How Media Constructs Political Corruption: Case of the Internet Media Reaction to the Political Corruption Scandal during Election Campaign to the Parliament of Lithuania in 2016

Renata Matkevičienė

Vilnius University, Lithuania

Abstract:

Corruption is not just a problem of developing countries, corruption scandals arise and develop also in Western democracies, what differ are the perception and assessment of corruption. As scientists state, corruption is a phenomenon that is determined by the country's democratic (state) traditions and culture, dominant values and behaviour standards, etc.

Most of the time corruption is analysed in the context of political, business, health care and media systems that are interrelated. By far, talking about the understanding and reaction to corruption in politics, are based on public perception of corruption. Corruption in political arena is related not only to actions of politicians, or public officers, but depends on the understanding and its tolerance in society. The cases of political corruption are rare, but they still happen, and it does not matter whether it is a developing county, a newly established democracy, or a so called western democracy. The phenomenon of political corruption is based on political culture, or even more broadly speaking, on national culture, traditions. And because of that cases of political corruption and their evaluation and reaction to them of the participants of political system (political actors, media and citizens) in general demonstrates the level of tolerance of such actions. Results of political election campaign can be considered as the mirror of perception of political corruption in political system, because they demonstrate the activities of all participants of political system and their attitude toward the case.

This article aims to analyze the concept of political corruption in order to identify its main determinants and to investigate the potential influence of the case of corruption of political actor on the outcome of the political elections.

In this paper the quantitative media content analysis is presented to show the coverage of the political party in relation to political election campaign during the political election period and political corruption event. It is done in search for the factors that determine the presentation and possible impact of political corruption event on the results of political elections. In the research the media content of the political actor, that was accused of corruptive activities (bribery) was analysed. The article also discusses whether the political corruption of political party leader and its presentation in the media may affect the political election results.

Key words:

corruption, political corruption, bribery, corruption scandal, media, elections

Discussion on the concept of corruption

Corruption is one of the topics in question, a problem, which has been tackled, and the problem that has been faced by many countries. Corruption is also a problem that is difficult to communicate, because in every country corruption has different public understanding of it, and the damage that could be the result of corruption to different aspects of social life (political system, economics, etc.).

Perhaps the most common definition of corruption is describing corruption as actions that are contrary to performance standards set in certain society. As Oskar Kurer (2015: 31) states, "corruption always involves a failure to conform to some standards". The standards may cover different actors - both persons and state figures and organizations.

This definition refers to a number of important aspects: First of all, it requires pre-agreed rules, recognized infringement of these rules, "conventions or laws concerning the proper exercise of public duties for the purposes of private, pecuniary or personal gain" (Thompson 2000: 28). Corruption is always associated with personal benefit that could be direct or indirect, material or immaterial, related to actions that enhance the welfare of the person's family or the group or clique as it's called by Kurer (2015: 33) with whom the person identifies (political party, business entity, etc.).

There are several key aspects in defining corruption, which are consistent with description of corruption in the political system: corruption as such should put the (1) intended rogue actions (or otherwise, actions that violate rules and norms) (2) that could serve others

illegitimate outcomes and could lead to bribery or favour (Arnold, Heidenheimer 2007: 6-7) of (3) a person that has a position of trust (official, civic servant, person who has a power) and (4) holds position of trust; (5) what indicates the influence for the beneficial effects of the giver (Thompson 2000: 28).

As it was mentioned earlier, researchers had identified correlation, or to be more precise - some relations between corruption and culture, cultural values and norms, accepted rules of conduct, that are recognized in a given society. As John Gardiner states, different nations have different notion, and different legal regulations of corruption, for example, in some nations, laws deal only with the most blatant bribery: other nations however have added laws to regulate nepotism, conflicts of interest, election campaign contributions, etc.; while in some nations "gift-giving" or "dash" payments are acceptable (Gardiner 2007: 36).

These statements about the prevalence of corruption in various countries are enhanced by the results of the special Eurobarometer study on corruption: three-quarters of respondents (around 80%) think that corruption is widespread in their own country. The countries where respondents are most likely to think corruption is widespread are Greece (99%), Italy (97%), Lithuania, Spain, Czech Republic, Croatia, Romania, Slovenia, Portugal and Slovakia (all more than 90%); respondents from Nordic countries think corruption is rare – more than half of respondents from those countries agree to this statement - Denmark (75%), Finland (64%) and Sweden (54%) (Special Eurobarometer 2014: 6).

