

Reflections on the Independent Mass Media of Post-Soviet Countries and Political Competitiveness

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Abstract. *The aim of this paper is to analyse political activity in the mass media discourses of states with more democratic and more authoritative regimes respectively, so as to show a clear difference in the context of a formal analysis of mass media content. The current study examines political news on qualitative online media portals in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. Thirty years ago, these states began their independent transition from a closed system to openness/democracy. However, at today's transition point, only Lithuania is considered a democratic country. In different periods Ukraine has been considered an example of competitive authoritarianism, while Belarus deviated towards complete authoritarianism and dictatorship. All political news items between 2005–2020 (for delfi.lt – since 2007) were collected with the help of the Python program. To measure the indicators, several Python programs were designed. The results of the research confirmed that the intensity of political activity differs in the mass media discourses of states with more democratic (Lithuania, Ukraine) and more authoritative (Belarus) regimes. Furthermore, a clear difference was shown in terms of five indicators, average indicators and the dynamics thereof.*

Keywords: *Mass media, competitive authoritarianism, liberal democracy, political news, post-Soviet*

Introduction

Typically, the media is the initiator of political news, which ensures the accountability of political actors to citizens in a democratic society. As Bielinis (2010) points out, the media has already become a kind of guarantor of efficiency, so it is

here that the interest groups that seek to influence politics are formed and operate. Therefore, the provision of political news, especially negative, has become an object of policy-making, which results in dependence on the information presented in the media. In turn, negative news in the field of economic policy also has a positive effect, as it affects the country's internal economic efficiency (Van Dalen – Svensson-Kalogeropoulos – Albaek – De Vreese 2018: 90).

The media, as creators of political news, often rely on confidential sources of information, values, attitudes, editorial / ownership positions and so on. Naturally, the abovementioned circumstances bring different modes and perceptions of truth to the content of political news. Independent journalistic research is often equated with monitoring the political field, ensuring the accountability of politicians, but at the same time ensuring the legitimacy of the media as a political actor.

Media research is very similar to scientific research in that it produces a specific form of knowledge. It has been observed that it is the type of knowledge that is oriented to society in order to inform, expand cognition and defend the public interest, based on professional ethical standards of journalism (Grisold – Preston 2020: 1). Science, of course, is perceived as a neutral and objective activity. The political system gives the impression that research provides facts, not politically influenced opinions. But unlike scientific knowledge that spreads beyond the political arena, the media operate in a political system, so the news it provides is not impartial. On the other hand, one school of thought holds that the more news is consumed, the better the evaluation skills of the population (Van Dalen – Svensson – Kalogeropoulos – Albaek – De Vreese 2018: 149). Usually, the purpose of such news does not allow for a new approach to emerge and largely supports an existing opinion. This is why some scholars believe that the issue of professionalisation of journalism needs to be revisited (Slavtcheva – Petkova 2016: 69).

It is no longer surprising that in liberal democracies, the existence of an independent media is presented as an unconditional necessity and advantage. However, it is important to critically assess whether the freedom to disseminate political news is fundamentally different from the political news being developed in authoritarian and hybrid regimes and whether it is always worthy of attention. To discover these transitive states of the regimes, three neighbouring post-Soviet countries with different types of political regimes, situated between authoritative Russia – which still interferes in affairs of the state, whether directly or indirectly – and democratic Europe were studied: Belarus as 'the last dictatorship' in Europe; Ukraine as an example of 'competitive authoritarianism' with a certain level of political pluralism (Minakov 2018) or as a state with formal democratic institutions and authoritative values (Haponenko 2018: 8); and Lithuania as a 'young liberal democracy' with freedom of speech, equality, rule of law and human rights. According Burkšienė et al, (2020) 'young democracies are a project

structure that means the research object constantly changes: some elements disappear, while new ones appear.' Researchers (Ramonaitė 2020: 490–491; Raunio – Sedelius 2020: 51; Khoma – Kokoriev 2021: 50–53) disagree on exactly where the country is located in this context. Some say that it has already achieved liberal democracy, while others say that it has not yet done so. However, some researchers noted that some EU member states are characterised by 'illiberal democracy', as they ignore parliamentary debates, and violate the rule of law (Buzogány 2017: 1309; Popov 2019: 449; Khoma – Kokoriev 2021: 39). In such a democracy, an organised community turns into an underdeveloped corporate form – a clan. The illiberal structure suppresses civil society and the media by seeing them as key competitors (Šerpėtis 2016: 71). After Lithuania's accession to the EU, it managed to reduce the dominance of clan / oligarchic structures, especially as one former president regularly mentioned the fight against such structures in his annual reports (Dvorak 2012: 305–306). The aim of this paper is to analyse political activity in the mass media discourses of states with more democratic and more authoritative regimes respectively and to show a clear difference between the discourses (average indicators and dynamics) through a formal analysis of mass media content (political news). The study focuses on political actors (politicians or institutes), since they are the core elements of news production and the percentage of mentions is respectively similar among popular political figures (balance indicator); political emotions and negativity, because political actors use emotions in the competitive struggle for power and in order to draw the attention of the public towards their political messages; and quotes for mass media generation (intertextuality indicator), because attractive slogans and soundbites are important for more open political struggle. Though the research is based on political news between 2005–2020 collected from three news portals in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine which specialise in qualitative political news, the results contribute to the pool of studies that reflect the differences and similarities of political life in more and less democratic states respectively.

