

**Negative Political Communication in Online Video
Advertisements: Case Study of 2016 Lithuanian
Parliamentary Election**

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Abstract:

In the course of election campaigns politicians and political parties try their best to highlight their most favored topics that would help them draw public attention and increase people's regard for specific political figures. In contrast to the positive communication content announced during an election campaign, candidates sometimes choose negative messages that focus on their opponents' weaknesses (real or imagined) rather than their own strengths. The goal of this research is to identify the forms and means of negative communication used in political video advertisements during Lithuanian parliamentary election of 2016. To achieve our goal, we analyze the political video advertisements that were categorized as negative communication. We categorize and analyze those advertisements by using concepts of forms of negativity and targets of negativity. Our findings suggest that negative communication is being used by Lithuanian political organizations, but it is the positive one that is still dominant in political video advertisements. Despite that, negative aspects of communication are used by different parties, in diverse forms and for different targets.

Key words:

negativity, political communication, online video advertisements, election campaigns

Introduction

During election campaigns, politicians and parties seek to dominate in the general information environment by any means in order to increase their popularity and the opportunities to win election. The number of people using the Internet and interactive media is increasing every year, therefore, nowadays politicians include the Internet and social media on the list of

communication channels in order to ensure the widest dissemination of their messages that is possible. With each election campaign, interactive communication media play an increasingly important role in the overall communication process, sometimes even becoming the central field of political fight.

Due to the formation and constant increase of the number of active social media users, online groups have become an attractive message audience for politicians, in particular during election campaigns. As well as performing the function of a resource of political information, the Internet and social media are changing substantially the ways and forms in which politicians communicate with the electorate. Due to different social media, politicians have wide opportunities to easily access large audiences and to communicate with electors directly, without the mass media acting as an intermediary. In addition, with social media helping to combine the mass outreach and the personal impact opportunities, new opportunities arise that enable political actors to include potential electors into the electoral communication processes.

Positive, negative and neutral political communication

In the course of election campaigns politicians and political parties try their best to highlight their most favored topics that are to help them draw public attention and increase people's sympathy towards chosen political figures. Campaign strategists make every possible effort to ensure that the topics pertaining to various problems which are favored by candidates and are relevant to society get into the centre of public discourse (e.g. taxes, unemployment, health security, social insurance, etc.). Attempts are also made to show that specific candidates are the only ones capable of solving the emerging problems, i.e. they possess adequate competences, know-how, experience, etc.

However, the focus on a specific topic is often linked with a thoughtfully selected and explicitly stated candidate's position on a particular issue. In order to win an election, candidates take special caution in selecting when and how to express their position on controversial issues polarizing society. The selection and defence of one's position on relevant issues causing considerable controversy in society always pose a certain risk that politicians will not only draw attention of a part of voters and win their favour but will inevitably drive a certain percentage of potential voters with an opposing opinion on the issue away from them. Nevertheless, the adoption of a clear position on controversial issues and its expression help candidates running in an election to draw public attention and to stand out from their political competitors.

Besides, if political competitors have diverging views on the issues of interest to voters, it may serve as a basis for the implementers of an election campaign to launch a direct or indirect discussion with political opponents on the issues of public interest. The discussion may occur directly when candidates announce their messages via interactive media with a direct reference to the positions of their opponents, such as “political competitors are going to increase taxes and we are not,” or indirectly when candidates express their positions by abstaining from mentioning those of competitors on the same issues directly (Foot, Schneider 2006).

The overall communication content that appears in social media can be classified into three groups by the type of information provided in election campaigns:

1. Positive communication messages which aim at forming a positive public opinion on candidates through social media, i.e. to highlight their value and strengths;
2. Negative (attack) communication messages, which are targeted at political opponents of the candidates publishing them and intend to show their opponents in an unfavourable light or to put them into an uncomfortable position;
3. Neutral communication messages, which cover the whole political content published in social media in the course of election campaigns containing neither positive nor negative elements.

In contrast to the positive communication content announced during an election campaign, candidates’ negative messages focus on their opponents’ weaknesses (real or imagined) rather than their own strengths. However, the purpose of both positive and negative messages is to make potential voters understand and memorise the information addressed to them.

In the context of elections, negative communication messages are otherwise known as attack, smear or question messages. Negative information relates to critical statements and images of the problems of politicians, institutions, political processes or a specific policy which appear during an election campaign. The negativity of communication in election campaigns varies from the criticism addressed by one politician to another to cynical statements on candidates’ motives and the selfishness of their objectives in political decision-making (Unikaité 2008).