As Mark Philp (2015: 18-19) states, we usually attach the negative connotations to calling things corrupt, especially if they are ascribed to them by politicians, journalists, or ordinary people, "each of whom may have different concerns and different interests in identifying certain types of conduct as corrupt." As it is discussed in many scholarly publications, public opinion, understanding or status of corruption in country, set not only by the law, but by the cultural values as well, affect behaviours and responses to corrupt activities. John Gardiner (2007: 32) provides an explanation of the relation of cultural values and citizen's behaviour stating that "investigators and prosecutors know that if citizens are concerned about corruption (…) they will be more likely to report crimes, to assist in investigations, and to vote for convictions when they serve as jurors. (...) Citizens' values about corruption are likely to affect how they behave themselves – whether they will offer bribes or will abide by the requirements of the law".

But the most important factor that influences the occurrence of corruption and rooting of it in different fields and social systems is money: the vast part of the activities, their success depends on the money, and this creates an environment conducive to corruption. As it was stated in the Global Corruption Report (2004: 19), "much of democratic political activity simply could not occur without it", because of this, possibilities of corruption in political processes are high.

Political corruption: party finances, political actors, and interests

Corruption in politics usually is defined as the process in which the political actor that has some power to make an impact on (political) decisions receives beneficial proposal to use that power to meet the interest of the third party.

Mark Philp (2015: 22) strengthens some key elements that describe political corruption: political actor (or more broadly - public official), who has some power and who is intended to violate the norms of performance of the public institution to suit public interests; someone (person or institution) who will benefit from the act of political actor by themselves or a third party they represent and will "gain access to goods or services they would not otherwise obtain."

The misuse of money and power, particularly when it reflects corrupt practices in politics, creates some problems– and not only because this harms democratic principles, but violets the faith in fair representation, transparent decision making. According to public opinion on political corruption researches corruption is seen in some countries like Poland, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Finland, Luxembourg as widespread within political parties - around 40% of respondents in the countries mentioned before have claimed that political corruption is in political system (Special Eurobarometer 2014: 24).

It is believed that political corruption could lead to some possible ways of response by citizens: it could be related with decreasing political participation rates, apathy and distrust in the political institutions and processes. But at the same time the research results (Special Eurobarometer 2014: 24) show some contradictory numbers - countries where it is quite widely understood that corruption in political system is used, in the same countries the most positive perceptions of politicians have been displayed: in countries like Cyprus, Lithuania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Malta and Poland, Luxembourg and Sweden - around 40% of respondents are positive toward evaluation of political actors and institutions.

In the context of political corruption the financing policies and practices of political parties play an important role. The practices in different countries differ (in some countries parties could be financed by the state, in some - political parties could be owned by individuals), and those differences make an impact on the understanding and evaluation of political corruption. For example, in the countries where political parties are financed by the state, political actors "are less beholden to their voters, supporters and members, and this may erode ties of loyalty and weaken accountability" (Williams 2000: 7). On the other hand, when political parties are financed by individuals, the political party can be used as a means of reaching the interests of a single person (owner, supporter) and determine pure accountability.

Political finances are mostly related not only to political party finance, but to campaign finance, and the last one is the most important "in both new and established democracies as well..." (Global Corruption Report 2004: 13). In established democracies and developed countries, "the key problem is often seen as corruption arising from the financial needs of competitive political parties" (Williams 2000: 9). The financial support of political parties and their activities causes some political scandals because of the nature, sources and consequences of the support. As Robert Williams states, party finance is understood as funds that "are received and expended by the political parties" (Williams 2000: 12) to "ensure a stable and viable democratic process of representation" (Smilov 2007: 2) according to national regulation system that is tailored to make the system accountable and transparent.

Political finance is two sided - it is influenced by, and influences relations between participants of political system such as political parties, political leaders or party members. Political finance and corruption are separate notions, as emphasized in Global Corruption Report (2004: 19) "but when their valences overlap, the zone of political corruption emerges". The factors that encourage the emergence of political corruption are the lack of openness and transparency in party finance, lead by ineffective government regulation; closeness between financial contributors and the political parties. These actions influence and determine "subversion of democratic processes, and, more simply, straightforward bribery" (Williams 2000: 2).