Mass Media Beyond Competitive Authoritarianism and Liberal Democracy

Over 30 years of independent development, most of the regimes in the former Soviet Union have tended to fall into one or more of the following categories: 1) competitive authoritarianism; 2) dictatorship; 3) liberal democracy or they have become hybrid versions of these systems.¹ In post-communist societies, this means that some political systems have not moved from a closed system to a more open one. Levitsky and Way (2002) believe that this is not a transition to

1 For the contemporary debate about the hybrid regimes cf. for example (Procházka – Cabada 2020).

democracy but rather a special state of the regime, which may be described as *competitive authoritarianism*. The transition to competitive authoritarianism is said to be driven by the following reasons: a) the economic crisis, albeit it has been noted that this only partially explains the trend; (b) the vast revenue generated by the state from the export of mineral resources; c) strong state interventionism, whereby states not only interfere in economic steering but suppress civil society, opposition, criticism and so on (Levitsky – Loxton 2013: 109). However, it was generally agreed at the beginning that the transition would develop in a targeted manner and evolve into the democratisation of state-society relations.

Accordingly, we determined that in the case of authoritarian regimes, the media is state-owned and heavily censored. The government exercises control over major TV channels and radio stations. It has been shown (Cho – Lee – Song 2017: 145–146) that strict control over the media helps to ensure better support for the authoritarian regime, even if their ratings are low at first. Alternative or independent media is banned or eliminated. In competitive authoritarianism, on the other hand, alternative media is legitimate and influential. However, in such a regime, autocrats spread media control and censorship in informal ways (Way 2004: 145). In liberal democracies, the media monitors the political system and informs voters of political abuses and so on. Most often, the main problem in a democracy arises from the monopolisation of the media and the concentration of political power, which can grow profits or influence policy-making (Pickard 2020: 708).

The model of competitive authoritarianism singled out by Levitsky and Way (2002) emphasises that, in general, the regime seeks to suppress independent media. In some countries, this can even be done in order to reform the media sector by making it more independent, but with the opposite result, as has been the case in Serbia (Castaldo 2020: 1631). According to Castaldo (2020), in the case of competitive authoritarianism, the discretion to decide which media to allocate state subsidies and / or state advertising orders to plays an important role, which is especially critical when an economic crisis begins in the country. This leads to greater political dependence and influence on the regime, which is especially important in the context of competitive authoritarianism, where disloyal media can be suppressed. It is true that in such circumstances the media becomes useless to the audience as a source of information, as it no longer performs the functions of monitoring, stimulating debate, presenting opinions and arguments (Yıldırım – Baruh – Çarkoğlu 2020: 18). It should be noted that dictators are opposed to completely free media, because even partially free media can have a huge impact on overthrowing a *dictatorship* (Egorov – Guriev – Sonin 2009: 646–647). However, there are well-known examples (Serbia, Kyrgyzstan) where dictators have tolerated media freedom, explaining that the media helps to ensure the accountability of the bureaucracy in such ways (Egorov – Guriev – Sonin 2009: 646–647). Dictators need to constantly look for ways to weaken the

professional bureaucracy of a potential competitor. This is necessary because a dictatorship usually creates an hierarchical system of power, known in the case of Belarus as a *vertikal* (Kasmach 2015: 124). In a dictatorship, an apolitical mood prevails among the vast majority of the population, influenced by state-run media and ideology (Kasmach 2015: 124).

In contrast, Way (2004) explains that, despite persistent depression and repression, the media remains a source of opposition. Opposition journalists offer alternative, independent counter-discourses to the state media that convey the government's position. Particularly influential journalists may be viewed by authoritarian leaders as personal enemies as they seek to spread knowledge that violates the foundations of the regime and mobilises the public to take group action (Repnikova 2018: 42–43). Paradoxically, the media news of competing authoritarianism may be attractive to some individuals in a liberal democracy because it offers what is not available elsewhere (e.g. fake news).

In a *liberal democracy*, the media is seen as a guarantor of credibility. This is manifested through the audience's understanding that the media is objective and can be trusted (Ejaz 2020: 346). Media news is used selectively because there are differences in political beliefs and ideologies among the population. This is especially evident in the case of digital news (Dahlgren – Shehata – Ström-bäck 2019: 160; Hanitzsch – Hanusch – Ramaprasad – De Beer 2019: 16–17). However, Pečiulis et al. (2012) discovered that the paradoxes mentioned above in the case of competitive authoritarianism also occur in a liberal democracy, as professionally prepared information from public relations agencies penetrates the media. Trendy, non-journalistic information undermines trust in the media.

Indeed, citizens are heavily dependent on information on political matters (Ejaz 2020: 334; Van Dalen – Svensson – Kalogeropoulos – Albaek – De Vreese 2018: 148). The political systems of liberal democracy are highly vulnerable because of their openness. As a result, infrequently competing media outlets are becoming sources of disinformation and a threat to the existing open society. This excludes citizens from political participation and acts as a hindrance rather than an incentive, distorts information flows, undermines trust in governance structures and important projects of national importance, and deepens opportunism and mistrust in public sector activities (Šerpelis 2006: 71; Matonytė 2010: 62). In turn, the emerging new unpredictable hybrid media variants are alternative media versions of various interests, contradictions, and conflicts (Holt – Ustad Figenschou – Frischlich 2019: 633).

The mass media in Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine

The current chapter of the article shows mass media development perspectives in the countries under investigation and characterises the news portals which were chosen for the analysis.

Mass media in Lithuania. In Lithuania, the news is mainly received by the population through two media channels, namely television and online media portals (Balčytienė – Juraitė 2020: 7). Among the most influential media in Lithuania are state television and *radio (LRT)*, the private online media portal *Delfi.lt*, the visual content creator and campaign organiser *Laisvės.TV*, the online media portal *15 min* and the TV channels *LNK* and *TV3*. According to Pečiulis et al. (2012) and Balčytienė et al. (2020), media content is mostly influenced by the position of their owners and main shareholders (especially in the regions) and the financial contribution of the media clients, as it affects the quality, diversity and pluralism of their coverage. In the context of Lithuanian political journalism, conflict-like reports dominate – that is, scandalous news. Previous research (Soroka 2006: 381–382) on economic news in the media confirms that bad news is consumed much faster. Research in Lithuania has shown that, for news journalists, the activities of the legislature do not seem relevant to society (Bajorinaitė et al 2019: 92–93). In 2017, four companies dominated the Internet provision market in Lithuania, which once occupied 76.8 percent of the market (Balčytienė – Juraitė 2020: 7). In 2019, the number of Internet news users in Lithuania was one of the largest in the EU, reaching 91 percent of the overall population (European Commission 2020). According to the World Press Freedom Indices published in 2021, Lithuania was ranked 28th of 180 countries.

