



DIACOMET

„Fostering capacity building for civic resilience and participation: Dialogic communication ethics and accountability“

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Focus Group Country Report

LITHUANIA

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Summary..... | 4 |
| 1. Introduction to the Country Report on LITHUANIA | 9 |
| 2. Research Setting: Applying the Framework | 12 |
| 3. Experiencing the Media Environment..... | 15 |
| 3.1. Media Context and Current Challenges | 15 |
| 3.2. Perceptions of Media Environment | 17 |
| 4. Engaging with Public Communication..... | 25 |
| 4.1. Public Communication: Political, Social, and Technological Dimensions | 25 |
| 4.2. Perceptions of Public Communication Environment | 28 |
| 5. Reflecting on Communication Ethics | 38 |
| 5.1. Media and Communication Ethics | 38 |
| 5.2. Perceptions of Moral Responsibilities and Communication Ethics..... | 38 |
| 6. Conclusion..... | 47 |
| References | 50 |
| Annex 1. Overview of Focus Group Discussions..... | 56 |

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Summary

This report, D3.3, is one of eight country-specific studies presenting the results of focus group discussions conducted as part of Work Package 3 (WP3) of the Horizon Europe project *DIACOMET – Fostering Capacity Building for Civic Resilience and Participation: Dialogic Communication Ethics and Accountability*.

In total, 87 focus group discussions were held across Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Switzerland. Over 500 participants took part in these discussions, reflecting on the ethics of public communication and the media environment in their respective countries. The findings are presented in national reports, each prepared independently by the respective country team.

This report offers a comprehensive analysis of how civil society actors in Lithuania perceive and reflect on the media environment, public communication landscape and ethical standards and responsibilities in their country. Drawing on qualitative data from 14 focus group discussions with a total of 72 participants, it highlights public perceptions of major issues and challenges, ethical tensions and expectations regarding evolving media and communication settings.

The main findings suggest that the participants recognize the ongoing transformation in traditional media and rapid expansion of new digital communication tools. The mainstream media is criticized for biased news coverage, orientation to profit, and decreasing commitment to facilitate public good. In return, participants call for more transparency and balanced reporting, greater accountability and a renewed commitment to journalistic ethics. On the other hand, social media platforms are also considered problematic, especially for vulnerable groups, due to their emotional charge, attention-seeking practices and algorithmic modus operandi.

Focus groups' participants across different attention capital categories reported a pervasive sense of disorientation and uncertainty as they navigate constantly changing and transforming public communication landscape, where conventional norms and standards have become increasingly ambiguous and difficult to enforce. Many discussions focused on major disruptive trends in society such as political polarization and societal divides (us vs. them), hate speech, canceling culture, power abuse and inequalities. These issues are driving people further apart, as they become entrenched in their positions, unwilling to understand or empathize. For public dialogue and democratic engagement to flourish, participants called for a more holistic and inclusive approach to public communication to foster common understanding, empathy, and a shared sense of community.

Finally, it was important to address how different actors interpret normative values and responsibilities and what are their lived experiences of these values and principles in real life communication settings. Several key principles and moral aspects were addressed by the participants as central in contemporary public communication, including inclusivity, equality, truthfulness, and empathy. Participants also advocated for greater transparency and community involvement in decision-making processes to ensure inclusivity and equality. In order to promote public dialogue and inclusive communication practices, media literacy and critical thinking are considered of paramount importance for all. The responsibilities of safeguarding democratic values and the fundamental principles of public dialogue should be shared by professionals, governmental institutions, the private sector, the media, and society at large. Therefore, a holistic approach is needed to address the ills of contemporary public communication, with a requirement for close and genuine collaboration between various actors and institutions at its center.

In this report, our goal is also to contextualize individual insights and reflections within the broader landscape of media and communication developments in Lithuania. We hope that readers will gain a thorough understanding of the key ethical concerns, evident tensions, value conflicts, and moral ambiguities, taking into account the changing public communication ecosystem.

Theoretical Background

A shared research framework developed collaboratively between the WP3 lead (Tampere University) and national research teams draws on research into the hybrid media environment (Chadwick, 2017) and the attention economy (Davenport and Beck, 2001; Webster, 2014; Klinger and Svensson, 2016). These approaches highlight that the pursuit and commodification of attention have become key logic to contemporary public communication, shaping the dynamics of information dissemination and participation in digital spaces.