Among other purposes, negative messages seek to prevent political opponents from proceeding with their planned election campaign. Usually, after negative messages on political opponents published in social media receive considerable public attention, the latter may not

ignore them and have to react at least partially, in one form or another. Opponents are forced to dedicate their time and efforts to replying to negative messages, thus causing a certain disruption in the usual rhythm of their election campaign and its changes. What is more, negative and attack messages may provide much better positions in the electoral struggle even for a weak candidate.

One of the reasons explaining the increasing domination of negative messages during election campaigns is people's ability to memorise negative information much better than positive one. It is also believed that positive messages only strengthen the beliefs of existing supporters, while negative messages have a stronger effect on undecided voters and help them decide not to vote for a political opponent. As noted by Breyglio, one of US President Ronald Reagan's campaign managers, it is important in these times to not only equip people with arguments why they should vote for you but also provide arguments why they should not vote for other competitors. Hence, negative campaigning or an attack strategy is a necessary part of any electoral activity (Johnson-Cartee, Copeland 1997).

Forms and targets of negative political communication

Theoretical contributions on the circumstances under which parties or politicians exploit negative campaigning are mainly developed in the context of the American two-party system. However, recently scholars are beginning to study negative communication in a European context, when parties or politicians make use of negative campaigning in a multiparty system in a more active manner.

The main difference between a two-party system and a multiparty system is that in a multiparty system parties have to make a trade-off between their goals. In a two-party system such as the United States, winning votes in the election campaign means getting into office and acquiring policy influence. In a multiparty system in which coalition governments are the rule, this is not necessarily the case, as winning the biggest share of votes does not automatically translate into government office or policy influence (Walter et al. 2014).

Summarizing the various results from different continents it is possible to identify main candidates or parties characteristics that affect candidates or parties inclination to make use of negative campaigning:

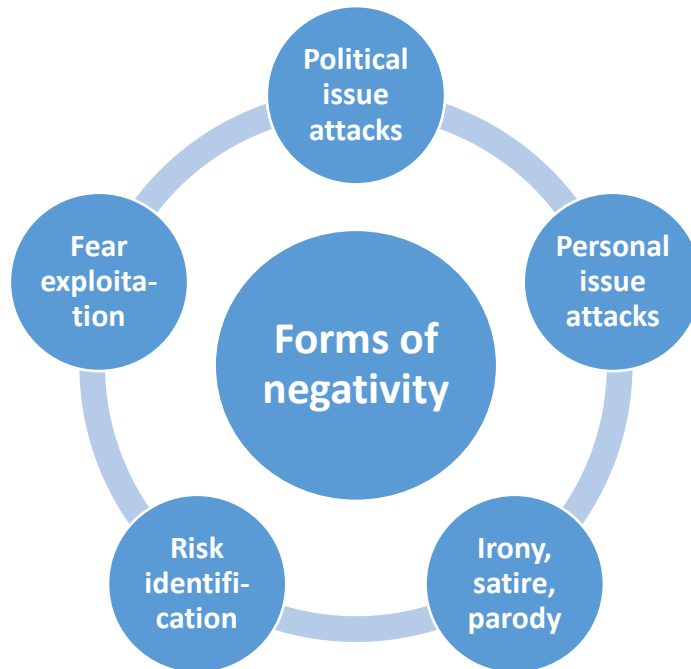
- **The government status of the party or politician.** Opposition parties or politicians are more likely to engage in negative campaigning than government parties or politicians.

- **Standing in the polls.** Parties or politicians that are losing in the polls are more likely to go negative than parties or politicians that are gaining in the polls.
- **Previous government experience.** Parties or politicians that have more government experience are less likely to go negative than parties or politicians that have less or no government experience.
- **Ideological position of the party or politician.** Parties or politicians that are closely positioned to the median political position within the system are less likely to go negative than parties or politicians that are positioned far away from the median positions.
- **Available resources of the party or politician.** Parties or politicians that have less resources (money, human and etc.) are more likely to go negative than parties or politicians that have plenty of resources.
- **Size of the electorate.** When the relative size of the electoral market is larger, parties or politicians are more likely to make use of negative campaigning than when the relative size of the electoral market is smaller.
- **Time to election.** The closer the elections, the more parties or politicians are likely to make use of negative campaigning. As election day approaches, the tone of a campaign becomes increasingly more negative.

