

8. Reporting the EU from Brussels – The Case of Lithuania

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8.1. Introduction

Lithuania being a new member of the European Union (EU) has little experience in EU reporting when compared to older and larger member states. Lithuania has only a few accredited correspondents in Brussels (among whom only one has a permanent full-time job in Brussels). Also, as was reported in the first field study of the AIM project (Balcytiene & Vinciūnienė 2006), the status of EU news has only recently changed from international/foreign to national news. This indicates that the political decisions made at the EU level have a strong impact on the agenda of the national political institutions, and shows a rapidly growing interest in European affairs¹ among the citizens of Lithuania.

The main goal of this report is to create an understanding of the complexity of the routines of the Lithuanian foreign correspondents working in Brussels, whose main task is, firstly, to observe, select and report news about EU political life, and, secondly, to make EU news relevant to the national context, thus attractive for the audience in the home country. In other words, the report seeks to give a better understanding of: (a) who the Brussels correspondents working from Lithuania are, and what are their motivations, roles and functions; (b) the environment in which EU news for Lithuania is gathered, edited and produced; (c) the decision making character in EU news provision (sources used, communication channels applied, etc.); and (d) the prospects for European journalism as well as a European public sphere as assessed by Lithuanian Brussels correspondents.

As the first field study has shown, in EU reporting, journalists from Lithuania justify their decisions on reports in terms of the audiences they serve, as well as the logic of the media they represent (public service broadcaster, tabloid daily, news agency, regional

newspaper, online news portal). In other words, all media produce journalism that is audience-oriented: EU news is published if it is relevant to the audience. Moreover, to make news interesting, journalists contextualise EU news: they present it from a local angle. Only few media outlets (regional daily and public service broadcaster) have confirmed that their newsrooms have a policy to report on Europe.

It is important to notice that among journalists based in Lithuania the notion of EU news has changed in the course of EU integration. Since Lithuania's accession, Europe is mainly represented from the economic rather than the political perspective, which was more prominent during the period of negotiations. A news agenda analysis of the mass media has also demonstrated that the thematic priority in the media in Lithuania concerns economic and financial matters (Vinciūnienė & Balčytienė 2006). A kind of 'Lithuanian European news' can also be found: including news about the financial support that Lithuania receives from the EU; and news about official visits of Lithuanian politicians to other EU countries, and the EU's relationship with Russia.

Despite the fact that the status of EU news has changed, Brussels is both close and far away from the media at home. It is close to those media organisations that either have a Brussels correspondent or invest in new technologies and training of journalists. Brussels is far away for less strategically oriented media, i.e. mainly locally based media.

As the first field study has demonstrated, aside from the conventional sources used in EU reporting (news agencies, national politicians, members of the European Parliament, web pages, etc.) an abundance of information also reaches journalists from EU institutions and representations. According to journalists from Lithuania, the latter type of information, however, has little news value; in addition, its language is very technical. Thus, for many media outlets, a correspondent in Brussels would be very useful in this respect: he/she could explain decision-making structures, and provide insider information about the EU policy-making procedures, etc. Another suggestion from Lithuanian based journalists to improve EU communication is to tailor it to the media logic, because most journalists are not EU experts: they may have language skills, but little understanding of particular policies.

¹ The current representative Eurobarometer survey (2006) shows that one third of Lithuanian citizens feel that their knowledge about the EU is sufficient, one fifth of respondents say that they are involved in EU politics and two fifths of them claim to have no information about the ways and possibilities of active participation. According to the survey, for citizens of Lithuania EU news sources are: television 75% (EU average: 66%), daily newspapers 37% (EU average: 42%), radio 42% (EU average: 30%), other newspapers and magazines 28% (EU average: 19%) and the Internet 26% (EU average: 22%).

To summarise, the political reality, audience demand, editorial policy, and the perceptions of journalists about the EU are the most important factors influencing EU reporting in Lithuania. It appears that identical news value criteria are applied to all news, EU news being no exception. The following sections provide an insider's view into the *procedural* aspects of EU news selection, prioritisation and presentation in the media as performed by the Brussels correspondents from Lithuania.

