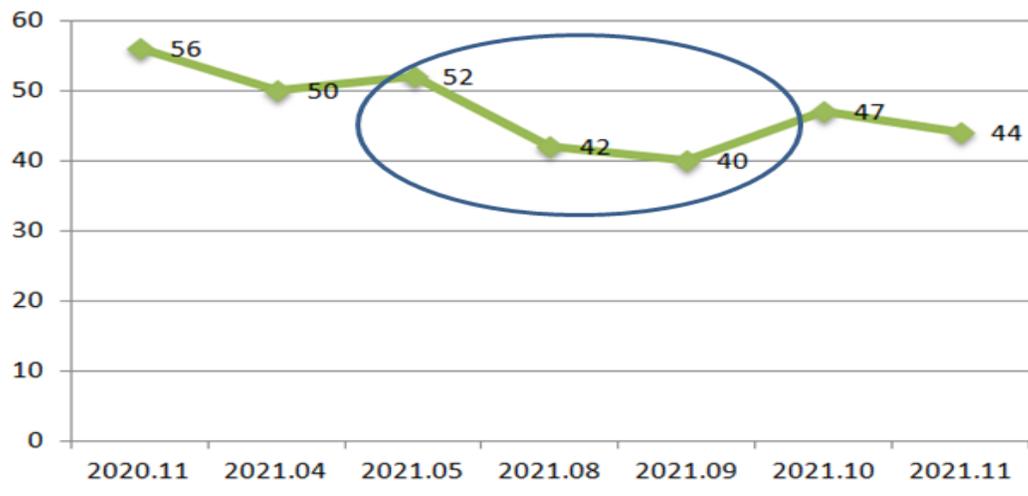


Figure 4 The percentage of people, who positively answered to the question do you trust media? Source: LLC "Baltijos tyrimai"

Doubly Decisive Test

The fifth group of tests is Doubly Decisive Tests. David Collier argues that these groups of tests provide strong inferential leverage that confirms one hypothesis and eliminates all others.¹⁷ Besides, single tests that accomplish this are rare in social science, fortunately, this leverage may be achieved by combining multiple tests, which together support one explanation and eliminate all others.¹⁸ I already demonstrated that the deepest crises of trust in media occurred between May and September 2021. Firstly, I need identify the most significant events of that time in Lithuania. Secondly, I have to check how likely is the probability that these specific factors made such serious impact on decline in trust in media among Lithuanians.

Three Pillars of the Big Family Defence March: Opportunity passport, Istanbul Convention, Same sex partnerships

Indeed, May 2021 was marked by serious social events of Lithuania. Current government of the Republic of Lithuania and the ruling majority in parliament debated three sensitive questions: 1) same sex partnerships, 2) ratification of Istanbul convention, 3) instruments for the fight with Covid-19, including, opportunity passport. All these questions were related to one of the biggest protests in the history of independent Lithuania. This protest, which was named the Big Family Defence March, attracted more ten thousands Lithuanians.¹⁹ It is useful to look closer at these aspects.

The first problematic question was the legitimization of same sex partnerships. The vast majority of Lithuanians stands for traditional family. They claim that family is the union of man and woman. The public opinion polls every time shows that Lithuanians do not agree to legitimize same sex partnerships. Despite this fact, liberal politicians and their allies among Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christians Democrats party still sought to legitimize same sex partnerships. Liberal politicians proposed to legitimize same sex partnerships in May.²⁰ Few days later public opinion poll results demonstrated that 65% of Lithuanians are against legitimization of same sex partnerships. However, Lithuanian National Radio and Television focused on 30 % of Lithuanians who support same sex partnerships.²¹

The second problematic question was the ratification of Istanbul convention against violence against woman. This question was sensitive²² for society due to two reasons. Firstly, this convention is based on Marxist idea that “violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men, which have led to domination over, and discrimination against, women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of

¹⁷ David Collier, “Understanding Process Tracing”, *Political Science and Politics*, 827

¹⁸ Ibid, 827.

