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# COVERAGE OF YOUTH ISSUES BY LOCAL PRINT MEDIA OF POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES (COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF LITHUANIAN, GEORGIAN AND POLISH PRESS)

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## ABSTRACT

The Soviet Union kept its citizens in an information vacuum. Media worked under strict censorship conditions. Today, information about news happening in the world in the post-Soviet space is disseminated on a daily. Although the media environment in the post-Soviet space has changed significantly since the official abolition of Soviet censorship and the gaining of independence, it is interesting to examine how this development has unfolded in different countries. This paper provides a comparative analysis of how youth issues are covered in the local print media of Lithuania, Georgia, and Poland. The results of the study will allow us to assess the quality of media development in three countries with a shared past but different opportunities. The study will offer insights into the similarities and differences in the press's treatment of this specific direction in the three countries and highlight the challenges and needs that exist in youth-focused local media in the post-Soviet space.

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## KEYWORDS

Post-Soviet Space, Local Media, Print Media, Youth Issues

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## Introduction.

The essence of media lies in its mass appeal, offering diverse content to audiences with varying interests. Today, there is a vast array of media outlets in the market. Alongside traditional media, new media has significantly evolved. Informational blogs and vlogs have gained particular popularity among young people.

Traditional media must focus on creating content that engages young audiences to retain them. While young people are naturally interested in politics and global news, it is crucial to provide them with access to content that aligns with their specific needs. Relevant content for youth includes topics such as adolescence, parent-child relationships, culture, sports, various educational projects, bullying, and a wide range of entertainment and educational materials. The media's role in raising public awareness and informing society largely depends on how frequently and from what perspective these topics are covered.

Today, the existence of an independent, diverse, and robust media is one of the key indicators of a country's democracy and development. Journalism in the post-Soviet space has faced a challenging path to growth. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, countries developed in different ways, and in some of them, the media is still not free.

This article examines the coverage of youth issues in the local print media of Lithuania, Georgia, and Poland. The research subject and objects are defined by the countries' shared past and their rankings in the 2024 Press Freedom Index. The non-governmental organization Reporters Without Borders publishes an annual global ranking based on the press freedom index. According to the organization, the index is determined by journalists' ability to work free from political, economic, legal, and social interference, both individually and in groups, while selecting and covering topics. It also takes into account potential physical and psychological threats journalists may face in their work. According to the 2024 data, Estonia ranks highest among post-Soviet countries in terms of press freedom, holding 6th place, followed by Latvia in 12th, Lithuania in 13th, Georgia in 103rd, and Poland in 47th place (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.).

Although Poland was never officially a member of the Soviet Union, it is historically considered a satellite state, as the Soviet regime had a significant influence on the country and played a major role in dividing its territories.

The focus on regional media became the subject of research due to its potential. It can discuss the daily life and needs of a specific region in more detail than central media outlets. Typically, central media, due to commercial interests and time constraints, only highlight regional stories that are of a broader scale or importance. As a result, it is impossible to continuously cover the everyday life of any particular region.

The aim of the research is to review the regional media of Georgia, Lithuania, and Poland, and to identify the similarities and differences between them. It will explore the portrayal of topics relevant to young people, their problems, interests, and opportunities, as well as analyze how the media in these countries have developed since the collapse of the Soviet regime and the abolition of censorship.

The research period is defined as May 2024. To achieve the stated goal, the following research questions are posed:

1. How frequently are youth-related topics covered in the regional newspapers of Georgia, Poland, and Lithuania?
2. What are the main topics these publications focus on?
3. What similarities and differences exist in the coverage of youth issues in the local newspapers of Georgia, Poland, and Lithuania?

### **Methodology**

In this article, three research methods are utilized: analysis of secondary sources, content analysis, and comparative analysis. Secondary sources are essential for obtaining existing information on the topic. Content analysis ensures the depth and relevance of the research by seeking answers to the questions surrounding the research focus. For the content analysis, the websites of regional newspapers from Lithuania, Georgia, and Poland were used. The materials examined were published in May 2024 and specifically addressed youth-related issues and problems.