Two main forms of negative campaigning could be discerned: political issue attacks and personal attacks. Quite often those are not the political positions of the opponents that are attacked, but emphasis is laid down on personal characteristics. Such type of an attack affects strongly the electors' emotions and can be traced down back to Ancient Greece and Rome. Thus in the 6th century B.C. in his Rhetoric, Aristotle defined the fundamentals of any effective public communication as follows: a reliable and trustworthy source (ethos), a message supported by facts (logos) and emotionally backed expression (pathos).

Besides the two main forms of negative campaigning other forms of negative political communication can be identified, such as fear exploitation, risk identification, irony, satire and parody (Picture 1).

Picture 1. Forms of negativity



Source: own construction

Usually, parties or politicians resort to negative campaigning in an attempt to become voters' preferred choice by diminishing positive feelings for opposing candidates or parties. The most obvious strategy to achieve such a goal and win voters is a direct attack on political opponents. By criticizing their opponents politicians and parties are, first of all, trying to persuade voters not to vote for political opponents in anticipation to receive the votes of the people who change they opinions.

Negative communication messages may be targeted not only at specific political opponents but also at abstract enemies by not identifying them explicitly. For instance, the messages of candidates running in an election may be dominated by topics 'against monopoly', 'against corruption,' 'against crime' and at the same time those candidates may abstain from mentioning specific monopolists, corrupt persons or criminals.

The findings indicate that the impact of negative messages varies depending on (a) the status of the candidate delivering the message, (b) the characteristics of citizens receiving the message, and (c) the style of the candidates' criticisms (e.g., policy vs. personal attacks) (Fridkin, Kenney 2004).

Picture 2. Targets of negativity



Source: own construction

Online video advertisements as a tool for negative political communication

It is better to see something once than to hear it a hundred times. This old proverb describes the fundamental dimension of modern communication in business and politics – images, especially when they are moving, are a magnetizing force that draws attention. Therefore, video advertisements have been seen as one of the most effective channels of political communication for several decades.

According to a survey carried out in France in 1975, 64% of voters said that television is the most useful and efficient way to choose a candidate. In 2009, 50% of them stated that television is the first source of political information (Borrell, Dakhliya 2017). Nowadays most of the content from television is published online, some of the video content is also published directly on video sharing platforms (YouTube) or social media (Facebook). People are getting their news online, following politicians on social media – reading their posts and watching their videos. In 2009, 30% of Americans watched political videos online, rising from 15% in 2007 (Purcell 2010). In 2012, 66% of respondents watched political videos online, and 36% watched especially political advertisements (Smith, Duggan 2012).

As in other channels of communication, some of online political video advertisements are negative. These negative advertisements often generate substantial attention – during the 2010

United States Senate election, negative advertisements accounted for only one third of all online video advertisements, but also generated more than half of the views (Ridout, Fowler, Brandstetter 2012). However, politicians must be careful – sometimes negativity has a “backlash” effect. This could have happened in the 2012 United States presidential election, when Republican candidate Mitt Romney’s approval ratings lowered when respondents watched attack ads against Democratic candidate Barack Obama (Baumgartner 2013).

Many politicians and political parties are creating videos that are only posted online. This is one of the cheapest and cost-effective ways to reach target audiences. Studies on online political advertising show that online video advertisements could prove more effective than the static display ads (Broockman, Green 2013). Moreover, political videos posted online have this possibility that they might go viral and reach a tremendous number of people in days or even hours. Politicians and political strategists understand that and choose online video advertisements as a channel to transmit all kinds of messages – not only positive or neutral, but also negative, with different forms and targets.

Negative communication during the 2016 Lithuanian Parliamentary election campaign: research method

In order to understand the aspects of negative communication during the 2016 election, we constructed our sample from video advertisements that were published on political parties’ or coalitions’ official Facebook pages from September 1 to October 9. We restricted this sample to only those videos that were created as professionally edited political advertisements, excluding other videos e.g. livestreams or video reports from conferences, discussions, etc. 10 out of 14 political parties and coalitions participating in 2016 elections had professionally edited political advertisements posted on their official Facebook pages.

When categorizing these videos as positive, neutral or negative we followed this rule: negative videos must not only be easily described as “attack ads”, but also have a particular target, mentioned in Picture 2 – political opponents, national government, political institutions, economic institutions, business subjects or foreign countries. However, this target does not have to be named, because it can be obvious without naming it. Even if an advertisement has some positive aspects, we include it in our sample if it has at least some negativity and particular target. We found 12 videos that we categorized as negative. These negative videos were created by 5 different political parties or coalitions – Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, Homeland

Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats, S. Buškevičius and Nationalists’ Coalition “Against corruption and poverty”, Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union and Lithuanian People's Party.