In today's hybrid media environment, where public attention functions as a scarce and unequally distributed resource (Citton, 2017), the competition for visibility has markedly intensified. While some actors can convert attention into new forms of discursive influence and symbolic power, others encounter increasing limitations in their opportunities to participate in public debate or policymaking. The distribution of attention is therefore an ethical issue in itself (Bombaerts *et al.*, 2024), calling for critical reflection on how different groups and their perspectives are represented—or excluded—in public discourse.

Beyond redistributing power, the attention economy also impacts the quality of public discourse. Since visibility is often achieved through emotional intensity or disruption, actors may be incentivised to adopt extreme performative strategies. These dynamics are further

reinforced by algorithmic environments, which systematically amplify content that evokes strong emotional reactions (Papacharissi, 2021; Phillips, 2018; Phillips and Milner, 2021). This often includes aggressive or hostile rhetoric, trolling, harassment, and the spread of misinformation — all of which contribute to growing mistrust and cynicism in society (Persily and Tucker, 2020; Rogers, 2024). As a result, we can see that conditions for dialogic communication are eroding, weakening empathy and citizens' capacity for meaningful engagement.

While grounded in theory, the framework also has practical value for empirical research. The concept of attention capital (Franck 2011, 2019) enables the identification of analytical actor categories operating occupying different positions within the attention economy and possessing diverse resources, strategies, or means for public participation. Rather than studying the field of professional journalism and the media, the focus in this study is set on civil society actors residing on the periphery of journalism and professional communication (Eldridge, 2018; Hanusch and Löhmann, 2022). Four categories were conceived to help locating them:

1. **Attention Magnets** – Individuals or groups with high public visibility (e.g., influencers, celebrities, politicians)
2. **Attention Workers** – Content creators competing for epistemic authority without institutional status. (e.g., podcasters, citizen journalists, journalism students)
3. **Attention Hackers** – Actors strategically manipulating visibility, often from the fringes. (e.g., activists, counter-media outlets)
4. **Attention-Deprived** – Marginalised groups struggling to attain public attention (e.g., ethnic or cultural minorities, the youth, elderly people)

While seeking correspondence with analytical categories and real actors and social groups in each participating country, the research teams were encouraged to identify locally relevant cases that had yielded public debate on communication ethics. This opened two strategies for the recruitment of participants in the focus groups. In the “intra-category” approach, focus group discussions were held with participants from one actor category (for instance, “attention workers”). In the “case” approach, participants representing two or more actor categories were brought together in a single session to discuss an issue of shared interest.

Research Method

Focus group discussions followed a qualitative research tradition, emphasising participants' lived experiences and subjective perspectives. Discussions were conducted using the dialogue method developed by the *Timeout Foundation*, either in person or online. Timeout is a non-profit organisation established by the *Finnish Innovation Fund (Sitra)*, with the aim of fostering constructive public dialogue. The method promotes respectful and inclusive

conversation by encouraging listening, reflection, and experience-sharing rather than argument or debate (Heikka, 2018).

The analysis adopted an inductive approach and was carried out using thematic analysis, a widely used and flexible method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning in qualitative data. Thematic analysis is well suited for examining how participants perceive their environment, articulate their experiences, and construct social meaning – making it an appropriate tool for addressing the open-ended and ethically nuanced questions such as those addressed in WP3. The process of meaning-making typically unfolded organically from *bottom-up*, with participants contributing to the development of analytical categories. In sociological terms, this represents an *emic* approach (Alasuutari, 2010), in contrast to *etic* approaches, in which analytical categories are predetermined and applied *top-down* to the data.

This shared methodological framework ensured overall coherence across country reports while allowing teams to adapt it to national contexts. In the chapter 2, each research team will explain their methodological strategies in more detail.

Analytical Focus and Structure of the Report

The analysis in WP3 is guided by a shared set of research questions designed to explore how non-professional or peripheral actors perceive communication ethics:

RQ1. How do participants describe and evaluate the current hybrid media environment?

RQ2. How do they describe and assess the state of public communication in relation to the policies that matter to them?

RQ3. How do participants define and prioritize ethical principles in public communication and whom do they consider responsible for upholding or institutionalizing these principles?