### **Literature Review**

To analyze the past and present of three different countries, the study uses scientific articles, reports prepared by various NGOs and research organizations, as well as monographs. Additionally, internet resources, including the websites of the newspapers being studied, were utilized.

For information on Lithuanian local media, we referred to the work of media researcher Jolanta Mažylė, *Lithuanian Parliamentary Election and the Regional Press* (2016). Mažylė notes that Lithuanian local press, when covering politics, tends to focus more on local events, and when addressing general national topics, it is guided by the scale of events and the interests of the target audience. Common topics of interest include issues related to taxes, pensions, and price regulations (Mažylė, 2017).

Another significant source for this article is the website of the NGO *Reporters Without Borders* (<https://rsf.org/en>). It provides the global ranking of countries based on the press freedom index and includes brief information on each country, which is crucial for the research. For example, on the website's section about Poland, it is noted that the media has been turned into a "propaganda tool." There have been instances of restrictions on journalists' work and even arrests. From September 2021 to the end of 2022, the state prohibited journalists from working near the Belarusian border, where hundreds of migrants were attempting to enter Poland. Several deaths were reported at the scene, and the state did not allow widespread coverage of the events (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

In Freedom House's report *Pluralism Under Attack: The Assault on Press Freedom in Poland* (Chapman, 2017), it is mentioned that media freedom in Poland has been significantly restricted since the

victory of the "Law and Justice" (PiS) party in the elections. They began interfering with the editorial policy of public broadcasters. Although this led to protests from the public and journalists, it was ultimately ineffective (Chapman, 2017). General information about Polish regional media can also be found in the *Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom* (CMPF) report. In many Polish regions, the only local media outlets are controlled by local authorities, raising doubts about their objectivity and the thoroughness of local monitoring (Vanevska, 2024).

Research on the state of media in Georgia indicates that the media landscape in the country is highly polarized. Regional media in Georgia faces numerous challenges, the most significant being budget constraints and a shortage of qualified personnel. Local publications are sold in limited quantities at press kiosks in the regions. Vendors cite not only the low circulation of these publications but also a lack of interest from the audience as reasons for this (Margia, 2023). Notably, a report by "Transparency International Georgia" highlighted several issues. Among them, it is crucial to note that media owners and employees need to deepen their understanding of journalistic ethics. The government uses "various tools" to create financial problems for opposition channels (Tsetskhladze, 2018).

The primary research is based on the content of the newspapers under study. The article examines the websites of these newspapers and the materials related to youth issues published in May 2024.

### **1. The Development of Media in Lithuania and the Representation of Youth Issues in Local Print Media**

Lithuania's contemporary media environment is free and diverse. The NGO "Reporters Without Borders" writes on its official website that the country's public broadcaster is particularly popular. Additionally, online media has a large audience, with its primary users being young people. It is noteworthy that media regulatory and monitoring bodies in Lithuania are free from political influence, unlike the board of the public broadcaster, where many members are appointed by politicians. Specifically, of the board's 12 members, 4 are appointed by the Seimas (Parliament) and another 4 by the President (Lithuanian National Radio and Television, 2024).

For the presented article, the research subject selected was the newspaper *Vakarų ekspresas*, which operates in one of the largest regions of the country, Klaipėda. The main criteria for selection were its many years of experience, large circulation, recognition, and well-developed website. *Vakarų ekspresas* was founded on September 15, 1990, and initially operated under the name *Mažoji Lietuva*. Today, it is one of the largest daily regional newspapers in Klaipėda. The website, [www.ve.lt](http://www.ve.lt), is bilingual, available in Lithuanian and Russian. The materials are divided into the following sections: news, current issues (covering both Klaipėda and events across Lithuania), business, sports, culture, entertainment, and more. There is no specific section titled "For Youth," but topics of interest to young people are integrated across various categories.

The newspaper focuses on issues such as education, arts, entertainment, health, and employment for young people. Articles are written in various formats, including informational reports, features, and interviews. During the research period, the newspaper introduced its readers to several interesting and successful young individuals from different fields living in the region. The tone of these articles was positive, not only highlighting the individuals' achievements but also promoting active lifestyles and education.