Mass media in Belarus. Belarus is dominated by state-owned media, especially TV, through which a large number of the country's population receives news. The constitution of an independent Belarus guarantees that every citizen is guaranteed the opportunity to freely express their opinions, views and expression. However, criticising the president is considered a crime (Dvorak 2020: 159–160). Alexander Lukashenko, both during his legitimate presidency and later, has suppressed freedom of speech and the press and applied a strict legal regime that made it difficult for the independent media to operate (Szostek, 2018: 312). In 2021, Belarus was ranked 158th of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index by the nongovernmental organisation Reporters Without Borders. The regional media in Belarus is facing the challenge of choosing a way forward. Some media outlets are now fully operational online (websites, social networks), but small town media still appear in the form of traditional print media (Hradziushka – Bykov – Bakhvalova 2020: 87–90). In Belarus, the main Internet service provider is the state-owned company *Beltelecom*. The Internet monopoly controls international data and blocks online media portals that spread anti-regime information. According to Freedom House, the Belarusian KGB monitors online communications and uses a *trojan horse* virus to steal passwords from such portals (Dvorak 2020: 160–161). The main Internet users are located in Minsk, the capital of Belarus. They are mostly involved in Russian-speaking social networks, but it is likely that recent events after the

August 2020 presidential elections began to reverse this trend as attempts were made to use *twiplomacy*² to draw attention to the authoritarian regime's use of violence against protesters. Following the start of protests after the presidential election, the Belarusian authorities detained media correspondents from various countries and began to withdraw the accreditations of foreign journalists. Belarusian citizen journalists working in the independent media were detained, followed by legal proceedings.

Mass media in Ukraine. Ukraine has a wide range of media sources, from traditional print media to online media. Some newspapers are published in the Ukrainian and Russian languages. After the annexation of Crimea, the national media held anti-Russian positions. The Ukrainian authorities have banned a number of pro-Russian TV channels and social networks. According to the findings of Orlova and Taradai (2016), Ukrainian journalists consider themselves the main source of important information or viewpoints in the formation of public opinion in social networks such as Facebook. Social networks and TV news are the main news sources for Ukrainians (62 % and 52 % respectively), and TV consumption has been decreasing. Trust in the media is highest for national and regional mass media (both 48 %), while trust in TV has declined (from 49 % in 2019 to 41 % in 2020) (Internews Ukraine 2020). Oligarchs predominantly control Ukrainian mass media, especially TV channels. Public television, which broadcasts journalistic investigations of all top Ukrainian politicians (presidents in particular), is the only exception. Professional media organisations observe some violations of professional standards because of owners' influence on TV news content ('jeansa' or covered advertisement placement) (Detector Media 2021). Popular online mass media is more independent: there are approximately 10 national online media organisations which have earned high marks for compliance with professional standards (see IMI 2020a). Regional mass media experiences different forms of pressure from politicians, local authorities and local oligarchs; 15.2 % of texts violate professional standards ('jeansa', non-properly marked advertisements). However, there are some examples of qualitative journalism, predominantly in cities (see IDPO for print and online regional mass media monitoring) (IPDO 2021). A non-transparent system of media ownership and 'jeansa' content undermine Ukrainian society's trust in both media and political institutions (Taranenko 2011: 124), and prevent society from obtaining objective and qualitative information (Sadivnychyj – Sushkova 2016: 24). In 2021, Ukraine's World Press Freedom Index ranked 97th out of 180 countries.

Thus, having compared the mass media environment of the post-Soviet countries, we see that, despite different obstacles, Lithuania and Ukraine do

2 The term coined in 2011 to describe the volume of use the social media website Twitter by state leaders, diplomats, and heads of INGOs

have independent mass media, especially among online national outlets with high levels of pluralism and compliance with professional standards. In Belarus there are a few independent online mass media organisations; however, they work under significant pressure, and may be blocked, journalists may be jailed, and so on. However, in this situation, it is possible to differentiate qualitative mass media sources and compare them in order to describe the peculiarities of political discourses in the states.

As such, for this research, three online mass media outlets were chosen.

Several criteria were formulated for media outlets:

- independent, as opposed to state-owned;
- qualitative (hard news prevails);
- not tabloid news policy;
- available online, with a news archive from 2005, which is technically suitable for parsing;
- mass audience (as opposed to being for subscribers only);
- located in the country;
- with a local Ukrainian, Belarussian or Russian version;
- specialising in politics and society;
- nationwide, as opposed to local.

According to the criteria, three sites were selected. The Russian version of *delfi.lt* represents Lithuania's mass media discourse. It was founded in 2007, and according to Similarweb data, the site is ranked fourth in the national rating of popular outlets with 37 million total visits per month. It also has an impressive average visit duration of about 10 minutes, and a respectively low bounce level of 37.8 %. The site is owned by Estonian Ekspress Grupp. Delfi news portals function in three more countries: Latvia, Estonia and Ukraine. In the past, the content of Delfi was multifunctional, combining online news, entertainment, e-shopping and e-dating and e-mail possibilities (Balčytienė – Harro – Loit 2009: 523). According to Similarweb data, the site ranks first in the 'media' category with 30.5 million total visits per month.

