

Media and political information environment in Lithuania

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Introduction

This paper provides an overview of Lithuania's political information sphere by examining existing studies across several key dimensions: the supply and quality of political news, media concentration and diversity, audience fragmentation and polarization, the spread of misinformation, and inequality in political knowledge. The goal of this paper is to bring together insights from academic and non-academic sources to map out how political information is produced, consumed, and perceived in Lithuania. The research highlights not only the structure of the media system but also the underlying trends and risks that shape public access to credible political content.

Supply of political information

Despite the lack of a well-established tradition of academic audience research in Lithuania, existing data on media consumption indicates that staying informed and socially connected has become a key part of daily life. Research also shows (Balčytienė, 2011) that the country offers a broad range of media outlets, which are generally accessible, affordable, and open to public engagement through comments and contributions. However, the availability of independent sources that help interpret political information remains limited. This points to a highly diverse and uneven media landscape, marked by significant variation in media quality, performance, and accessibility across different segments of the population.¹ Due to the common use of English language in the Baltic states there are well-established cooperation agreements among Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian governments and cultural industries; also, due to their small dimensions, they have traditionally constituted an

¹ Aukse Balcytiene, "Access, Loyalty, and Trust: Changing Audiences and Media Life in Contemporary Lithuania," *Media Transformations*, January 1, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.7220/2029-865X.06.03>.

integrated market.² Apart from several major media market participants owned by joint-stock companies or international corporations, the major part of Lithuania's media outlets are limited liability companies owned by small number of legal or natural persons.³

Mainstream media largely function within the framework of established power structures, prioritizing control over resources and operating under strong commercial pressures. In contrast, alternative and niche media seek to gain visibility and influence by catering to the specific needs and interests of underrepresented audience groups, aiming to carve out their own space in the media landscape. The amount of time Lithuanians spend consuming information daily has increased across all age groups. On average, people in Lithuania watch television for about 3.5 hours per day, and 91% listen to the radio for at least 15 minutes each day (TNS Annual Review of Media Surveys, 2011). A 2012 survey also highlights the rising importance of the internet as a daily news source, with 58.6% of the population using online media regularly, and over half of these users accessing it six to seven days a week. One notable finding from this research is that age has become the primary factor influencing media consumption habits, while other socio-demographic factors such as gender, ethnicity, education, and income have become less significant. Approximately half of respondents (53%) follow media content in foreign languages, with teenagers and young adults aged 15 to 24 being the most active, as 65.9% of them regularly engage with one or more foreign media outlets. In contrast, older adults aged 65 to 74 and those over 75 show the least interest in foreign-language programming, with only 30.8% and 22% respectively tuning in. Among the senior audience, preferences tend to lean toward Russian-language media. Younger audiences, especially those between 12 and 35, predominantly use online platforms such as Facebook, Google, and YouTube, and they favor TV channels in English, including MTV, Eurosport, BBC, CNN, Discovery, and Travel Channel. For these younger users, the internet is the primary source of daily news, followed by television, and they show a strong preference for online news portals, forums, and blogs.⁴ According to 2016 data television still remains the dominant source of news, with major broadcasters like LRT (the public broadcaster) holding a 9.8% audience share, followed by LNK Channel Group with 27.4%, and TV3, part of the MTG Channel Group, with 20.9%. These three are also at the top when it comes to daily viewership, jTV3 leads with close to 37%, LNK follows with 36%, and LRT Televizija draws in nearly 30% of the daily audience. Radio, which has been a fixture since 1926, continues to be one of

² Andrea Miconi, "Europeans and the Media: Between Global and Local," July 2024, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382705915_Europeans_and_the_Media_Between_Global_and_Local.

³ Jolanta Mažylė, "Lithuanian Parliamentary Election and the Regional Press (2016)," *Political Preferences*, January 1, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.6084/M9.FIGSHARE.5216191>.

⁴ Balcytiene, "Access, Loyalty, and Trust."

the most widely used media formats in the country. In 2016, it reached 70% of people daily and 85% weekly among those aged 12 to 74, which is a drastic decrease from 2011 data. The most listened-to stations are M-1, LRT Radio (public broadcaster), and Lietus, each claiming about 17% of the audience. Online news is dominated by a few key players—Delfi, 15min, and Lrytas—all of which attract over a million users each month. Meanwhile, traditional print media continues to decline. For example, the main national daily *Lietuvos rytas* saw a drop in loyal readership, falling by 2% in a year and being read by just 8.6% of the population in 2016.⁵