8.2. Profile of the National Correspondents Corps in Brussels

For the second field study, a qualitative interview methodology was used. Lithuanian journalists working in Brussels were interviewed according to the questionnaire guidelines prepared in advance. The main questions addressed were the following: (a) basic information about the respondents (age, work experience, etc.) and the Brussels news site, (b) communication with the editors at home, (c) information sources and types of internal communication, and (d) the perception of the idea of a European public sphere, European identity and European journalism. As there are a very small number of journalists from Lithuania (3 foreign correspondents)² working in Brussels, it was decided to interview all.

The respondents represent different media outlet types: television, radio and one national daily newspaper. It is worth noting that neither news agencies nor Internet based news media from Lithuania have correspondents in Brussels. Despite this, as the news agenda analysis has demonstrated, these two types of media (news agencies and the Internet media) are the main active providers of EU information in Lithuania (Balčytienė & Vinciūnienė 2006). It is also important to mention that many media organisations (news agencies, business dailies, regional press, the Internet media) send their journalists to Brussels on short visits (mainly two to three times per year). As these journalists are 'guests' and not permanent residents, they were not interviewed. The goal of the project is to understand the working routines, sources and com-

munication patterns of foreign correspondents based in Brussels on a long-term basis.

All three journalists interviewed were very much interested in the results of the project, thus they kindly agreed to answer the questions and to provide all necessary background information. All the interviews were carried out in the period of March 24 to 29, 2006, and took place in the buildings of the European Commission and the Council of the European Union, each lasting between 40 minutes and one hour.

Each of the Brussels correspondents interviewed can be described as 'generalists', or to be more precise: they cover everything. They write about EU as well as NATO issues, they report on the events in other countries of Europe (e.g. on the death of the Pope, or about student strikes in Paris, etc.). This can be explained as a calculated and rational decision: for the media in Lithuania it is cheaper to ask the Brussels correspondent to do a reportage rather than to send a special correspondent from Lithuania.

The Lithuanian media outlets do not practice the tradition of rotation among Brussels correspondents. On the one hand, the editors follow the idea that the permanent resident is much better than a 'guest reporter'. From the point of view of a media organisation, permanently residing journalists gain a better knowledge of the system. Given the time they have invested to cultivate the skills necessary to work in a foreign location, they can do a better job. To teach a new correspondent takes time and money, and hence it is more rational to keep the same correspondent for a longer time in Brussels. On the other hand, the experience of the Brussels correspondents from Lithuania is still relatively new (just a few years), thus a rotation may take place when more experience has been gained, depending on the growing needs of the media in Lithuania.

The first Lithuanian correspondent in Brussels started working there in 2002, two years before Lithuania's accession to the EU in May 2004. Thus, the work experience of a Brussels correspondent from Lithuania is just a few years. Despite this, most of the respondents acknowledged that they were interested in European news long before they started to work in Brussels.

As regards the circumstances in which they became employed in Brussels, the Lithuanian correspondents

² At present, there are only three journalists from Lithuania working in Brussels. Only two of them have permanent accreditation to the EU institutions: the Lithuanian National Radio and Television (the LRT) and the national mid-market daily *Lietuvos rytas*. The journalist from the national daily (*Lietuvos rytas*) comes to Brussels only for special events.

follow one of the two paths: either the journalist got a job and moved to Brussels, i.e. he/she was interested in EU issues, sought a Brussels job following his/her professional needs; or the journalist already lived in Brussels and looked for a job, i.e. he/she had already moved to Brussels because of studies, family or other personal circumstances, and later found a job as Brussels correspondent for a media outlet in Lithuania. The journalists have also opted for different types of employment. Those who moved to Brussels to specifically do this work tend to be salaried correspondents, who have a work contract and are staff members of the media outlet in Lithuania. Freelancing is a typical form of employment for those who were already based in Brussels. While working as freelancers, they are not listed as staff members and do not get any social security contributions from the employer. Freelancers sell what they produce in Brussels, the articles, reportages etc. to the editorial office. These different employment tracks also reflect differences concerning their expectations about their professional careers.

Those who moved to Brussels to be correspondents usually have more experience in journalism – a developed interest in EU affairs – and thus becoming a Brussels correspondent has been a clear advancement in their professional career. They are very self motivated and want to satisfy their professional needs. They also want to have a better understanding of the EU, and to see how it works from the inside. Those freelancing tend to be younger journalists with less professional experience and less knowledge about the EU, wherein becoming a Brussels correspondent for them represents a first step in their journalistic career. However, they have much more ambitious plans and seek to work in Brussels for, e.g., an international news organisation.