In Ukraine *Ukrayins'ka pravda* (pravda.com.ua), founded in 2000 by independent journalists Heorhii Gongadze and Olena Prytula, was chosen for the research. This outlet has been publishing resonant journalistic investigations about all Ukrainian presidents since Kuchma, with high marks for professional standards. The Ukrainian NGO Institute for Mass Information claims that 96 % of the site's journalistic texts do not violate such standards (IMI 2020). Olena Prytula is the owner of the portal. According to Similarweb data, the site is ranked 31st most popular in Ukraine (and third in the 'media' category). For Ukraine, the news aggregator ukr.net is ranked first (albeit excluded from our analysis) and censor.net, with more entertaining content and some preference

towards crime news, is second (and was also excluded). Ukrains'ka pravda registers 35 million total visits per month.

For Belarus, because of its specifics – media restrictions, and a lack of data pertaining to mass media – a list of the most popular independent and reliable online mass media was tested (see also (IMI 2020b)). However, all but one site from the list failed to meet the research's criteria – *Nasha Niva* (nn.by).

Other outlets were excluded for the following reasons:

- tut.by – because it has a more tabloid news-based policy;
- Belapan's content is available only to subscribers (other readers may view the headlines only);
- onliner.by is popular as well, but does not specialise in politics (technologies, automobiles, real estate, people and forums are the main rubrics);
- euroradio has an archive from 2007 and is ranked 115th in the category;
- gazetaby.com (salidarnasts) – tabloid news-based policy, archive from 2009;
- citydog.by – local news cite, founded only in 2012
- reform.by – founded in 2016;
- KyKy.org – founded in 2010, and lifestyle topics rather prevail;
- The Village.by – local news site, archive from 2017;
- Belsat – broadcasts from Poland.

Nasha Niva (nn.by) was first founded as a newspaper in 1906 and revived in 1991. The site was founded in 1997, and the paper version was closed in 2018. *Nasha Niva* is owned by the private company NNbaj. It has been blocked several times by the Lukashenko regime, including during the 2020 protests. According to Similarweb, it is ranked 35th with 4.8 million visitors per month. As far as exploring the most popular sites was not the research objective, this site was used for this case. Additionally, other comparative observations on Ukrainian and Belarussian mass media (*Pravda.com.ua* and *Belapan.by* were studied) have shown almost the same numbers within the proposed indicators for the Ukrainian news outlet – the more active presence of constant political actors (Steblyna 2020c).

Hypothesis

The intensity of political activity differs in mass media discourses of states with more democratic and more authoritative regimes respectively; thus, it is possible to show a clear difference (average indicators and dynamics) by means of a formal analysis of mass media content (political news).

In particular it is supposed that in terms of independent online mass media:

H1 – in democratic states, attention to prominent political actors (politicians or institutes) is more balanced and the percentage of mentions overall is similar among popular political figures (balance indicator);

H2 – in democratic states, political emotions and negativity are much more vividly expressed in news, because political actors use emotions in the competitive struggle for power and in order to draw public attention to their political messages (emotionality and negativity indicators);

H3 – in democratic states, a forum of ideas is constantly functioning, politicians express their opinions freely, and these opinions are actively represented in political news in the form of direct and indirect quotes (direct and indirect intertextuality indicators).

Thus, we expect to see larger indicators and more stable dynamics in Lithuanian political news; relatively large indicators and a more unstable picture in Ukrainian news (with some transformations because of the more authoritative regime of Yanukovych in 2010–2014, as well as Russian aggression); and low indicators and stable dynamics in Belarussian independent journalism, with a certain level of activity in recent years (due to the protests in 2020).

Materials and methodology

All political news between 2005–2020 (for delfi.lt – since 2007) was collected with the help of Python software (requests and bs4 modules) from the sites. To measure the indicators, several Python programs were designed.

For the balance indicator, vocabularies of prominent political actors (politicians and institutions) were composed. Both dictionaries and, in some cases, regular expressions were used to measure the indicator (Rad[aoui]\w?, Verkh\w+ Rad.\w? – for Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada). Every mention was counted, and the rating of mentions was created (total number of mentions per year). The balance indicator was obtained from the ratio of total mentions of the most popular political actor to that of the second most popular political actor.

For emotionality, negativism and indirect intertextuality, verb vocabularies were composed:

- state verbs, such as ‘want’, ‘promise’, ‘demand’ etc. – for emotionality;
- negative verbs, such as ‘forbid’, ‘disinform’, negative particles and negative prefixes – for negativity;
- verbs with communicative intention, such as ‘claim’, ‘respond’, ‘say’ – for indirect intertextuality.

The indicators were obtained from the ratio of verbs to the total amount of news.

For direct intertextuality, punctuation marks and proper nouns were used, for instance:

The regular expression ‘[A-Z]/:.*?/n’ for headlines such as ‘Vytautas Landsbergis: red empire of lies started crumbling in Lithuania’; the regular expression ‘/n.*? [- -]/s[A-Z]/n’ for headlines such as ‘NATO concerned about Russia’s military build-up in Black Sea region, Crimea – Stoltenberg’; and the regular