A bribery as a form of corruption could be assumed as an action that involves a public official or political actor and their behavior that represents a perversion of the standards of the institution the person represents (Thompson 2000: 29). Bribery could be also defined as the

attempts of business to make an influence through their support to political parties (Williams 2000: 10).

According to Eurobarometer research on corruption (2013: 6), more than the half of Europeans believe that bribery and the abuse of positions of power for personal gain are widespread among political parties and politicians at national, regional or local level (around 60%).

Around 70% of Europeans agree that bribery and the use of connections is often the easiest way of obtaining some public services in their country: this kind of belief is most widespread in Greece, Slovakia, Croatia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Italy and Slovenia (around 90%); and least so in Denmark and Finland and Sweden (less than 40%) (Special Eurobarometer 2014: 7).

As it was mentioned before, corruption is a phenomenon, which is caused not only by the political system, its regulation, but which is also based on cultural peculiarities. Next part of the article includes the analysis of media coverage of corruption event that involves a political party leader, suspected of taking a bribe from big business corporations that had happened in Lithuania during the election campaign.

Research methodology. Suspicion on bribery and its representation in internet media: how representation of crisis could have an impact on results of election campaign

The aim of the research that is presented in the article is to investigate manifestation of political corruption case in the selected internet media portal Delfi.lt (the most popular internet portal in Lithuania based on unique entries and time spent in the portal during the period of research, source: http://www.delfi.lt/apie/), and to determine how certain media (re)presents political corruption that occurred in Lithuanian political party – Liberals Movement of the Republic of Lithuania (*Lietuvos Respublikos liberalų sąjūdis*, LRLS) when the leader of the party was suspected of bribery. As the outcome of the research is to discuss how the case of political corruption fits in with the messages presented in the media are related to political elections, and how this relates to public opinion on the relevant political party and political election campaign results.

For the research qualitative and quantitative media content analysis methods were selected. The selection of messages was based on the keywords related to a specific party and its

participation in the elections, as well as specific policies on the political corruption action / event.

The period of study was chosen in relation to political election campaign and political corruption scandal. The chosen sample was one pre-election year – 9 October, 2016 election to the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania: one year before the elections: October 2015 - October, 2016. The events related to one of the popular political parties – LRLS. Its leader Eligijus Masiulis was detained on suspicion of bribe on 12 May, 2016.

During the period that has been chosen for investigation LRLS and its preparations for the elections to the Seimas have been mentioned in 198 messages, among which - 34 messages mention LRLS and party's relation with corruption case, and 9 publications were messages that represented E. Masiulis as the leader of LRLS and were related to the political corruption event (suspicion for the act of bribery, allegation of possible influence making).