Due to the very limited number of respondents, it is quite difficult to describe a typical Brussels correspondent from Lithuania. All three correspondents interviewed are relatively young – between 30 and 45. Two of the correspondents are women. For most, Brussels (or Belgium) is their home: their families are there (Linus Balsys from the Lithuanian Radio and Television works in Brussels with his wife who is a camera-woman), they rent apartments close to the EU institutions. In short, the profile of the three Lithuanian national correspondents in Brussels can be described as being either *self-motivated* or *life-motivated* people (see Table 1).

Table 1. Profiles of Brussels correspondents from Lithuania.

Aspects	Self-motivated	Life-motivated
Experience	Experienced	Not-experienced
Age	Older	Younger
Type of employment	Salaried	Contract
Why Brussels?	Professional ambitions	Personal life conditions
Covering area	EU, other European countries	EU, main events

In short, although there are few Brussels correspondents from Lithuania, they differ as regards work experience, career understanding, type of employment, and future professional expectations.

8.3. The Brussels News Site

For the respondents, Brussels was nothing new: they were regularly reporting on EU matters long before moving to Brussels. They had been to Brussels as special correspondents on short-term assignments, thus many aspects (institutions, work organisation matters) were familiar to them. The Lithuanian journalists enjoy working in Brussels, although as correspondents they do not have a 'real' office: they work everywhere and all the time. Most of them work at home or use their laptops where there is a connection to the Internet. They live very close to the EU institutions – they want to be fast and efficient in sending the most recent news from Brussels to their home newsrooms.

According to the interviewees, in many cases, working in Brussels is more comfortable than working at home (in Lithuania): their chief editors and media directors are far away which gives them more freedom regarding news planning and presentation. In addition, newsroom politics (political or business impacts on the media) do not influence how the correspondents work in Brussels, thus foreign correspondents feel that they can report about the 'real' news and not the local political scandals, which tend to be the number one topic in the press in Lithuania.

The correspondents also positively assess the new communication strategy of the European Commission (the 'Commission'), and compliment the work of the spokespersons. They note that the press rep-

representatives of the Commission are very competent, very well-trained specialists in their policy field, who can answer any question a journalist may ask and provide all the information that is required:

“It is very good to communicate with the spokespersons; they are very well-trained, and responsible. You can ask whatever, even the most stupid questions, you can be totally out of the context, but they will, with great patience, explain that the EU comprises 25 member states... even if that is basic information.”

In contrast to this communication at the EU level, with the Lithuanian governmental institutions it is easier to receive information just by telephone. Politicians, also the heads of the state and government, are easily accessible as a first source, while in the EU institutions all the work is done by press representatives. The spokespersons, not the Commissioners, provide information and answer the questions of journalists.

Being only three journalists from Lithuania among all the other foreign correspondents in Brussels, they certainly form a very small group. Therefore, the professional relations among the three of them are described as cooperative rather than competitive. All three journalists work for different media types: public service broadcaster, commercial radio and the national daily, yet they seem accustomed to working together, and helping each other. The Lithuanian journalists share information and discuss which issues they are going to emphasise in their reports. In short, they are not only colleagues, but also friends.

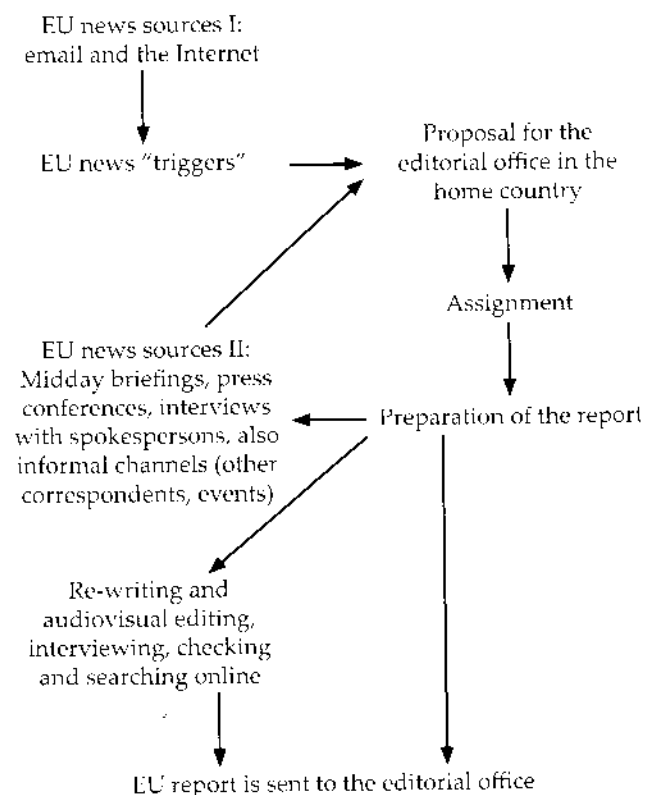
The relationships between Lithuanian journalists and foreign correspondents of other nationalities are a little different. Their professional relationships are not that developed, except with the foreign correspondents from the other Baltic countries. Journalists from France and Great Britain are seen as being kinds of authorities, who know everything and are the first ones to get new information. Lithuanians not only observe how the British and French colleagues work but they also use their reports as sources of information.