Quality of news

In Lithuania, access to top-ranking politicians is notably more common than in many other countries. This can be attributed not only to the small size of the media market, which fosters closer personal connections, but also to the intertwining of politics with individual interests. Historically, Lithuanian politics and journalism have shared a uniquely close relationship, particularly in the early 1990s, when both groups were united in pursuing common national goals. Although close ties between the media and political spheres still exist, there is a clear trend toward greater separation, with both fields becoming increasingly professionalized.⁶ The biggest issues when it comes to news impartiality arise in regional media as showcased by the analysis of decisions taken by the Lithuanian Commission of Journalist and Publishing Ethics, which highlights a pattern of recurring problems. Among the most frequent are the failure to distinguish clearly between facts and opinions, a lack of balance in representing different viewpoints, and an over-reliance on sources without proper scrutiny. There are also concerns about the use of questionable or even unlawful methods to gather information, denying individuals the chance to respond, and publishing information that hasn't been properly verified. In some cases, news stories include unsubstantiated claims, delve into private family matters, or reflect personal disputes between journalists and their employees.⁷

According to a survey done in 2016 most people in Lithuania tend to see media primarily as a source of information about current events. There's also a fair sense that entertainment and leisure content get a good amount of attention, and that the media plays an educational role to some extent. Fewer

⁵ Auksė Balčytienė and Kristina Juraitė, "Lithuania," *Centre for Media Pluralism and Freedom* (blog), October 2016, <https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/mpm-2016-results/lithuania/>.

⁶ Auksė Balčytienė and Milda Malling, "Media-Politics Interaction Shaped by Benefits-Oriented Reasoning," n.d.

⁷ Jolanta Mažylė, "Problems of Media Accountability in the Regional Periodical Press of Lithuania," accessed June 5, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/32274053/Problems_of_Media_Accountability_in_the_Regional_Periodical_Press_of_Lithuania.

people believe that the media actively tries to shape public opinion, and even fewer feel that it aims to instill fear. Among ethnic groups, Poles are more inclined to disagree with the idea that the media spreads fear and more likely to see it as informative, while Russians are somewhat more skeptical, seeing the media as trying to influence opinions.⁸

Media concentration and diversity of news

In Lithuania, an oligopolistic media market is virtually unavoidable. Due to the country's small market size, only a limited number of competitors can sustainably operate within any given media segment, excessive competition would weaken all players financially and would not necessarily ensure content diversity. A distinctive feature of the Lithuanian media landscape is the combination of high ownership diversity and significant cross-sector and intersectoral concentration. Media owners often have financial stakes in various industries, including publishing, real estate, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, and finance. These overlapping interests can blur the lines between media ownership and economic or political power, heightening the risk of undue influence. While there are rules in place in Lithuania requiring media outlets to disclose who owns them, in practice this information is often missing, outdated, or hard to find. There is a clear lack of transparency and publicly accessible information regarding media ownership and ownership structures.⁹ Only a handful of major outlets, mostly public broadcasters and a few minority or community media groups actually publish this information on their websites or share their editorial guidelines.¹⁰ While Lithuanian law requires media organizations to report changes in ownership and provides penalties for non-compliance, it does not set a clear timeframe for submitting this information. As a result, media authorities often only partially enforce compliance, undermining efforts to establish a culture of accountability among media owners and users. Although the country formally adopts a “hard transparency” stance in its media market regulation, the actual implementation remains incomplete (Balčytienė & Jastramskis, 2022).¹¹ This lack of transparency opens the door to growing media concentration and outside influence, and it also makes it harder for the public to understand who’s behind the news they consume. Over time, this weakens media professionalism and contributes to

⁸ “Ziniasklaidos_vartojimas12_galutine.Pdf,” accessed June 5, 2025, https://lrkm.lrv.lt/uploads/lrkm/documents/files/Ziniasklaidos_vartojimas12_galutine.pdf.

⁹ Anda Rožukalne, Aukšė Balčytienė, and Halliki Harro-Loit, “Towards Responsible Media: Understanding the Baltic Countries’ Traits Through the Lens of Transparency and Accountability Analysis,” *Comunicação e Sociedade*, no. 46 (December 31, 2024): 1–22.

¹⁰ Balčytienė and Juraitė, “Lithuania.”