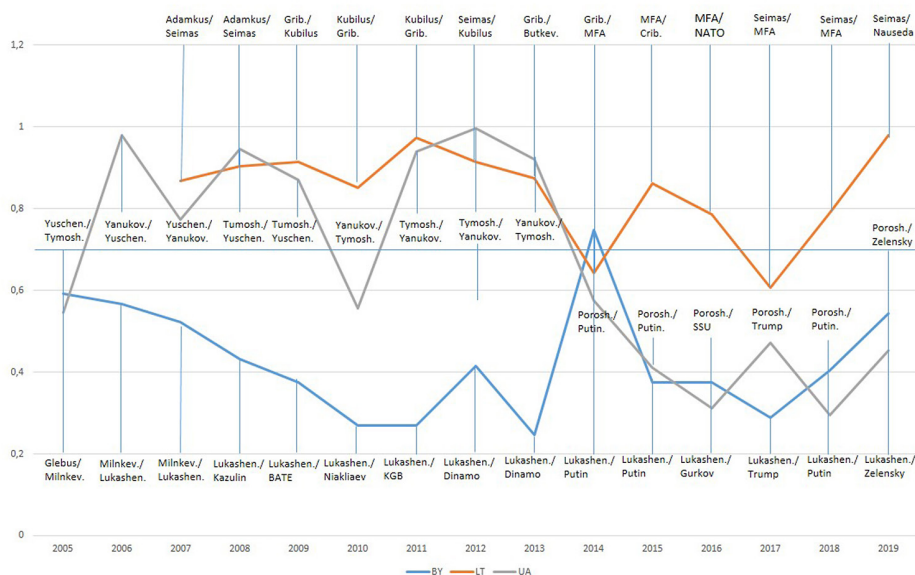
expression ‘[«“”][a-z]\w+.*?“”’] for headlines such as ‘Occupied Crimea and parts of Donbas turn into ‘territory of lawlessness’. The indicator was obtained from the ratio of headlines found to the total amount of news.

Findings

Balance

Average balance indicators confirm the previous thesis pertaining to attention paid to prominent political actors (politicians or institutes) being broadly similar in more democratic states, with the largest number in Lithuanian online media (0.84), a somewhat average number in Ukrainian online media (0.66) and the smallest in Belarussian online media (0.42). However, the dynamics of the indicators should also be taken into account (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Balance indicator



There is an evident change in the dynamics of all media from 2013 (Lithuania, Ukraine) and from 2014 (Belarus). In Lithuania the indicators are higher and more stable; presidents, the prime minister and Parliament are the most popular figures, and so internal politics is the main focus. In the period 2014–2018 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was constantly mentioned, so Russian aggression and permanent Russian conflict with the West was more significant. This led to a decline in the indicators and the high volatility thereof. However, there

is further evidence, as *delfi.lt* prepared a Russian-language version (as well as Lithuanian and English-language versions) with funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Valentinavičius 2016: 58). It was also funded by the European Parliament project *MyEP News* and *Grynas* from the EU and the Ministry of the Environment (Valentinavičius 2016: 58). Only in 2019 did the situation change because of the presidential election. It is also remarkable that the legislative organ is constantly visible in *delfi.lt* news and all the figures/institutions are domestic ones (with NATO as the only exception; however, as far as Lithuania is part of NATO, this may be interpreted as a reaction towards constant Russian provocations). Thus, on Lithuanian sites the domestic actors construct the political discussion. Furthermore, it is possible to see through a more balanced representation of politicians and institutions.

For Ukrainian sites before 2013 the indicators were sometimes higher than in Lithuania; however, the volatility of the indicators is evident. This means that political discourse of the hybrid Ukrainian regime, as presented on *pravda.com.ua*, is characterised by constant rivalry between political personalities. However, political consensus is not the aim of the rivalry. This is just a 'clans' struggle' (Minakov 2018), where 'one clan tries to establish its own vertical power, while the others undermine it in cooperation with wider social groups'. Before 2014, political institutions (parties, NGOs, ministries etc.) were not particularly popular; this is also a feature of Ukrainian discourse, with weak legislative, executive organs. However, it is important to mention that oppositionists (Yanukovych and Tymoshenko during Yushchenko's presidential term; Tymoshenko during Yanukovych's term) are sometimes in first place in this context. The situation has changed dramatically since 2014. Foreign political figures (such as Putin and Trump) are mostly in second place, and in such a context the Ukrainian leader is shown as the only one who deals with Russian aggression (oppositionists did not compete with him for attention), while other domestic voices failed to make themselves heard. Of course, there was constant breaking news from the so-called 'ATO/JFO zone', but for *pravda.com.ua* both weak institutions and rivalry among the elites caused a decline in the amount of attention paid to internal affairs in the times of crisis. As such, domestic figures were supplanted from political discourse; their appearance was episodic and accompanied by scandal (with the Security Service the only exception). Remarkably, even the presidential election in 2019 did not lead to a sufficient increase in the indicators (towards 2005–2013 levels).

In Belarus, there were relatively high indicators on *nn.by* between 2005–2008 with oppositionists in first and second place. In 2005 the Belarussian writer Glebus was in first place, because *Nasha Niva* did not differentiate political news and feature pieces at that time. Furthermore, all figures opposed to the regime (not only politicians, but artists and writers as well) were included. Afterwards the popularity of the oppositionists continued to decline, and in 2009 a soccer

club (BATE) was more popular. Because of the presidential election and political protests in 2010, Vladimir Nekliaev rose as high as second place; however, Lukashenko's domination was significant. The suppression of the protests led to the popularity of the Belarussian KGB, and afterwards a soccer club was again found in second place. This means that before 2014 there was weak political interaction in authoritarian Belarus; political figures did spread some political messages, but their activity did not resonate in society and was not covered by nn.by. Of course, the independent media looked for alternative views, but because of constant political repressions and the failure of the oppositionists to reach a mass audience, the attention paid to internal politics and opposition activity constantly decreased. After 2014, the increase of the indicators is explained by a pivotal change in the discourse: foreign political actors (Putin, Trump, Zelensky) have become more popular. The only exception was in 2016, when the boxer Gurkov was ranked second. This means that for some time Lukashenko succeeded firstly with his image as a moderator of Ukrainian-Russian relations, and secondly with the usage of images of Russia and Putin as a possible threat to state security. As such, low levels of attention paid to opposition figures, the presence of non-political actors in the news (such as soccer clubs and sportsmen) and a high level of attention paid towards international events are the features of the nn.by coverage of political interactions in the authoritarian Belarussian regime. Additionally, knowing about modern protest activity in Belarus since August 2020, the greater attention paid to Lukashenko may be a possible reason for closer observation of Lukashenko's internal actions and repressive politics as well.