¹⁹ LRT, “Lithuanian president addresses rally against 'genderist propaganda', backs traditional families”, *LRT* (May 2021) <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1410566/lithuanian-president-addresses-rally-against-genderist-propaganda-backs-traditional-families>

²⁰ BNS, “Politikai siūlo įteisinti lyčiai neutralią partnerystę, partneriai negalėtų įsivaikinti”, *Verslo Žinios*, (May 2021) <https://www.vz.lt/verslo-aplinka/2021/05/04/politikai-siulo-iteisinti-lyciai-neutralia-partneryste-partneriai-negaletu-isivaikinti>

²¹ LRT, “Naujausia apklausa: partnerystei pritartų 30 proc. gyventojų, tolerantiškiausias jaunimas, priešiskumu išsiskiria Tauragė” (May 2021) <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1405024/naujausia-apklausa-partnerystei-pritartu-30-proc-gyventuju-tolerantiskiausias-jaunimas-priesiskumu-issiskiria-taurage>

²² Aušra Garnienė, “Stambulo konvencija: kas sukiršino piliečius“ *Kauno diena*, (March 2021) <https://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/lietuva/salies-pulsas/stambulo-konvencija-kas-sukirsino-piliecius-1015921>

women”.²³Secondly, gender ideology, which lies in the text of Istanbul convention: “gender” shall mean the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men”.²⁴Once again the vast majority of Lithuanians was against the Istanbul convention. Presidency of the Republic of Lithuania bought public poll which showed that 78 % of Lithuanians answerer negatively to the question: do you support the ratification of the Istanbul convention. There were only 22,1 % of Lithuanians who supported such initiative.²⁵ The instant reaction of media was critic to such public opinion poll.²⁶

The Pandemic was the last but not least tension between the government of the Republic of Lithuania and citizens of the country. The number of people who were exhausted due to lockdown increased. Besides, promotion of vaccination was stronger than ever before. Politicians decided to separate Lithuanians into two groups of people. Those who have been vaccinated, have recovered from Covid-19, or have tested negative the virus were able to get Opportunity passport, while others not. This document comes into effect at the end of May 2021.²⁷

Response to all these tensions was the Big Family Defence Marhc in 15th of May. This historical protest attracted approximately 10 000 people from the whole Lithuania. Participants of this protest criticized plans to ratify Istanbul convention and legitimization of same sex partnerships. Some critics were focused on the management of Pandemic. It is worthy to emphasize that few days after protest, The Research department of the Republic of Lithuania published extremely negative article on the organisers of the Big Family Defence March. The main message of this article was the State Security Department of Lithuania thinks that organisers of the Big Defence March are threat to security of Lithuania.²⁸

Who do not trust in media?

It is plausible that some Lithuanians might interpret such articles as the evidence that media is bias and protects government from critics. If it is truth, when in Lithuania I expect to find similar situation U.S. Well-known Pew Research Center prepared the study which shows that “Americans’ trust in media varies widely by political party and whether they see the outlet in question as part of the “mainstream media” or not – though in very different ways between Republicans and Democrats.”²⁹Republicans trust in mainstream media less than Democrats.³⁰

²³ Council of Europe, “Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence”, Istanbul (May 2011) <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Vaida Zakarkienė, “Mokslininkė apie prezidentūros apklausą dėl Stambulo konvencijos: tai yra nekorektiškai naudojama sociologija ir siekis toliau dirginti“, *LRT*, (April 2021) <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1398436/mokslininke-apie-prezidenturos-apklausa-del-stambulo-konvencijos-tai-yra-nekorektiskai-naudojama-sociologija-ir-siekis-toliau-dirginti>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ BNS, LRT “Opportunity passport’ comes into effect in Lithuania” (May 2021) <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1416038/opportunity-passport-comes-into-effect-in-lithuania>

²⁸ LRT, “LRT Tyrimų skyrius apie Šeimų maršo organizatorius: VSD ataskaitose jie įvardinti kaip grėsmė Lietuvai” *LRT* (May 2021) <https://www.lrt.lt/mediateka/irasas/2000152973/lrt-tyrimu-skyrius-apie-seimu-marso-organizatorius-vsd-ataskaitose-jie-ivardinti-kaip-gresme-lituvai>

²⁹ Jeffrey Gottfried, “Republicans less likely to trust their main news source if they see it as ‘mainstream’; Democrats more likely”, *Pew Research Center*, (July 2021) [Republicans trust their main news source less if they see it as ‘mainstream media’ | Pew Research Center](https://www.pewresearch.org/2021/07/21/republicans-trust-their-main-news-source-less-if-they-see-it-as-mainstream-media/)

³⁰ Ibid.