The goal of this research is to identify the forms and means of negative communication used in political video advertisements during Lithuanian parliamentary election of 2016. To achieve our goal, we analyze the political video advertisements that were categorized as negative communication. We categorize and analyze the advertisements by using concepts of forms of negativity and targets of negativity.

Political context

Political parties and coalitions that expressed negativity in their political video advertisements varied greatly in their government status or experience, ideological position and standing in the polls. Here we introduce these five political forces and the political context in Lithuania in 2016.

Lithuanian Social Democratic Party was the governing party during the 2016 election, having been in power since 2012, also carrying a great experience of leading the majority governments since 1992. This political party has an ideological stance of centre-left (social democracy) and pro-European. The ruling party and its leader, the prime minister Algirdas Butkevičius, were very popular for most of the time since 2012 but during last months their popularity declined rapidly.

Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats was the main opposition party during the 2016 election, having lost power in 2012 to Social Democrats. This party also carries great experience in leading the majority governments since 1996 and has always been the main rival of Social Democrats. Homeland Union has an ideological stance of centre-right (conservatism and Christian democracy) and pro-European. The party is not very popular since 2012 but in April 2015 it has a new, young leader, former MEP Gabrielius Landsbergis and since then the popularity of this party had been growing.

S. Buškevičius and Nationalists’ Coalition “Against corruption and poverty” is a block of two parties – Young Lithuania and Lithuanian Nationalist Union. Neither of the parties had seats in Lithuanian parliament or European Parliament. Their ideological stance can be described as ultra-nationalism and right-wing populism. The coalition was very unpopular before the 2016 election.

Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union had one seat in Lithuanian parliament and one seat in European Parliament before the 2016 election, but was widely represented in municipalities

(147 seats in the whole country). Their ideological stance can be described as agrarianism and green politics. Despite being represented in Lithuanian parliament for many years and even being part of the coalition government from 2004 to 2008, Farmers and Greens Union was never considered a major force in Lithuanian politics. However, in March 2016 the party has attracted a new, popular, independent public figure (former police commissioner and Minister of the Interior) Saulius Skvernelis who became the leader of Farmers and Greens election list. This move has put them among the most popular political parties in Lithuania.

Lithuanian People's Party had no seats in Lithuanian parliament or European Parliament. Their ideological stance can be described as radical left and pro-Russian. The party was very unpopular before the 2016 election.

Of the political parties and coalitions that used negative communication during the 2016 election, three parties (Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats and Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union) were considered as having the best chances of winning the election as they had similar high status in opinion polls. Remaining 2 of the 5 political forces were considered radical populists and performed very poorly in the opinion polls. There were also parties who had a good chance of winning at least some seats in the 2016 election (e.g. Party “Order and Justice” or Liberal Movement) but these parties either did not publish any political video advertisements or all of their video advertisements were categorized as either positive or neutral.

Analysis

Negative communication during the Lithuanian parliamentary election of 2016 had different forms and targets of negativity. Some advertisements had more than one form of negativity or more than one target of negativity. The most widely used form of negativity was policy attacks (6 times). Less common, but still used forms were fear exploitation (4 times), personal attacks (3 times) and irony, satire and parody (1 time). The most common targets of negativity were political opponents (8 times). National government (3 times), political institutions (2 times), business subjects (1 time) and foreign countries (1 time) were also used as targets. We begin by analyzing the forms of negativity and later continue with the analysis of targets of negativity.

Policy attacks, as the most widely used form of negativity, was used by 4 political parties. Social Democrats used policy attacks 2 times while criticizing their opponents' past decisions and comparing the results of two different coalition governments. Homeland Union

used policy attacks in their advertisements 2 times, criticizing government's failing policies and constant scandals. Farmers and Greens used policy attacks one time, criticizing current governments' neglect of poor people. People's Party also used policy attacks one time, criticizing other parties for accepting European Union's refugee quota system.

Fear exploitation was used by 3 political parties. Social Democrats used fear exploitation in one attack advertisement which was to make people believe that it would be a nightmare if their opponents were back in power with their tax reform. Buškevičius and Nationalists' Coalition used fear exploitation 2 times on a wide range of issues from so-called European Union's or Russia's imperialism to rich people exploiting poor people. People's Party used fear exploitation in one advertisement on a wide range of subjects from "homosexual propaganda" to migrant crisis.