However, there is evidence of Russian influence for all the news sites, albeit with different outcomes. In Lithuanian mass media the change of popular political actors with periods of dominance by political institutions and the high volatility of the indicator are visible. As such, institutions are used to solve possible security issues, and interrelations between personalities are less in demand. For the Ukrainian site, it was not institutions but rather political leaders who were subject to most coverage, and for some time Poroshenko's personal rivalry with Putin was used to shape the political discourse. In Belarus one may see a similar approach, whereby Russo-Ukrainian and some possible Russian aggressive actions are used to distract attention; thus Lukashenko and international leaders dominate the news on nn.by as well.

Thus, H1 is confirmed, with more balanced attention and more similar percentage figures for popular political figures in Lithuania; less balanced and less similar in Ukraine, especially after 2014; and low indicators for Belarus. However, the dynamics are additionally significant and should be taken into account as well, especially in times of military aggression.

Emotionality and negativity

Here Ukraine leads, and the dynamics of the indicators are similar (there is a positive correlation between balance and emotionality at 0.796, and balance and negativity 0.689 for Ukraine). Neither Belarus nor Lithuania exhibit such similarity (no correlation: for Lithuania, balance and emotionality 0.207, balance and negativity 0.12; for Belarus, balance and emotionality -0.222, balance and negativity -0.112 (see Fig. 2, 3)).

This leads us to the observation that authoritative regimes such as Belarus are not characterised by high emotionality and negativism and there is no connection between periods of more and less balanced coverage on nn.by. However, the more democratic Lithuania and Ukraine do have emotionality and negativity in political news on sites from both countries, but for Ukraine it is a connection between more intense/weak interactions between political actors and higher/lower emotionality and negativism. By contrast, for Lithuania – with more stable indicators – there is no connection. As such, it may be supposed that high and unstable emotionality and negativity with a correlation with the balance indicator mark more unstable transitive regimes with significant rivalry among the political elites (Ukraine). In the case of more consolidative democratic regimes such as Lithuania, high balance indicators do not depend on high emotionality and negativism of political articulations.

Additionally, there is a positive correlation for emotionality and negativity indicators for all discourses (0.951 – Belarus, 0.815 – Lithuania, 0.732 – Ukraine). Thus, there is a connection between emotions and negativity, used for attracting attention to political competition: higher numbers for radical competition with constant appeals to different social groups to interfere and to delegitimise current ruling elites; and average numbers for the mass media of more consolidated democracies and low numbers for authoritarian states.

In terms of the dynamics on the Ukrainian news site, Yushchenko's presidency is the period with the highest emotionality and negativity. At that time, approaches to create a political coalition failed, which influenced the media coverage: it was a period of constant tensions between Yushchenko, Tymoshenko and Yanukovych as the representatives of three most influential political parties. After 2008, when Ukrainian mass media claimed Yushchenko's 'political death', indicators decreased and remained lower during the authoritarian Yanukovych's presidency with a loyal government and parliament. Yet if between 2010–2013 emotionality slowly decreased, negativity grew. This may be interpreted as a reflection of social anger and Ukrainian intolerance for the geopolitical turn towards Russia (see also some observations about Ukrainian society's moods before the revolution (Kushnir 2020: 77). Afterwards, in the Poroshenko era, when internal politics was not popular compared to the Russo-Ukrainian war and Russia's campaign against the West, there were low and

stable indicators on pravda.com.ua. Here the international agenda displaced internal political rivalry.

On the Lithuanian site the situation is calmer, comparable to that of Ukraine; thus, political events and tensions did not lead to high indicators. We may observe some growth in both indicators until 2009 and high numbers until 2013, but afterwards there was a period of stability. We suppose that this was influenced by the following factors: a) electoral cycles; (b) the ongoing global financial crisis and the bankruptcies of several banks; and c) the Lithuanian presidency of the European Union.

- *Electoral cycles.* In 2011 and 2012, elections of municipal councils and the Seimas (Parliament) were held. Naturally, election campaigns feature large arrays of messages in which politicians and candidates seek to show their best qualities, although quite often candidates receive scandalous messages without fully disclosing information about their past (e.g. criminal record).
- *The ongoing global financial crisis and the bankruptcies of several banks.* At the end of 2011, the operations of one of the largest retail banks in Lithuania were suspended. The event sparked a great deal of political debate, as one of the bank's main shareholders was a Russian citizen. The suspension of the bank was accompanied by an information leak scandal as some politicians withdrew deposits before the bank was suspended. The start of 2013 was also accompanied by the suspension of another bank. The main shareholder of that bank was a businessman of Russian origin, the founder of a small populist party, and the owner of the Žalgiris basketball club.
- *The Lithuanian presidency of the European Union.* Lithuania held the presidency of the European Union for the first time in the second half of 2013; therefore, preparations for this important challenge took place in the first half of the year. At the end of 2012, in preparation for the EU presidency and the approval of the new Government, President Dalia Grybauskaitė began testing the English language skills of future ministerial candidates.

Thus, on the Lithuanian site the situation was calmer; however, here we also see some changes of indicators due to political events. Additionally, since 2013–2014 there has been some degree of stabilisation. This is somewhat surprising, because, as Laurėnas (2017) points out, since the annexation of Crimea the relations between the state and society in Lithuania have been significantly affected by the topic of war being developed in the media (Laurėnas 2017: 227). In 2019, the presidential elections led to an increase in the indicators.

As for the Belarusian site, the constant growth of the indicators is observed. Low indicators of emotionality and negativism are observed before 2008 and at the same time – high indicators of balance. Thus, the activity of oppositionists did not lead to real political interrelations (with emotionality and negativism,

used in order to attract attention towards different political figures). Here we may additionally observe the increase of the indicators before and after the 2010 protests. The decrease in 2012 may be interpreted as a consequence of Lukashenko's suppression of his opponents (high levels of emotionality because of the protests and the activity of Niakliaev as the opposition presidential candidate in 2010, growth in levels of emotionality because of court hearings and KGB activity in 2011, and some decrease in 2012). Since 2013 the numbers have been growing, as has Lukashenko's presence in the news. Thus, closer attention paid to the president may cause emotions and negative growth.