Figure 1. Timetable of publications related to the LRLS, political elections and political scandal in Delfi.lt, %.
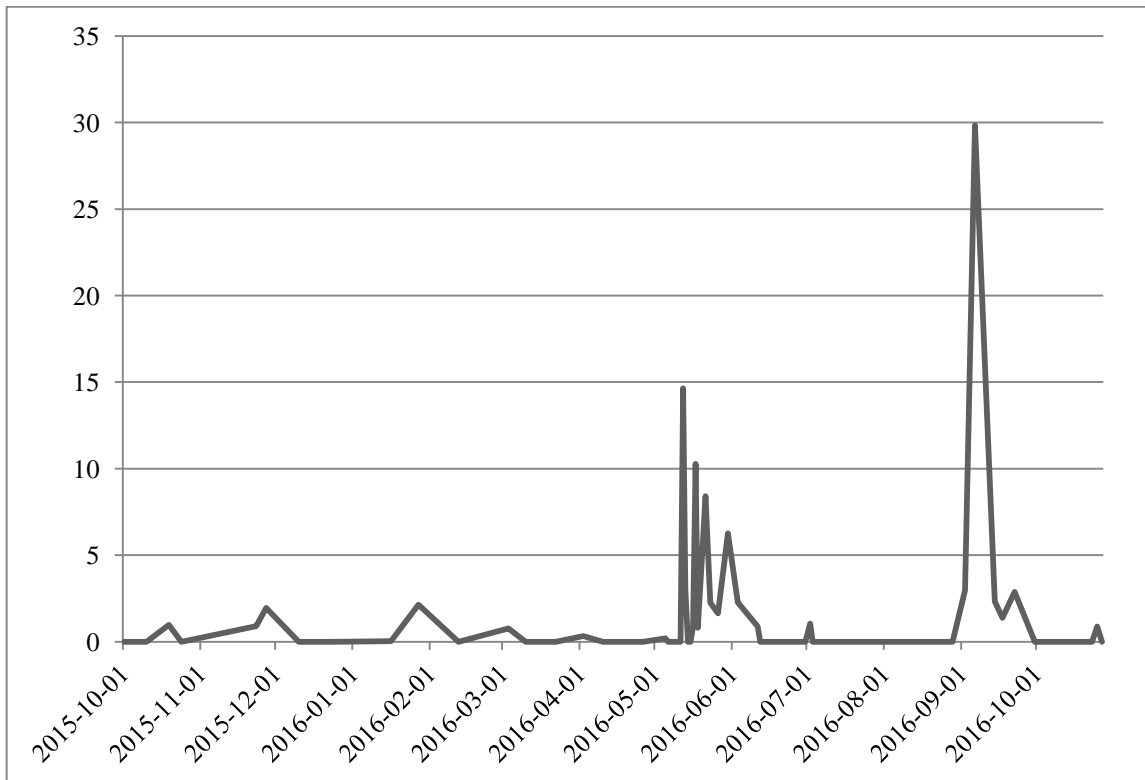
Source: own construction based on conducted research

As it is provided in Figure 1 of the publication distribution in time, the messages that mention LRLS and events related to corruption were published largely only during the period of several weeks starting with the event of detention of E.Masiulis on the suspicion of bribery.

The analysis of the distribution of publications (see Figure 2) shows the domination of the reporting about suspicion of political corruption (90% of publications). The majority of publications relate to corruption events (suspicion of bribery), and only partially link this event with political party, its activities (8%), the assessment of the event from commentators and reports on public opinion researches (17%).

Figure 2. Distribution of thematics of publications in Delfi.lt during the period of research

topics	%	%
investigation of corruption		53
investigation actions	26	
suspicion for bribery	12	
E. Masiulis guilty for bribery	1.9	
approval of E. Masiulis actions	13	
E. Masiulis honest politician	0.1	
LRLS actions in relation to political corruption		8
E. Masiulis resigns from LRLS	2	
elections of new leader of LRLS	4	
political party management	2	
political elections 2016		17
political elections	6	
public opinion, political parties ranking	11	
other		22

Source: own construction based on conducted research

While discussing the publications, it is worth paying attention to the fact that some changes in media performance have been detected. Before the corruption scandal has occurred, LRLS was named by media and commentators as one of the leaders of political arena, it was presented as one of the leading parties in the election campaign, in the context of the possible outcome of elections: setting of possible coalition of ruling political parties. In those messages

the LRLS members, especially party leader - E. Masiulis were interviewed as experts or commentators, presenting and discussing prospective political election results, commenting on other political parties a number of (dissonant) decisions taken by government (LRLS - opposition party during the election campaign), especially in relation to possible non-transparent decisions.

After the crisis (after bribery scandal) media reports have changed: LRLS leaders and representatives were not interviewed as experts, even in the messages on the analysis of the political election campaign and its prospective or actual results. The number and names of chosen representatives of the party were given, but they were not interviewed.

Figure 3. Type of publications: intensity, publications distribution of genres and themes in delfi.lt during the period of research

	high intensivity (%)	low intensivity (%)	medium intensivity (%)	Comments (%)	Analytical investigation (%)	Information (%)	Interview (%)
investigation of corruption	26.09	0.00	4.35	0	4	24	4
LRLS actions in relation to political corruption	4.35	13.04	13.04	0	8	20	8
political elections 2016	4.35	13.04	13.04	0	4	16	4
other	0.00	4.35	4.35	4	4	0	0
			100				100