The publication emphasizes the importance of youth employment and the challenges they face when searching for work, such as high competition and the need for several years of work experience alongside their education. To support youth employment, the newspaper also provides information about targeted projects. For example, a May 21, 2024 article reveals that the Klaipėda municipality is running an employment program for minors aged 14-18, helping them earn their own money during the holiday season. The article provides detailed criteria for the program, explaining that the working hours and job descriptions are aligned with the age and needs of the youth (Norvilė, 2024).

Employment is a significant issue for citizens of all ages. The reviewed articles focused on the necessary points, making the media product a valuable resource for young people. Along with information, the newspaper offers practical advice and discusses real challenges related to the issue.

During the research period, the newspaper also published material on the availability of entertainment spaces in the region. The article included a survey of young people living in Klaipėda. The main questions were: How do they spend their free time, and do they feel that they face challenges in self-fulfillment? In addition to discussing numerous complex issues, the article reviewed various local establishments offering entertainment, cultural, and educational activities. The journalist also presented the opinion of a surveyed youth, who described how they enjoy leisure time with friends in Klaipėda (Blekaitytė, 2023).

The newspaper also covers the opening of new entertainment or educational spaces in the region. It reports on visits from public figures who hold public meetings or discussions with young people. For instance, it covered a meeting at the Klaipeda Youth Center with actor Giedrius Savickas. The article was informative, noting that young people would have the opportunity to ask the actor questions and take photos with him (Vakarų ekspresas, 2024).

*Vakarų ekspresas* also focuses on the issue of bullying. Bullying is unacceptable and cannot be justified in any way. It is especially important to properly convey the definition of bullying to adolescents and school students, informing them of its negative effects. Naturally, the media should not remain indifferent to such issues.

The newspaper frequently writes about the relationship between teenagers and their parents, a crucial topic given that adolescence often brings a clash of interests and views between generations, which can lead to discussions and conflicts. In various articles on this subject, the newspaper presents advice and theses in a way that helps parents understand their role while also making teenagers aware of the importance of their family members' perspectives. These articles have a positive psychological impact and can contribute to building healthy relationships and communication. The newspaper also publishes materials on dealing with pre-exam stress, recognizing adolescent depression, and the importance of healthy eating (Vakarų ekspresas, 2024).

It is noteworthy that the materials on these topics, published during the research period, were prepared by psychologists, which adds to their credibility and professional quality.

The newspaper also highlights the success of local athletes and sports teams. Articles on sports were published with titles like "Klaipeda's Young Wrestlers Are the Strongest in Lithuania" (Pauliukonis, 2024) and "Historic Result: Lithuanian Youth Hockey Team Wins Silver at the World Championship" (ekspresas, www.ve.lt, 2024). There are frequent reports about young footballers who were named players of the month.

Thus, the newspaper is highly diverse and covers all events in the region, including youth issues, in a timely manner.

## **2. Post-Soviet Polish Media and Coverage of Youth Issues in the Regional Press**

Although Poland was never officially a member of the Soviet Union, it was heavily influenced by it and had to live by Soviet rules. In 1947, the country established an Office for the Control of Press and Publications, and all media activities were strictly regulated. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Poland sharply shifted toward a European development path. In 1999, it became a member of NATO, and in 2004, it joined the European Union.

Today, there is a significant presence of foreign capital in the country, with some media outlets owned by foreign investors. The Polish media market is diverse and competitive. Nevertheless, numerous studies highlight alarming levels of media pluralism and issues with press freedom in Poland. Many researchers note that media freedom is frequently restricted, and the media has become a "tool of propaganda" (Reporters Without Borders).

For the presented article, the research subject selected was the official website of *Gazeta Krakowska* (www.gazetakrakowska.pl), a media outlet with a long history. The first issue of this newspaper was published on November 2, 1945. It primarily covers events happening in Krakow and informs readers about news, ongoing events, education, culture, sports, and other current topics.