¹¹ Rožukalne, Balčytienė, and Harro-Loit, “Towards Responsible Media.”

shrinking media diversity, especially since there are no specific laws to stop big players from owning multiple media outlets across different platforms.¹²

Although there are formal restrictions preventing legal entities linked to political parties from owning media outlets, individual politicians, or people involved in companies, can still acquire and run media channels. In Lithuania, it's not uncommon for media owners or even editors to be affiliated with political parties or to openly support certain political interests. As a result, the content produced by such outlets often reflects clear political bias. This trend is especially noticeable at the regional level, where ties between local media and political actors tend to be more direct and visible.¹³ In 2013, non-governmental organization combating corruption Transparency International – Lithuania (TILS) announced that in the last five years before that there were cases when politicians owned media outlets by themselves or via third parties. Two of them were members of municipal councils and at the same time owners or co-owners of media outlets.¹⁴ In Lithuania, formally, the overall legal climate for the functioning of media is quite favorable: the basic rights of freedom of expression and right to information are preserved and protected also, media regulatory bodies are functioning independently and professionally. Legally, many things appear to be in place, but not all of them are functioning in practice. Political parties cannot be owners of media, but political affiliations do exist in reality. This, together with shortages in ownership transparency and weak self-regulatory measures that stipulate editorial independence, result in the medium risk of political control over media outlets.¹⁵

Political communication on the internet in Lithuania has been significant since at least the 2009 presidential elections, when candidates including clear favorite Dalia Grybauskaitė used websites and social media to engage voters. Media and blogs closely monitored their online presence, highlighting the growing importance of digital campaigning. Social-media platforms like Facebook became key for political messaging. These platforms also help combat voter apathy, with campaigns targeting young voters and offering interactive tools to compare political views. Additionally, the web serves as an outlet for dissenting political groups and activists outside mainstream politics, with several relatively large Facebook groups like 'knygnešys' acting as alternative information spheres.¹⁶ Although internet and social-media are gaining prominence according to a survey done in 2016, the most important news source remains television, followed by internet and radio, with newspapers

¹² Balčytienė and Juraitė, "Lithuania."

¹³ Deimantas Jastramskis, "The Political (in)Dependence of the Media in Lithuania," January 2015, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303549158_The_political_independence_of_the_media_in_Lithuania.

¹⁴ Mažylė, "Lithuanian Parliamentary Election and the Regional Press (2016)."

¹⁵ Balčytienė and Juraitė, "Lithuania."

¹⁶ Yuen-Ying Chan et al., "EDITORIAL COMMISSION," n.d.

falling behind drastically. Older respondents (36+) tend to value TV, radio, and print media more, while the internet is favored by respondents aged 18-45.¹⁷

Fragmentation and polarization

There is growing concern about how audience fragmentation might affect democracy, especially the fear that different audience segments could end up in isolated media bubbles, no longer engaging with one another. This would threaten the cohesion of the political community and make it harder to reach shared, well-informed decisions. Although data suggests some signs of fragmentation in Lithuania with parts of the population relying on very few media sources or none at all. Although, audiences for different channels are not always overlapping, there's still a relatively strong connection between many audience groups. The greatest degree of fragmentation seems to occur at the periphery of the media system, where smaller outlets with limited audiences operate. At the core, however, the audiences of various channels still show substantial overlap, especially within the same type of media, like newspapers or radio, suggesting that people tend to stick with familiar formats but may explore different outlets within those categories. So, while fragmentation exists, the Lithuanian media audience isn't heavily polarized. In other words, although people may be scattered across various channels, their media choices aren't so divided that they exist in entirely separate informational worlds. Comparing 2006 to 2012, there's a noticeable trend toward more fragmentation, with traditional media like newspapers and radio becoming less central, while online news sources continue to grow in importance. These digital platforms sometimes even becoming the sole source of news for parts of the population. Despite this shift, television remains the main common ground, a unifying medium that still reaches a large share of the public. Meanwhile, major internet portals are gaining ground as more robust platforms for political information, thanks to their vast content capacity and accessibility.¹⁸

To better understand how echo-chambers form in social media spaces, a study examined eight Facebook pages linked to Lithuanian political parties and independent civic movements. The research focused on the political engagement of these pages' followers, especially during a politically active period in May and June 2021, when national debates were intensifying, most notably around the "Great Family Defense March." Findings showed that Facebook users tend to gravitate toward

¹⁷ "Ziniasklaidos_vartojimas12_galutine.Pdf."