Despite the fact that Lithuania has multiparty system, the same situation is in Lithuania. Table 1 show that voters of the biggest parliamentary party - Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christians Democrats trust in media much more than voters of the strongest opposition party – Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union. Moreover, this party became significant after successful elections of Seimas in 2016. This is additional evidence that current Crisis of trust in Media is more related to ad hoc Factors than to long term trend of decrease in media trust.

			Trust in media (TV, radio, Outlets)			In total
			Do not trust/ Absolutely do not trust	Neither yes, nor no	Trust/ Absolutely trust	
Vote for Party	Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats Party	N %	11 10,9%	53 52,5%	37 36,6%	101 100,0%
	Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union	N %	44 55,7%	22 27,8%	13 16,5%	79 100,0%
	Social Democratic Party of Lithuania	N %	64 34,6%	71 38,4%	50 27,0%	185 100,0%
	Lithuanian regions party	N %	12 37,5%	9 28,1%	11 34,4%	32 100,0%
	The Liberal Movement of the Republic of Lithuania	N %	16 25,4%	24 38,1%	23 36,5%	63 100,0%
	Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania	N %	5 71,4%	1 14,3%	1 14,3%	7 100,0%
	<u>Labour party Lithuania</u>	N %	22 38,6%	21 36,8%	14 24,6%	57 100,0%
	Freedom Party	N %	10 45,5%	6 27,3%	6 27,3%	22 100,0%
	Other	N %	9 28,1%	16 50,0%	7 21,9%	32 100,0%
	Do not vote	N %	68 45,0%	53 35,1%	30 19,9%	151 100,0%
	Do not know	N %	85 31,4%	124 45,8%	62 22,9%	271 100,0%

Table 1 Trust in media among voters of diferent political parties. Source: Data collected by Market & Opinion Research Centre "Vilmorus"

Negative outcomes of crisis

Current Crisis of Trust in media may cause serious negative consequences. Lithuania is under the information warfare. State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania and The Defence Intelligence and Security Service under the Ministry of National Defence every year publishes publishes National Threat Assessment. In the last report they wrote: “Foreign actors concurrently employ disinformation and cyber manipulations against Lithuania and its allies. Such operations aim to weaken transatlantic ties, sow discord in society and undermine public trust in

state institutions.”³¹Therefore, I will argue that decrease of trust in media not only weakens democracy of Lithuania, but is a threat to national security of the country.

Conclusions

The general trust in media has been declining in Lithuania for many years. However, detail analysis of public opinion polls and process tracing method confirms that historical crisis of trust in media is a more related to ad hoc factors than to general trends of trust. Among the most important ad hoc factors we found approach on the Big Family Defence March. Lithuanians think that media supports current Government of the Republic of Lithuania and do not represent reality. Therefore, Trust in media depends on the approach towards current government of Lithuania and opposition. Those people who support opposition trust media less than those who support ruling majority in the parliament. This situation is similar to the situation in U.S. where Republicans trust in media less than Democrats. Unfortunately, current situation not only effects negatively trust in media, but also strengthen the alienation in Lithuania. Due to the existence of information warfare against Lithuania such situation has a huge threat on the country and its people. Therefore, we need to dig deeper and make analyses whether the media is as bias as citizens of Lithuania sees it. This is the topic for future studies.

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³¹ Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania and The Defence Intelligence and Security Service under the Ministry of National Defence, “National threat Assessment 2021”, 7 https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2021-EN-el_.pdf

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