These questions reflect the project's interest in the ethical concerns, tensions, and contradictions encountered by non-professional actors in today's communication environment. They aim to shed light on what the participants in the focus groups say about communication ethics and how they understand the contexts of their arguments, concerns, and experiences. Some of the questions addressed in this Work Package, and the DIACOMET project in general, go beyond the themes analysed in the country reports. For instance, these reports do not include comparative analysis across countries.

All national reports follow a shared structure. The Introduction section provides a brief overview of the national context. This is followed by a description of the research setting: how the research team recruited participants, conducted focus group discussions, and

analysed the data produced in these discussions. The empirical findings are presented in three main sections: the first one explores the participants' views on *media environment*; the second focuses on their reflections of *public communication*, and the third examines their perspectives on *ethical issues*, values and responsibilities. The conclusion summarises the key ethical tensions and challenges that are identified in each national context. An annex at the end of the report provides information about the composition of the focus groups.

All quotations from the focus group discussions used in this report are pseudonymised. Pseudonymisation was carried out manually and deterministically to ensure confidentiality, with each pseudonym used consistently. A context-sensitive approach was adopted to preserve the cultural and social nuances of the data while maintaining a narrative coherence. The excerpts from the focus group discussions are translated in English. The translations aim to convey what the participants meant, which means that they include researchers' interpretations.

1. Introduction to the Country Report on LITHUANIA

This report shares insights from focus groups (FGs) in Lithuania, which are part of WP3 in the DIACOMET project. It explores how representatives of various stakeholders – who have extensive experience in the communications field and work as commentators, academics, and public intellectuals, as well as those representing civil society and community groups – experience and perceive public communication, including the media environment that creates situations that grab public attention. The report also offers insights into the ethics component, a key objective we are pursuing with this analysis.

Our discussion starts by setting the stage – highlighting the key aspects of Lithuania's politics, economy, and society that influence its unique communication culture.

Lithuania is a small European country located on the southeastern coast of the Baltic Sea, with a population of 2.8 million (State Data Agency, 2023). It boasts a 90.66-kilometer coastline along the Baltic Sea and shares borders with Latvia to the north (588 km), Belarus to the east and south (679 km), Poland to the south (104 km), and Russia's Kaliningrad region to the southwest (273 km) (Lithuania's Geographical Position, n.d.)

According to official data from the beginning of 2023, Lithuania's ethnic composition is approximately 83.6% Lithuanians, 6.4% Poles, 5.1% Russians, and the remaining 4.9% consisting of Belarusians, Ukrainians, and other nationalities (State Data Agency, 2025). The official language is Lithuanian, which is part of the Baltic branch of languages, alongside Latvian, within the Indo-European language family (Visuotinė lietuvių enciklopedija).

Since the 1990s, after Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia regained their independence and freed themselves from Soviet rule, democratization and Europeanization have been among the central policy directions in these three countries (Balčytienė, 2015). These transformations were not only internally motivated but also strongly shaped by external incentives – especially the European Union's conditionality and integration processes. According to Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005), the EU promoted democracy in Central and Eastern Europe by providing conditional rewards, such as the promise of membership, in exchange for compliance with democratic norms and institutional reforms – a strategy described as "reinforcement by reward" (p. 8). This approach was particularly effective in the Baltic states, where European integration was seen as a pathway to consolidate independence and align with Western values.

Lithuania joined the European Union (EU) and NATO in 2004. As a liberal democracy, it has achieved significant GDP growth and economic success, and the country is frequently

recognized in international evaluations as a success story of transition reforms and democratization. According to World Bank data, Lithuania's nominal GDP in 2023 amounted to approximately US \$79.8 billion, reflecting continued economic resilience following its post-EU-accession growth (World Bank, 2024).