As a result, hypothesis H2 has been partly confirmed. Ukrainian and Lithuanian politics do produce higher levels of emotions and negativity than Belarusian politics, but there is a difference between a more unstable Ukraine with frequent political crises and the calmer situation in Lithuania. There is no connection between a more democratic society and politics and high emotions and negativity. In our case, high emotionality means political instability.

Fig. 2: Emotionality

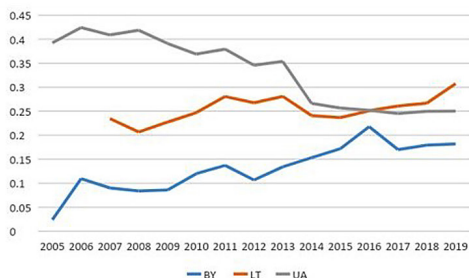
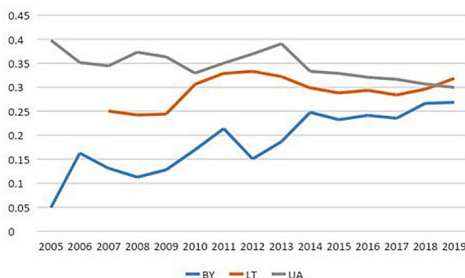


Fig. 3: Negativity



Direct and indirect intertextuality

When it comes to direct intertextuality, there is a clear difference between the mass media of each country. However, 2014 was again a turning point for Lithuanian and Ukrainian media. For the news sites, the numbers increased until 2014, before declining from that point onwards (more dramatically in the case of Lithuania). Indirect intertextuality is more popular for Ukrainian mass media than for Lithuanian media. In Belarus, the indicators have been increasing; however, they are still lower than in Ukraine and Lithuania.

In terms of the dynamics, for the Lithuanian site there is evidence of a constantly active 'forum of ideas' functioning, whereby prominent political figures generate direct quotes and mass media use these quotes in news production. Comparing this situation with a balance indicator, we may suppose that the change in mentions of leading political actors is reflected here as well. Political

personalities produced more direct quotes until 2014. As such, political tensions, caused by the elections and economic crises, may have influenced the situation as well. Afterwards the numbers declined before a certain amount of growth in 2019. However, every third news item still contains a quote, which is the largest result among all the discourses. High and growing numbers of indirect quotes are also observed, and 2011–2013 were characterised by increases in the indicator. Afterwards, the situation was unstable. However, compared to Ukraine until 2013, indirect quotes were not so popular, albeit their level is also respectively high when compared to Belarus.

In Ukraine the forum of ideas was also active at the beginning of the observation period. Indirect quotes, rather than direct ones, were popular on pravda.com.ua. Therefore, the consistent presence of political actors did not lead to the generation of direct quotes. However, the Ukrainian political crisis in 2007 and 2008 may have led to high levels of indirect quotes. During the Yanukovych presidency, we may observe certain levels of stabilisation for direct intertextuality, and a decrease in the indirect equivalent. As such, having conducted a comparison of the dynamics of indicators with negativity, it may be concluded that such a situation reflects a certain tension in society, where political crises led to the production of emotions and negativity, but political discussion was not shaped by direct communication between the political leaders. After 2014 the direct intertextuality stabilised, while indirect intertextuality declined, followed by a period of growth. However, a vivid difference between two periods (2005–2013 and 2014–2019) may be observed. The first period was defined by high levels of competitiveness, emotionality, negativity and indirect quotes; the latter indicator may explain the more closed, non-transparent tradition of Ukrainian politics compared with Lithuanian politics. By contrast, the second period led to a decline in the amount of attention paid to internal affairs and the high numbers of direct quotes in 2014–2016 may be explained additionally by the presence of international leaders in Ukrainian political news. Thus, here Ukrainian domestic politicians are unable to compete with them. Furthermore, the prevalence of the international agenda changes the direct intertextuality indicator, but Ukrainian politics remains the same.

For Belarussian mass media, both indicators are small; however, the dynamics should be taken into account. Here we have growth with high volatility, especially for indirect intertextuality, which is accompanied by the growth of other indicators (emotionality and negativism). If on the Ukrainian site pravda.com.ua the majority of the indicators declined and stabilised, because of Russian aggression and the prevalence of the international agenda, on the Belarussian site we may observe a high number of direct quotes between 2014–2016. This may be explained by Lukashenko's role as a 'peacemaker' in the Russo-Ukrainian war, as well as by internal affairs (in 2016 there was an increase in both indicators – parliamentary elections, state pension age change, the arrests of local

businessmen, etc.). In total, these factors may have led to the rise of the indicator of indirect intertextuality numbers, comparable with the Ukrainian and Lithuanian ones in 2016. However, the weakness of the ‘forum of ideas’ was significant – and numbers declined again in 2017–2019. In Belarus the forum has been developing throughout the observation period, and there were certain events which brought about its growth. However, the political system failed to stimulate its constant activity, as in Ukraine and Lithuania.