8.4. Correspondents' Relationships with Newsrooms and Audiences

The typical day of the Brussels correspondents starts with coffee and the Internet. The journalists receive

hundreds of emails with press releases, as well as announcements of events each day. There can be ten different press releases arising from the same issue: from the EU institutions, from lobbyists, from political parties, etc. Another way to get a feeling of what is going on is through the midday briefing of the Commission. The midday briefings are also a good opportunity for a journalist to carry out interviews and get the necessary quotations from the spokespersons; similarly they do this during the press conferences with the Commissioners. During the day, journalists maintain close contact with their home newsrooms to discuss what the main news topics are, and to plan and receive assignments. This usually happens during the early morning hours. Later in the day, they collect more information (attend the midday briefing), check data and facts, make interviews, film, write texts and send articles or reportages to the home newsrooms (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Information sources, work routines and news management activities of Brussels' correspondents from Lithuania.



According to the respondents, the foreign correspondents working in Brussels have several tasks to

accomplish. On the one hand, they must carefully follow, report and analyse the news. The journalist must know what events are taking place in the EU institutions, what policy decisions are being made, what these decisions imply for Lithuania, as well as to the whole of Europe. On the other hand, they must be the first ones to report the most relevant news to the audience in Lithuania.

Indeed, it is expensive to have a correspondent in Brussels when it would be cheaper to rely on EU news as reported by the news agencies. Hence, the news agency, not the other correspondent from Lithuania, is the biggest competitor. Brussels correspondents need to be faster and to provide more information than the news agency. The correspondents in Brussels are facing two types of pressures: on the one hand, they have to report the news earlier than the news agencies; and, on the other hand, they should provide more information than the news agencies.

Older journalists, especially those who had been specialising in EU reporting while in Lithuania, see their job as a verification of their professional ambitions. They know how to reach the main information sources, e.g. the EU Presidency, the Commissioners etc. The topics they prepare for the newscast usually have an international focus. When working from Brussels, the journalist needs to provide analysis as well as reporting.

In spite of these positive aspects, the interviewees also mention some serious problems associated with working in Brussels. The difficulty in understanding the language (the 'Brussels jargon') is frequently mentioned as the main drawback in EU reporting, in addition to the inherent complexity of economic and financial issues. According to the Lithuanian correspondents, these drawbacks can seriously affect the EU news agenda: for the editors to accept the news story, the journalist has to work hard to prepare an article in an appealing and easy to understand language.

A lack of visual material is another problem noted by the Lithuanian correspondents that usually affects how the EU is reported by the audiovisual media. On average, the audiovisual journalists prepare between three and eight reportages per week, with, of course, some help provided by the audiovisual service of the Commission.

The Brussels correspondents unanimously agree that European news is no longer simply international news in the media in Lithuania. Basically, the news from the EU is news about Lithuania. For instance, in the I.R.T. newscast EU affairs are reported in the domestic news section. This is one of the reasons why journalists in Brussels are looking for issues related to Lithuania or trying to find an angle to make it interesting for the home audience.

In the discussion regarding who initiates an EU story, the journalists have responded that in most cases it comes from them, and in very rare cases also from the news editors. As mentioned before, Brussels correspondents have particular tasks, i.e. to follow, to analyse and to report on EU matters. Correspondents know what is happening in the political life of the EU, thus they are competent to decide which topic has prime priority for Lithuania and suggest the most relevant to the editors. However, the editor still has the final say regarding the selection of the news.