Source: own construction based on conducted research

This is confirmed by data presented in Figure 3 in the analysis of the media reports' intensity[1]: messages that are devoted to covering the corruption scandal and the actions related with the suspicions of bribery, actions carried out by politicians involved in the situation are presented in the intense mode. But the comparison and linking of messages' intensity and publications' themes shows the fact that the publications, that discuss the political election campaign, potential results of political elections, ratings of political parties, public opinion

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[1] Intensity was measured as high when the entire publication was dedicated to the topic; medium intensivity was assigned when the topic was covered in the publication together with other topics; low intensity was assigned when the topic was only mentioned in the publication.

surveys' results or similar themes - have not been mentioning or only episodically (fragmentary) mention this specific political corruption event that occurred.

It is worth to note the fact that the publications, in which the main subject was the case of political corruption, were usually presented as an information (they presented facts with comments on the investigation, with no focus on the politician, political party or political system): they presented facts and information on actions taken by the politician, the prosecutor and the investigators, the process of elections of the new leader of political party, however, there were no publications presenting comments or opinions on the topic.

It is worth noting the fact that in the media publications were dominated by leaders of other political parties who had voiced opinions about the E. Masiulis as an honest politician, and they were not expressing negative opinions of evaluations of the case (excluding statements made by one of LRLS's members that a politician in question might have acted improperly).

Figure 4. Members of LRLS mentioned in Delfi.lt publications during the period of research

	actor - A.Guoga, as candidate to replace E.Masiulis	actor - E.Gentvilas, vice-chairperson	actor - E.Masiulis, leader of political party, suspected for bribery	actor - G.Steponavicius, vice-chairman of the party	actor - R.Simasius, as candidate to replace E.Masiulis
investigation of corruption (%)	8.97	5.13	**29.49**	6.41	1.28
LRLS actions in relation to political corruption (%)	10.26	8.97	**8.97**	2.56	2.56
political elections 2016 (%)	3.85	1.28	**5.13**	1.28	2.56
other (%)	0.00	0.00	**0.00**	1.28	0.00
					100
Length of citations, words	785	393	**9145**	390	149
Length of citations (%)	7.23	3.62	**84.19**	3.59	1.37
					100

Source: own construction based on conducted research

As for the analysis of media publications, it is worth to analyse the attention media devoted to the members of LMP linked with political corruption cases (see Figure 4).

As the research data shows, all those involved in corruption scandal - questioned whether mentioned in the context of corruption scandal – were relatively rarely mentioned in a number of

publications in the context of political party and its activities during the political election campaign. As the research data shows, those members of LRLS who were connected with political corruption scandal were not actively represented in the media content during the election campaign in the messages related with the performance of the LRLS. This could be the result of political party management, but this is related with the media-friendly performance as well.

Conclusions

Political corruption scandal has been a topic that has been discussed, and brought up by the media in the political election campaign.

After the political corruption scandal when the leadership of political party has been changed (leader of the political party that was suspected of political corruption resigned from the leadership and from the political party), and the person suspected of taking bribes withdrew from politics, the linkage between political party and the political corruption was lessened.

The media has not been investigating the schemes of political corruption, such topics as political party finances and possible corruption offenses have not been analyzed and the performance of the politician who was suspected of bribery was analysed just through giving the factual information by the media on investigations carried out by representatives of the law enforcement institutions.

The results of the research showed quite positive attitude of the media toward the political party and neutral coverage of the party leader and party management during the corruption scandal: interviews of the experts, opinion leaders, the evaluation of the political situation construct a relatively neutral presentation of the political actor's and political parties corruption case, without an expert assessment of critical statements on unfair practices performed by politician, possibilities of opaque financing of political party and election campaign.

Another aspect revealed in the analyses of the case was the support of other political parties - during the case representatives of other political parties were not criticizing nor commenting negatively on the particular political party and its leader who was accused of the bribery.

Maybe because of the media bias demonstrated during the case, or cultural context dominating in Lithuania in understanding and evaluation of corruption (especially in the finances of political parties), or confidence in political parties and politicians, voiced especially by young people, the political party that was involved in political corruption scandal gained support from the electorate during political elections, even though they took place relatively shortly after the political corruption scandal had occurred.

Therefore, it can be said that the media support, or media bias can even help political party and its leaders remain popular, even during the political corruption scandals.

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