Fig. 4: Direct intertextuality

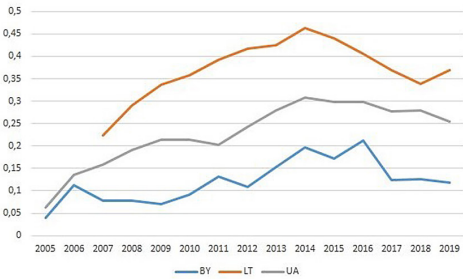
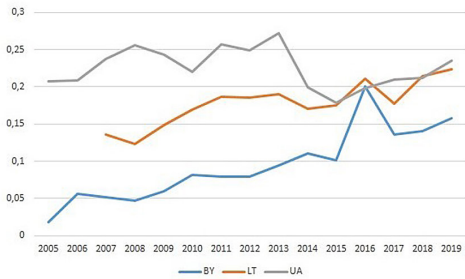


Fig. 5: Indirect intertextuality



As such, hypothesis H3 has been partly confirmed. Democratic Lithuanian politics has a more active ‘forum of ideas’ with high numbers of direct quotes, comparable to the active Ukrainian forum and less active Belarussian one respectively. However, when it comes to indirect quotes, Ukrainian politics is the leader.

Conclusions and discussion

In this research it was supposed that independent mass media outlets reflect political life differently in more and less democratic states respectively. Of course, the mass media should follow professional standards (seek and report truth, offer alternative voices etc.) and some market rules (use emotions, expressive quotes, etc.) to sell their news, but the political climate does influence political discourse. Thus, there should be a way to differentiate political news with a formal analysis of voices represented, characteristics of political activity, and so on.

It was possible to observe that the intensity of political activity differs in the mass media discourses of states with more democratic (Lithuania, Ukraine) and more authoritative (Belarus) regimes. Furthermore, a clear difference was shown across five indicators, average indicators and dynamics.

In particular, it was confirmed that for the Lithuanian site *delfi.lt* attention to prominent political actors is more balanced and the percentage of mentions of popular political figures are respectively similar. However, after 2014 political institutions were mentioned more often, and balance indicators became more

unstable. Additionally, domestic figures, not foreign ones, shape political discussions for the site. In Ukraine, on pravda.com.ua, the average indicator was smaller, and high volatility was observed, especially before 2013. In that period domestic politicians (rather than institutions) were popular. Afterwards, foreign politicians competed for attention, and the indicator declined. In Belarus, on nn.by, there was a significant imbalance between political actors (as a rule, Lukashenko was dominant). From 2014 foreign political actors were among the most popular, as in Ukraine.

All in all, the balance indicator dynamics provide some observations for further research: higher levels of attention paid to both political institutions and political actors is important for more democratic political discourse. Such a scenario was observed for the Lithuanian site *delfi.lt* before 2014. In Ukraine, on pravda.com.ua, the high popularity of political personalities led to the high volatility of indicators. One more point here in the context of further discoveries: the popularity of domestic political actors is important for democracy as well; the presence of international actors leads to a decreased level of interest in domestic politics and the interactions of domestic political figures are not represented properly.

Of course, this observation was made based on Ukrainian and Belarussian material, when the states were faced (whether directly or indirectly) with Russian aggression. However, it may be supposed that Russian aggression was not good for Ukrainian democracy (the state received EU and US support, but its institutions remained weak and unstable, and such aggression failed to pull society and political actors together). In the case of Belarus, it helped Lukashenko to divert attention from political problems in the country.

As for emotions and negativity, the hypothesis was partly confirmed. More unstable and chaotic Ukrainian political discourse, such as that represented on pravda.com.ua, disclosed a more emotional and negative political climate. Lithuanian politics, as reflected in the content of *delfi.lt*, was calmer. However, emotions and negativity are important to democracy, and political interactions should produce these components. This means that political actors use emotions and negativity in political competition, and with these components their messages become salient in independent mass media, as in the cases of *delfi.lt* and pravda.com.ua. Thus, emotionality and negativity were not high in Belarus on nn.by, as the presence of political actors is limited, so there is no constant political dialogue with opposite sides participating in the discussions.

However, in the case of political emotions and negativity, the dynamics are also important. For instance, a calmer period in Ukraine (since 2014) did not mean that the political situation had been stabilised. Again, the dominance of foreign actors on pravda.com.ua may make the domestic political dialogue more episodic and fragmented, as in this case. As such, it is important to differentiate emotions and negativity in more and less democratic states with and without the presence of foreign actors.

In terms of the functioning of the ‘forum of ideas’, the hypothesis was partly confirmed. Direct quotes were more popular in a more democratic and stable Lithuania. This means that with the help of delfi.lt, politicians participate in open political dialogue and generate direct quotes, which are suitable for independent mass media. In Ukraine, for pravda.com.ua, direct quotes were also popular, but the Lithuanian site delfi.lt has a larger average indicator. In Belarus, for nn.by the forum was not active, with some increase at the end of the observation period. However, in Ukraine indirect intertextuality on pravda.com.ua was more popular than on the Lithuanian site delfi.lt.

Additionally, it was also demonstrated that the dynamics of the indicators depend on some significant political events, and after 2014 (with Russian aggression as the possible cause) all the indicators in the countries have showed different dynamics. Therefore, the formal analysis used in the research may show some further changes in the indicators in 2020 and beyond (because of COVID-19, for instance, political activity declined in Ukraine (Steblyna 2020a: 105); and of course protests in Belarus showed some changes in the representation of political actors (Steblyna 2020b: 306)).

Limitations

The observations for the research were made only on the basis of three mass media outlets; as such, additional material will of course be helpful. We suppose that a country’s regime predetermines several peculiarities of political discourse: balance, emotionality, negativity, and intertextuality levels. The indicators should be similar for other independent qualitative mass media. However, this assumption must be checked. For instance, some mass media may have their own guidelines, and a computer program with existing vocabularies and regular expressions would not be able to calculate some data.

Of course, there is an intention to extrapolate the results to other countries with similar regimes; however, in order to do so, more news outlets and more countries should be added. The connection between a political regime, political discourse and political culture and traditions is additionally important.

The situation in Belarus should be taken into account as well: the volatility of the indicators may be caused by the regime’s actions towards certain news outlets (in this case *Nasha Niva*). Therefore, of course, comparative analysis of other independent news sites should confirm or refute the assumption about volatility being the characteristic feature of the political discourse in the state.

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