Personal attacks, as a form of negativity, in all 3 cases were used by one party – People's Party. They did it by showing pictures of politicians who accept European Union's refugee quota system or just by showing pictures of politicians and criticizing them without arguments. Also, in one advertisement, the leader of People's Party comments that one of the reasons why he is running for office in Centras-Žaliakalnis electoral district is because the leader of Homeland Union is also a candidate there.

Irony, satire and parody were used only once in the advertisements – when Homeland Union edited the video advertisement published by their opponents and turned everything around, making the advertisement about them.

Most widely used targets of negativity were political opponents. Social Democrats used all 3 of their attack advertisements to criticize Homeland Union. The first two advertisements were made in the similar manner (Picture 3). The first advertisement meant to show the difference of average salary in Lithuania between 2008 and 2012 when Homeland Union lead the coalition government, between 2012 and 2016 when Social Democrats lead the coalition government and the projected average salary between 2016 and 2020 if Social Democrats continued their work. The second advertisement meant to show how Homeland Union reduced the retirement pensions and passed 60 amendments overnight. Both advertisements follow the same logic – they are trying to show that Social Democrats are better at their job than their opponents. The effect is reinforced by statistics and such visual effects as showing opponents in dark animation colors or making them look destructive by putting their logo on a bulldozer.

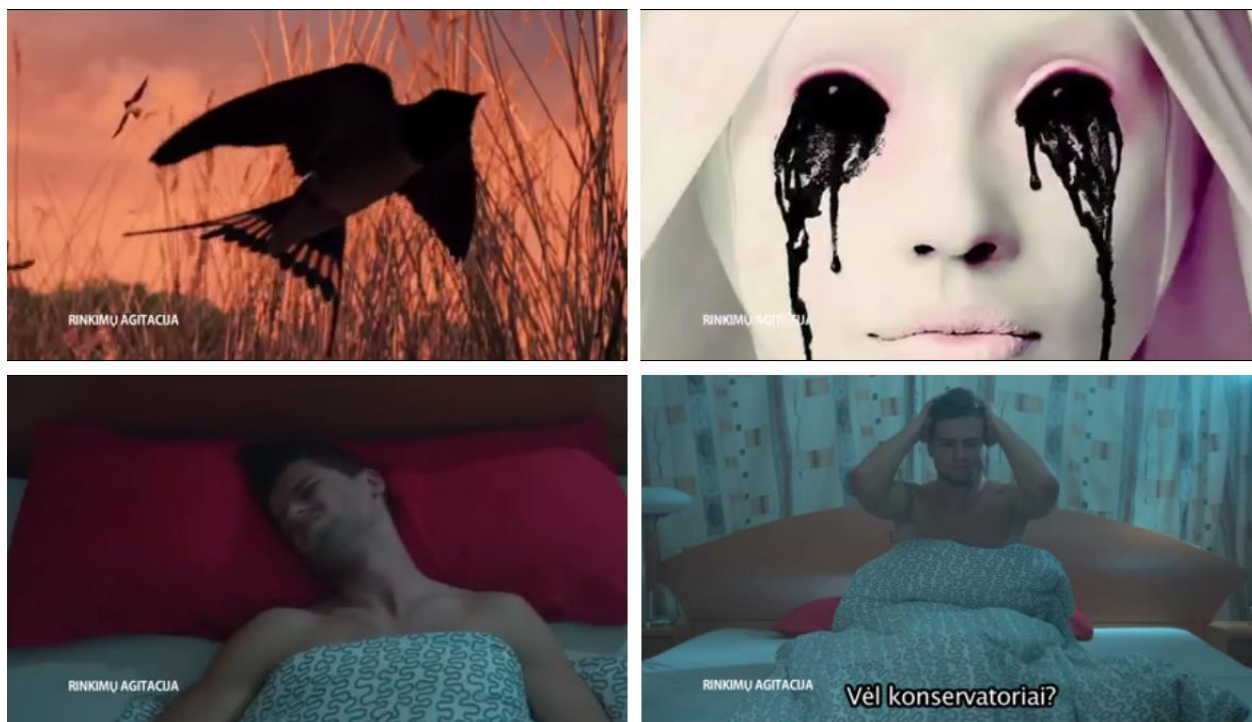
Picture 3. Screenshots from Lithuanian Social Democratic Party video advertisements



Source: own construction based on video advertisements

Another negative advertisement published by Social Democrats showed a man who is sleeping restlessly and rolling in bed because he is having a nightmare – that Homeland Union is coming back to power (Picture 4). The dream shows flying swallows (the symbol of Homeland Union) which are painted black and a black-eyed entity with blood running out of its eyes. When the man wakes up, he grabs his head and shouts „No! Overnight tax reform? Conservatives again? Are they really coming back?“. The screen becomes bright when the voice says „If you choose right, they will not come back“, and the logo and the slogan of Social Democrats appear.