The newspaper features content across informative, analytical, and entertainment genres. It introduces readers to interesting and successful young people, covering various youth events and sports activities. It also focuses on important issues such as youth financial independence and debt obligations. One article analyzes the results of a survey conducted by a research company involving 2,000 young people. According to the article, Polish youth need an average of 4,000 to 6,000 zlotys per month (approximately \$1,000 to \$1,500) to live independently and cover various needs. The statistics show that, as of March, the debt of young people aged 18 to 24 has reached 1 billion Polish zlotys, including various expenses like transportation fines, internet bills, rent, and more (Badowski, 2024). The article is valuable as it highlights the importance of youth financial well-being for both the country's and their personal development. By focusing on such issues, the media brings to the forefront important details, including insights into the nation's economic and social conditions.

As part of a social campaign, the newspaper also prepared material on cyberbullying and sexual harassment among children and teenagers. A survey of 2,000 respondents revealed that 6 out of 10 had experienced some form of online bullying or sexual harassment at least once. This is especially common in the form of sexual comments and private messaging. The issue affects not only teenagers but also children and adults. In an interview with the newspaper, one of the campaign organizers mentioned that cyberbullying has become particularly relevant in recent years and should never be normalized. Any form of violence requires a



strong response (Ignaciuk, 2024). This is a global issue, not limited to Poland. The media's focus on raising awareness and promoting campaigns against violence is an important and valuable step.

The newspaper also offered an intriguing article on Generation Z (people born between 1995 and 2010), their interests, capabilities, and competitiveness in the labor market. The author notes that this generation is highly dependent on the internet and engages in frequent online communication. They are not afraid of challenges and start working at a young age. The article also features an interview with a professor from the University of Warsaw's Sociology Department. According to Professor Michel Doblorovich, today's youth change jobs much more frequently and easily than their parents and grandparents did. In the past, most people would stay at the same job for decades or until retirement. Modern youth, however, are not afraid of challenges or new environments (Madan, 2024). This article provides motivation for young people.

The newspaper frequently covers news and success stories about local sports teams and athletes, as well as youth tournaments. This not only promotes a healthy lifestyle but also boosts the motivation of young athletes.

In summary, *Gazeta Krakowska* focuses on both entertainment and informative aspects when reporting on youth-related issues. The research suggests that the media outlet strives to cater to the diverse interests of its audience.

### **3 Coverage of Youth Issues in Georgian Regional Press**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia has been trying to develop on a European vector. In 2023, it received the status of a candidate for EU membership. The country's media environment is diverse. Both traditional and new media are developed. Central media outlets are particularly popular; and the regional media is in a difficult situation due to lack of financial resources. Current political developments in the country also affect the specifics of media work. The environment is polarized, some of the influential media outlets are connected to specific political figures and parties. Some politicians have their own media. Often the media intentionally distorts facts and presents them to the public in a changed or exaggerated form. Pro-government and opposition media are biased, the subtext of the information they disseminate is easy to understand for an objective audience.

For the submitted article, the 103-year-old Newspaper Adjara operating in the Adjara Region was selected as a research object. Its first issue was published on March 18, 1921 in Russian and the next day in Georgian. Initially, the newspaper was of a propaganda nature and functioned according to Soviet "rules". Today, the publication focuses on current events in the region and the country. It is noteworthy that it is financed from State allocations, but according to its Editor-in-Chief, Marina Mitaishvili, the publication covers the events impartially. Moreover, government representatives often refuse interviews, while opposition representatives use the opportunity to communicate with people and therefore they are often on cameras. (ajara.tv, 2024) The official website of the media outlet [www.gazetiajara.ge](http://www.gazetiajara.ge) has a plain design. Rubrics are almost not separated. News and various materials are completely placed on the page. The website has a convenient search system. Archive materials are arranged by year and month. In May 2024, the newspaper published various materials about youth. Including those, about successful young people, current youth and sports projects underway in the region.

The publication covers the activities of successful youth living in the region. In the focus of the newspaper were: a young female poet, a street artist who decorates different places of the city with beautiful paintings; three-time vice-champion of France - Georgian ballroom dancer; a student from Batumi, who won the best actor category at the country's student festival; also, the first Georgian ship mechanic, a young woman, who talks about the difficulties in the profession and the stereotypes that she often faced at the beginning of her career. (Lamparadze, 2024)

Materials, introducing successful young people to the public, are frequent on the publication's website. Their content is positive and in addition to presenting the respondents in a positive light, they also have a positive effect in terms of motivating them and increasing their awareness. It is also an incentive for other young people interested in similar activities.