¹⁸ Laima Nevinskaitė, "MUS VIENIJA ALUS IR TELEVIZIJA: ŽINIASKLAIDOS AUDITORIJOS (NE)FRAGMENTACIJA 2012 METŲ SEIMO RINKIMŲ KAMPANIJOS METU," *Politologija* 73, no. 1 (January 1, 2014): 67–97, <https://doi.org/10.15388/Polit.2014.1.2993>.

political content that reinforces their existing beliefs, a pattern consistent with the idea of echo-chambers. This was especially evident among followers of independent civic movements, who were more active in commenting, sharing, and supporting their opinions with external links, often directing others to the same few social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Telegram. This reliance on a narrow set of sources, frequently recycled within discussions, suggests a limited exposure to diverse viewpoints and a greater dependency on algorithm-curated content, which tends to amplify confirmation bias. Interestingly, while political party pages were also used for news sharing, their audiences were less engaged in intense debates and shared fewer external sources, possibly due to more restrained or formal communication styles. In contrast, civic movement pages featured more provocative and emotionally charged posts, which encouraged stronger audience reactions and more polarized discussions. The prevalence of links to other social media platforms rather than to traditional news outlets further underscores how these online communities can become self-contained echo-chambers. Although the study acknowledges that more data would be needed to fully validate the extent of these chambers, the patterns observed point to a clear tendency: followers of civic movements, more so than those of established political parties, are drawn into politically polarized spaces where opinions are continually reinforced and rarely challenged. This dynamic not only shapes how people consume news, but also how they interact with opposing viewpoints or increasingly, how they avoid them altogether.¹⁹ These findings align with a comparative study done of Finland and Lithuania. Despite some signs of audience fragmentation, especially on the fringes or within certain social media bubbles, the overall social-media landscape still holds together fairly well. The mainstream media seem to focus on similar political issues and while offering different angles or tones, does not drift into extreme or contradictory narratives. Both Lithuania and Finland scored high when it comes to social-media cohesion, suggesting that their professional online outlets still play a stabilizing role.²⁰

Relativism in news, fake news, misinformation

In 2011, survey results show that trust in media is pretty low across the board in Lithuania. Less than half of respondents trust even the most reliable channels, radio tops the list with 47.5% trust, followed

¹⁹ Justina Januškevičiūtė, "Lietuvos politinių partijų ir nepriklausomų politinių pilietinių judėjimų sekėjų „Facebooke“ polinkis į politinę poliarizaciją ir informacinio šulinio formavimąsi," *Parliamentary Studies*, no. 31 (December 31, 2021): 85–98, <https://doi.org/10.51740/ps.vi31.777>.

²⁰ "How_to_assess_national_resilience_to_online_misinformation.Pdf," accessed June 5, 2025, https://datalab.au.dk/fileadmin/Datalab/NORDIS_reports/Policy_Briefs/How_to_assess_national_resilience_to_online_misinformation.pdf.

closely by TV at 45.6%. Print and online media rank even lower, with just about a third trusting newspapers and magazines, and fewer still placing confidence in internet news portals (23.9%), social media (14.7%), or blogs (6.9%). Older generations tend to trust traditional media like TV, radio, and newspapers, while younger people are more likely to rely on online sources. Interestingly, among 25 to 34-year-olds, online media is actually trusted more than any traditional outlet. And when asked where they'd turn for information during a crisis, most people said national TV or radio, though younger respondents leaned toward the internet or simply asking friends and family.²¹ According to a more recent 2020 study, the following were identified by respondents as the most prevalent disinformation flows: COVID-19, vaccinations in general, global warming, disinformation from China and Russia, conspiracy theories, political campaigns, regional and global problems, etc. Every participant had encountered false news and saw the rise in misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. A significant number of interviewees expressed concerns regarding the reliability of news on social media, which is increasingly serving as the primary source of information.²²

Lithuania, with Latvia and Estonia has been in the crosshairs of Soviet propaganda for decades. And even after the Cold War ended, the Kremlin never really stopped targeting the Baltic states with disinformation. Over the years, this kind of information warfare has only gotten more sophisticated. These days, it taps into current fears and hot-button issues, like COVID-19, energy shortages, environmental problems, and even hybrid attacks. Thanks to digital technologies, disinformation spreads faster, adapts to whatever's trending, and uses new tools to make its impact stronger. In Lithuania specifically, Russian propaganda tends to have two main goals: one is to stir up public distrust in the government and democratic institutions, and the other is to paint Russia in a more favorable light.²³ Kremlin propaganda often attacks Lithuania's version of history. The USSR's occupation of the Baltic States in 1940 is rebutted, claiming instead that Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia voluntarily joined the 'big Soviet family'. Additionally, Kremlin propaganda often refers to participants of the Lithuanian resistance movement as "fascists" or "Nazis".

Informational attacks are mentioned among other conventional threats in the Lithuanian Military Strategy. It points out that Russia and other actors, including some non-state groups, have been actively spreading false and misleading narratives to sway public opinion on national security. A clear example of this happened on April 12, 2017, when hackers broke into the systems of BNS, one of the

²¹ Balcytiene, "Access, Loyalty, and Trust."