The most important criterion for selecting EU news is its relevance and importance to Lithuania: the more meaningful the topic is to the Lithuanian audience, the greater the possibility that the news will be selected. As one explains:

"The editors usually ask me: so what is happening, is there anything about Lithuania? In the news, the link to Lithuania can be direct (e.g. European support to the farmers) or indirect (e.g. dumping of Chinese shoes in the market – this message translates that shoe prices in Lithuania are affected)."

The potential negative aspect of the news is also an important selection criterion: bad news is 'good' news. However, this is mainly how the editors, not the Brussels correspondents think. Negativity in this sense mostly implies scandals in Lithuania, for example the recent scandals about the failure of national politicians to adequately use the financial support of the EU. A third criterion is related to references to elite people, e.g. the Lithuanian European Commissioner, Lithuanian members of the European Parliament, the Lithuanian Prime Minister or the President visiting Brussels. If the Lithuanian Commissioner gives a speech, this always becomes an important news item.

Other criteria for EU news selection are as follows: frequency, unexpectedness, continuity; personalisa-

tion takes a secondary place in the selection of EU news but, nevertheless, it is important. In short, Brussels correspondents see their audience as well-educated, interested in foreign politics and business. This applies mainly to the middle aged Lithuanians. For such an audience, the journalists seek to provide information about economic prospects, about new regulations, exemptions etc. From the point of view of correspondents, economic issues have the top priority in the media in Lithuania.

8.5. Sources

The largest amount of information reaches journalists through the Internet (personal email and also newsgroups that the journalist subscribes to; see Figure 1). Literally, each day, Brussels correspondents receive hundreds of emails with press releases and announcements from different press offices (from Directorates-General, national representations, etc.). In addition to the electronic PR news, it is also a very common practice for journalists to subscribe to different newsgroups, to check different news and institutional portals (e.g. the EUobserver).

In general, electronic information is used as a kind of 'trigger': if the topic is interesting, the journalist may then investigate the issue further. Also, journalists check very thoroughly any follow-up emails, which may have opinions and arguments, as this information becomes very useful background information giving context to facts and details of press releases. Official press briefings provide another channel of information. Journalists regularly attend the midday briefings organised by the Commission, and hear the latest information from the EU officials. They receive data about forthcoming events or significant press conferences. Here journalists have the opportunity to ask questions about the topics he/she is interested in, and also gather material for quotations.

As an information source, journalists also use the Internet pages of EU institutions, reports by news agencies, information from national representatives, all of which can be considered as formal sources. However, no less important are informal channels of information:

"Gossip, rumours, other colleagues – here we are not competitors, therefore it is good to share information. Also local media as well as the media from other countries, the Internet..."

Brussels correspondents tend to receive a good deal of information from colleagues in other countries, particularly as they are not competitors, they can easily share information. They communicate with each other during the midday briefing – about the latest news, about the topics they are preparing for the newscast. In this way, they can learn what has happened and what they have missed. Still, as mentioned above, Lithuanian journalists do not have close professional relations with foreign journalists.

Another informal information source and one of the most important from the point of view of journalists are the Lithuanian officials working in the EU institutions. This includes national representatives, European Parliamentarians, the European Commissioner and other officials working in the EU.

To conclude, the work of journalists in Brussels is quite formalised. Journalists have to follow the rules of the EU communication strategy. From what we have learned in our interviews, it seems that there is no opportunity for a journalist to acquire information or to carry out an interview incidentally: for the interviews or even visual material (which are very difficult to get hold of), the journalist needs a prior agreement.

Information is distributed through official channels, e.g. email, midday briefings, occasional press conferences, etc. But journalists also effectively use informal communication and informal sources: for instance, during the EU summit it was easier for journalists to receive news from informal rather than formal sources. In this way, it is much faster, although not so reliable. Informal relations can be observed also in daily routines, especially during the midday briefings. Just by starting a conversation with another journalist one can learn something that was not announced at the official media event.

However, Lithuanians do not have very close informal relations with the spokespersons of the Commission, nor are they in close cooperation with other foreign colleagues. There are many reasons for this: they are a small group of journalists, from a new member state, etc. Despite the fact that informal relations can be very useful for their work, the correspondents from Lithuania receive information mainly via formal channels.