The research period, i.e. the month of May, is the school graduation period in Georgia. That's why the newspaper prepared some materials about graduation events and graduates of schools in Ajara region. (Abuladze, 2024)

The content of the materials prepared on the topic was only informative. It is important that the publication devoted three materials to the protest performances of students and pupils, which were related to the draft law "On transparency of foreign influence" initiated by the Georgian Government. (Lamparadze, Newspaper Ajara, 2024)

The materials were informative in this case too. A media product with such a content is important in order to highlight the youth opinion about the current political processes underway in the country.

It is important that the publication focuses on targeted projects in the region that serve the youth education and development. Several materials were written on this topic, including the importance of the development of children's rights centers, as well as the winning project for increasing interest in physics among young people in framework of the current grant program underway in Ajara region. Unfortunately, the material was only informative and no further details or interviews were covered. (Newspaper, 2024)

The publication also deals with sports topics. The success of both local athletes and teams, as well as Georgians who won in large-scale tournaments, are covered. During the research period, the newspaper covered the ongoing wrestling festival in the region and prepared a material about Giorgi Chkhikvadze, a gold medalist in Greco-Roman wrestling at the Baku Under-23 European Championship. (Ajara, 2024) The materials were informative and were not distinguished by a special narrative style or diversity of information.

It is noteworthy that Newspaper Ajara covers general events in the region as well as in the country. During the research period, various materials on issues of interest to youth were not printed. Most of them were informative and the topics covered can be considered banal. In this regard, the publication did not offer to its readers news, interesting direction and different topics. The aforementioned materials on the website were mostly covered in the genre of news or interviews.

### **Conclusions**

As a conclusion, it can be said that the data described in the Press Freedom Index are relevant for the example of the considered countries.

A comparative study showed that in Lithuania

- It is a high-level media environment, with a refined regional media space. The local newspaper discussed in the article covers both local and national events;
- Healthcare, sports, culture, education, employment and other topical areas are covered around topics interesting to youth.
- Such topics as: mental and psychological health are covered, the materials are saturated with qualified comments and opinions of psychologists and relevant field specialists.

The comparative study also showed that the Polish media has many problems, which many international research and non-governmental organizations also point out.

- Media is developed in the country, but there are specific regions where local media does not function at all.
- At the example of the discussed newspaper, it can be said that the media outlet covers the current news in the region quite interestingly. It tries to cover various directions on youth topics, however, compared to the Lithuanian newspaper, the topics are not so diverse.

- It is interesting that the publication covers both entertainment and problematic issues.

Comparative research has shown that along with traditional media, new media are also developed in Georgia. However, regional media face many challenges.

- Newspaper Ajara discussed in the article is also considered the chronicler of the region due to its many years of history. As revealed in the research, the publication is not diverse in the direction of youth issues;
- During the research period, the newspaper did not cover employment, bullying, education and other problematic or interesting issues. Covering such large-scale and complex topics and informing the public is of the utmost importance. All the more so when the regional media draws attention to the topic and stands on guard to inform, educate and provide correct information to the public.

Research results can be formulated as follows:

- Based on the reviewed newspapers, the Lithuanian media most often covered materials intended for or prepared for youth. That is why several materials on a specific topic could be found.
- In Krakow Gazeta and Newspaper Ajara one or two materials were devoted to similar topics.
- Also, it should be noted that among the websites of publications, the page of Newspaper Ajara is the least organized.
- The purpose of the article was to study the development of media space in Lithuania, Poland and Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is noteworthy that Lithuania has made special progress from the listed countries in terms of media development. There is a free media environment in the country and a space almost free from polarization.

- After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Poland also developed significantly, although the level of freedom of the press in the country is satisfactory, the media is not completely free from influence.
- The media environment in Georgia is polarized. Regional media suffers from lack of budget. The Georgian media market is relatively weak in terms of researched content.

Thus, based on research, it can be claimed in terms of the coverage of youth issues by Lithuanian, Georgian and Polish local print media that the media environment of Lithuania has developed the most after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which is evident from its current situation.

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