²² Aelita Skarzauskiene, Monika Maciuliene, and Ornela Ramasauskaite, "The Digital Media in Lithuania: Combating Disinformation and Fake News," *Acta Informatica Pragensia* 9, no. 2 (December 31, 2020): 74–91, <https://doi.org/10.18267/j.aip.134>.

²³ "How_to_assess_national_resilience_to_online_misinformation.Pdf."

main news agencies in the Baltics. They managed to plant a fake story claiming that American soldiers had been poisoned with mustard gas in Latvia. While the attack was technically a success in terms of access, the false story didn't stay up for long, BNS caught it and removed it the very same day.²⁴

To combat disinformation the Radio and Television Commission of Lithuania can order channels to be blocked temporarily to stop the spread of propaganda narratives. Such sanctions have been imposed on a number of Russian channels on commercial cable networks. There are other private initiatives to combat misinformation in Lithuania. In 2017, the major news portal Delfi.lt in cooperation with Google through the "Digital News Initiative" announced that it is going to create a tool aimed at identifying and reducing the spread of fake news. Since 2016, Delfi has also invited its readers to report suspicious content they come across through a platform called Demaskuok.lt. Journalists follow up on these tips, and if they find the information is false, they publish fact-check articles labeled with "demaskuota," which means "unmasked."

Media literacy has become a big focus in Lithuania. It's been highlighted as a key priority in the government's agenda, and the national strategy "Lithuania 2030" places strong emphasis on involving communities, NGOs, and engaged citizens in shaping the country's future. One of the goals is to introduce media literacy education in all schools. Between 2014 and 2015, a major step in that direction was taken with a project led by the Education Development Centre, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Science and supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers Office in Lithuania. The project aims to integrate elements of media literacy into regular subjects in the primary school system.²⁵

Degree of inequality in political knowledge

Media reach in Lithuania reveals some troubling patterns that could deepen social inequalities over time. While general access to mainstream media and the internet falls within a moderate risk range, this shouldn't be seen as entirely reassuring. On the surface, digitalization has made information more accessible and diverse, but this can be misleading. According to the knowledge gap hypothesis, those with higher socio-economic status tend to benefit more from expanded media options, while those with fewer resources often stick to commercial or entertainment-driven content, missing out on more informative sources. Although Lithuania has been discussing media and information literacy for

²⁴ "Lithuania: Disinformation Resilience Index," *Prism Ua* (blog), July 31, 2018, <https://prismua.org/en/9065-2/>.

²⁵ "Lithuania."

years, very few thorough and informed policy-making decisions towards active measures for goal-oriented massive implementation in schools (or elsewhere, like public libraries) has yet taken place in the country.²⁶ Some progress is visible through scattered projects supported by NGOs, universities, and international partners, but the broader policy remains incomplete. Access issues extend beyond socio-economic gaps, too: regional and community media, women, minorities, and people with disabilities all face their own challenges. For example, there's a high risk when it comes to media access in local communities and among women, not because women aren't present in media leadership, Lithuania is among the countries with highest representation of women in media management positions the average in leading news media is 50% of women working in management, but because there's no specific policy supporting gender equality in media content or representation.²⁷ Minorities and people with disabilities fall into the risk zone, mainly due to insufficient support structures and underdeveloped legal protections. All of this points to a media environment that, while seemingly open, still leaves too many people on the margins.

Younger and older audiences in Lithuania differ not only in what platforms or channels they use to access news, but also in how often, when, and why they turn to media in the first place. Trust in sources, the purpose of information-seeking, and overall media habits vary significantly by age group, painting a picture of a society fragmented by lifestyle and information routines. A national survey in 2011, on media use highlights this trend: even though the media landscape is diversifying, with people regularly tuning into alternative sources and platforms, traditional outlets like television and radio still hold strong, especially across older generations. This coexistence of media shows that while access has broadened, shared informational ground has narrowed. As a result, the way people form political knowledge is becoming more uneven. Some segments of society are equipped with rich, diverse inputs, others continue to rely on narrower, more passive forms of media.²⁸

Conclusion

Drawing from a wide range of studies, this paper shows that while Lithuania has a relatively pluralistic and accessible media environment serious challenges persist. Media ownership remains concentrated and often non-transparent, regional outlets struggle with ethical standards, and digital platforms have created new patterns of audience fragmentation and misinformation. Although

²⁶ Balčytienė and Juraitė, "Lithuania."

²⁷ Balčytienė and Juraitė.

²⁸ Balcytiene, "Access, Loyalty, and Trust."

television continues to serve as a shared source of information, generational and social divides are widening in terms of trust and political knowledge. Efforts like media literacy programs and fact-checking initiatives are steps in the right direction, but stronger policies and enforcement are needed to support a more equal and resilient political information landscape.

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