8.6. The Relationship between Journalists and the EU Integration Process

Brussels correspondents from Lithuania are quite sceptical about a common – so called European – journalism. Their responses suggested that there are too many different countries with their own interests and their own views on the EU, and this makes it impossible to talk about any common criteria of European journalism. According to correspondents, journalists from different countries are interested in different issues. Moreover, while reporting on the same issue they emphasise different things. So there can be common Lithuanian, British or French journalism, but not really an EU journalism. As demonstrated in their daily routines, Brussels correspondents are mainly interested in topics that concern Lithuania, not the common politics of the EU.

As regards the role of the media in the development of a European identity or a European public sphere, the journalists had little to say. They attempted to provide an answer, but it seemed that they could not articulate what they wanted to say. However, they did recognise that the issue of European identity is a popular topic in Brussels, especially in discussions regarding the acceptance of new member states, for example Turkey.

According to the journalists, the issue of a European identity is discussed in the context of cultural matters, people, and such values as democracy, freedom of the press, religion and so on. The issue of European identity has therefore a theoretical rather than a practical context when an article or television report is prepared.

8.7. Conclusion

In Brussels, the number of foreign correspondents from Lithuania is very low due to complex reasons: for most media companies in Lithuania it is too expensive to have a Brussels correspondent; this also relates to whether an outlet has the competent journalists. In addition, some Lithuanian based media professionals disagree as to whether it is necessary to have a Brussels correspondent in order to do quality EU reporting.

Foreign correspondents experience a number of pressures in reporting from Brussels. In their daily rou-

tines, they fulfil numerous complex tasks: observing, selecting and reporting news about the political life of the EU, and providing analysis. In addition, they seek to make the EU news relevant to the national context. Being in Brussels, they also are under pressure to be the first to report the most relevant news to the audience in Lithuania. To be successful, they need many practical talents: they must be competent news gatherers and reporters, be flexible, and have comfortable working conditions (all our respondents told us that they work all the time and wherever it is technically possible).

Lithuanian journalists enjoy working in Brussels for several reasons. Firstly, they have the power to judge what is important at the EU level. Secondly, in Lithuania they are treated as EU experts, and thus are frequently requested to comment and provide analysis. For some, especially the self-motivated journalists, this is an excellent verification of their professional ambitions. Thirdly, they feel that by working in Brussels they can report news that has a ‘real value’, instead of focusing on domestic political scandals, which are the typical ongoing issues in the domestic media.

Certainly, their motivations for coming to Brussels vary. Journalists follow one of two routes – either they are self-motivated and look for a job as foreign correspondent in Brussels, or, because of life circumstances they move to Brussels and only later start looking for a journalistic career. It seems that the former route is a better solution for both the journalist and the media company. The journalist gets a permanent job, instead of working only on a contract basis, while for the media company having a Brussels correspondent is beneficial as reports, comments and analysis can be requested on a daily basis.

The communication culture in Brussels differs from that of Lithuania. News gathering and reporting at the EU institutions requires careful planning and management. There is little opportunity for spontaneous interviews. In Lithuania, journalists are accustomed to speaking to primary sources, while, for instance, at the Commission, everything has to be planned far in advance.

Despite the fact that the work of journalists in Brussels is quite formalised, there are also informal channels via which to receive information and get a sense of what is going on. These mainly include discussions

with fellow correspondents from other countries, gossip, information from national politicians, etc. Informal communication can provide a good background for a news report, however not everything gathered in such a way is as reliable as that distributed through formal channels, e.g. announcements or interviews.

As mentioned above, although informal relations can be very useful for their work, the correspondents from Lithuania gather information mainly via formal channels: the Internet, press releases, the midday briefings and press conferences.

What do Brussels correspondents from Lithuania think of their role in the EU integration process? From their point of view, European news is national news. In the news agenda, the EU news goes into the domestic news section; hence they are obliged to look for a Lithuanian angle. According to correspondents, journalists from different countries are interested in different issues: they have different priorities and different emphases. The correspondents from Lithuania are sceptical about their role in the development of a transnational European journalism, or indeed about whether such a journalism can exist alongside national journalism traditions. They believe that the Lithuanian media is too domestically focused for this to develop.

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