Picture 4. Screenshots from Lithuanian Social Democratic Party video advertisement



Source: own construction based on video advertisements

Homeland Union used political opponents as targets of negativity in one of their advertisements, and that advertisement was created as a parody of an advertisement by Social Democrats that was mentioned before. Homeland Union edited the advertisement in a way to show that the sleeping man is not seeing swallows in his nightmare, but popular speech blunders by politicians from two main parties of the coalition government – Social Democrats and Labour Party (Picture 5). These political opponents were already being mocked by opinion leaders on social media for their failure to speak proper English, comment on economic issues or even pronounce the word „constitution“ („Konstitucija“). Despite the fact that this parody was just an addition to the ongoing mockery, it soon went viral on social media and reached a lot more people than the original made by Social Democrats.

Picture 5. Screenshots from Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats video advertisement



Source: own construction based on video advertisements

Political opponents were also criticized in the advertisements of far-right Buškevičius and Nationalists' Coalition and pro-Russian People's Party. Buškevičius and Nationalists' Coalition called all their opponents the *nomenklatura* and People's Party went personal with showing pictures of different politicians and criticizing them.

National government was the second most popular target of negativity in video advertisements. Homeland Union criticized government in two advertisements, stating that the government is sleeping in the first one and attacking the government because of the never ending scandals in the second (Picture 6). All the negative comments were spoken by party leaders and one additional visual effect was used – the Vilnius skyline is pictured in bright, sunny day at first, but when the vice-chairwoman of Homeland Union, Irena Degutienė, says “the government is sleeping” (“Vyriausybė miega”), the bright day in Vilnius becomes the night. Later in that advertisement the chairman of the party Gabrielius Landsbergis talks about change and the essential conditions for change: “we need your vote” (“Mums reikia jūsų balso”). Another advertisement shows party chairman and his colleagues talking with people and saying “don’t know about you, but I’ve had enough” (“Aš nežinau kaip jūs, bet man jau įgriso”). However, both advertisements showed more positivity than negativity, introducing party candidates and policy plans, therefore negative comments were just a part of these advertisements. Farmers and Greens also attacked government in one advertisement by saying that the government “doesn’t care”. However, this advertisement was also more positive than negative.

Picture 6. Screenshots from Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats video advertisements



Source: own construction based on video advertisements

Political institutions, as the target of negativity, were criticized in two advertisements by Buškevičius and Nationalists' Coalition. They criticized the institutions of the European Union by accusing them of imperialism and they attacked Lithuanian parliament by saying it should be swept out as it is. In the first advertisement they also picked another two targets of negativity – business subjects (poor people feeding the rich) and foreign countries (Russian imperialism).

Conclusions

The purpose of our study was to extend the understanding of the use of negativity in political video advertisements in Lithuania. Our findings suggest that negative communication is being used by Lithuanian political organizations, but positivity is still dominant in political video advertisements. Despite that, negative aspects of communication are used by different parties, in different and diverse forms and targets.

Most widely used forms of negativity in Lithuanian political video advertisements are policy attacks and fear exploitation. The most popular targets of negativity are political opponents and national government. The forms and means of negativity vary greatly between the parties – while the more traditional parties use moderate means of negativity, questioning their opponents' policy decisions, the radical populists use different methods, exploiting fear and organizing personal attacks on their opponents.

The most popular video effects used in advertisements were symbolic – using dark colours, bulldozers or sunsets to portray that their opponents go hand in hand with negativity, destruction and misery. The messages are also clear – the opponents or the government either don't care about the people or they are incompetent and unqualified to run the country.

The negativity in Lithuanian political system was not influenced by the main characteristics that usually affect candidates' or parties' inclination to make use of negative campaigning. In Lithuania, main government party was as much likely to use negative campaigning as opposition parties, also parties that were gaining in the polls used negative advertisements as much as parties who were losing in the polls. Use of negativity was also not influenced by parties' or coalitions' government experience, ideological position or available resources.

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