Lithuania's performance in digitalization and fiscal stability is notable. For example, European Commission data indicate that Lithuania's digital public services are near the EU average (Ministry of the Economy and Innovation of the Republic of Lithuania, 2024, p. 5), and a 2024 e-government benchmark ranks Lithuania 6th among 37 European countries for digital public services (Government of Lithuania – Brand Lithuania, 2024). Lithuania has recently seen a rebound of GDP growth and the fastest growth of real wage in comparison to other European countries (OECD, 2025). The country has likewise maintained a very low public debt, at only about 38% of GDP by the end of 2024 (Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Lithuania, 2025). However, these strong indicators mask significant social challenges. EU reports highlight that Lithuania's income inequality remains among the highest in the EU (with the richest 20% earning over six times the income of the poorest 20%), and approximately 20.9% of Lithuanians were at risk of poverty in 2022, a figure well above the EU average (European Commission, 2024, p. 4). In short, despite Lithuania's rapid digitalization and sound fiscal position, serious social disparities persist.

As with all transformations, there are both winners and losers, and public policies, despite aiming to implement equalizing social programs, often fall short in timeliness in addressing the issues. According to Eurostat, in 2024, approximately 21.5% of Lithuania's population was living below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, and about 25.8% faced poverty or social exclusion—demonstrating that roughly one-fifth to one-quarter of the population continues to experience economic hardship (Eurostat, 2025).

According to EURES, in the second quarter of 2024, Lithuania's average gross monthly wage was approximately €2,196, with the average net wage around €1,352. This indicates that the actual take-home pay is substantially higher than €1,035 (EURES [European Employment Services], 2024).

Due to enduring socioeconomic inequalities, political polarization has intensified and public discourse has become more radicalized. As documented in *Freedom in the World 2024*, a report published by Freedom House (2024), “chronic problems including corruption and socioeconomic inequality often arouse public dissatisfaction with the government, political parties, and other institutions.” These issues and challenges are compounded by uncertainty stemming from the geopolitical crisis, particularly Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, as well as global challenges, such as the ongoing effects of the 2020-era pandemic, climate change, and migration crisis. Research shows that the Russian war in Ukraine fueled the rise of populist and far-right insecurity discourse in Lithuania's 2024 European Parliament elections (European Center for Populism Studies, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic led to a marked drop

in life expectancy from 76.2 to 73.7 years between 2019 and 2021 (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). Climate change resulted in a notable 3.3% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions between 2022 and 2023, though Lithuania remains above the EU average per unit of GDP (European Commission, Directorate-General for Climate Action, 2024). According to Eurostat (2025), the migration crisis resulted in approximately 4.3 million people under temporary protection in the EU by March 2025, including a significant share in Lithuania.

The current government, established on November 21, 2024, is a coalition of three major political forces in Lithuania: The Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP), the Union of Democrats “For Lithuania” (Demokratai), and the populist Dawn of Nemunas Alliance (PPNA). This center-left coalition formed after the parliamentary elections held on October 13 and 27, 2024. In those elections, the LSDP won 52 out of 141 seats (36.9%), Demokratai secured 14 seats (9.9%), and the PPNA gained 20 seats (14.2%). This brought the coalition's total to 86 seats, representing 61% of the Seimas, the parliamentary constituency in Lithuania. The coalition government was approved by Parliament and officially sworn in with Gintautas Paluckas as Prime Minister (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024).

In general, political participation in Lithuania is relatively low, though public engagement in national and European elections tends to be slightly higher. For instance, in the first round of the October 2024 parliamentary (Seimas) elections, voter turnout was 52.2%, dropping to 41.3% in the second round (Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania, 2024). In contrast, turnout in the June 2024 European Parliament elections reached 59.9%, which was among the higher participation rates in the EU (European Parliament, 2024). Civic engagement remains low, with only one in five Lithuanians reporting active involvement in associations or interest groups (Civil Society Institute, 2025).

Although generally reserved in their support of national politics, Lithuanians are actively supportive of the EU and NATO. In the Spring 2024 Standard Eurobarometer survey, 91% of Lithuanians agreed that EU membership is good for their country, marking the highest score across all EU states (European Parliament, Directorate-General for Communication, 2024, p. 5). Meanwhile, a Ministry of National Defence poll conducted in December 2024 found that 90% of respondents supported Lithuania's NATO membership, and 52% stated they would take up arms in defense of the country if necessary (Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, 2025).

Although Lithuanians generally remain reserved in their support of national politics – as shown by the 2024 Eurobarometer, where only 22% of respondents expressed trust in political parties – they demonstrate strong pro-Western sentiment. In Autumn 2024, 68% of Lithuanians reported they trusted the European Union (versus 49% EU-wide) (European Commission, 2024).

The following sections will provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the qualitative study by contextualizing the results and observations within specific aspects of communication culture in Lithuania.

2. Research Setting: Applying the Framework

In this brief section of the report, we closely examine the methodology used for data collection, focusing on the study's descriptive aspects, specifically explaining how the data collection was organized and detailing other specifics of the organization.

Participant Recruitment and Sampling

Focus group planning and recruitment process started in early March 2024 and continued through February 2025. 72 participants took part in 14 focus group discussions (FGD). Using a case-based approach, topical issues were chosen and cases addressing communication ethics challenges were prepared. These cases focused on academic integrity and AI, professional ethics in journalism and communication, social work with vulnerable groups, local communities and civic activism, and challenges for good communication in the digital media environment. Although sample size was important for research rigor and robustness, diversity across age, gender, professional background, and communicative roles, as provided by the attention model above, was central to our approach.

In the focus group discussions, we addressed those who are often underrepresented or marginalized in public discourse, including minors and young people, local communities, and individuals in precarious professional or public positions. To cover different perspectives and encourage a multi-actor dialogue, we also invited participants with institutional and media backgrounds. A list of the focus groups organized in Lithuania is provided in Annex 1.

Four VMU team members were actively involved in the recruitment and research planning process. This collaborative and role-sharing experience was one of the main advantages in meeting the required sample size. Professional contacts and snowball techniques were used to recruit research participants for the focus group discussions. In the beginning, email messages and Google Forms registration questionnaires were sent, often followed by phone calls to encourage feedback from invited participants.

Group size was an important factor in managing the discussions. Most of the groups involved 4-6 participants, which was quite an optimal size for good dynamics and open, in-depth conversation. One of the groups involved 11 participants, which made it challenging to engage everyone and provide them enough time to share their perspectives. In total, we had 72 participants involved in the focus groups and the composition of gender – 51 female participants and 21 male participants were involved in focus group discussions.

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Participation in the research was voluntary. All focus group participants were informed about the discussion topic in advance, including the DIACOMET project's goals and participants' rights during the research. They were also provided an informed consent form and requested to sign it. The signed forms were collected and stored in a protected repository. The main information on research ethics was provided at the beginning of each discussion to ensure informed consent.

We used both an in-person and an online video format for the discussions. Due to the challenge of recruiting participants, we decided to organize online as well as in-person discussions. The online platform was well-received by the participants and appeared to be quite effective. As a result, 7 out of 14 discussion groups took place online using MS Teams. The duration of the discussions varied, with in-person focus groups taking slightly longer (from 1 to 2 hours) than online discussions (about 1 hour).

The main topics/cases selected for the discussions included academic integrity and the ethical use of AI, professional communication practices, social work with vulnerable groups, local communities and civic activism, and communication challenges in the digital media environment. FGD participants were selected on the basis of their professional and demographic characteristics, also their attention category. Although the groups consisted of different participants and covered different topics and cases, they all addressed issues related to public or organizational communication and the role of dialogue in managing personal, public, and/or mediated communication.

Each discussion group started with an advance-prepared case, depending on the discussion topic, followed by the main questions regarding public communication practices, challenges, ethical dilemmas and moral values. For instance, for the discussion group involving junior researchers, a case on academic integrity was presented at the beginning to open the discussion and encourage participants to share their personal experience and reflection. This method was successfully adopted for all discussions, including the online ones.

Group Dynamics and Participant Engagement

It is important to acknowledge that all discussion groups had a good, inclusive atmosphere. This paved the way for an open, equal exchange of views, which contributed to in-depth conversations and enhanced the validity of the study. The role of the moderators and facilitators was highly important. They allowed the tasks and responsibilities to be shared, and they could replace one another in case of necessity. They also kept the focus on the main challenges of public and/or professional communication in terms of good communication conduct (dialogic approach). Most participants demonstrated a high level of interest in the discussion topic and were quite open when expressing their opinions and sharing their

perspectives, which sometimes were quite personal and sensitive. However, in cases where there was a big group, with 11 participants, it was difficult to involve everyone into the discussion and ensure equal opportunities for all to express themselves.

In some groups the participants disagreed with each other when discussing specific issues, particularly those related to controversial cases. However, the tone and atmosphere of these discussions remained polite, respectful, and constructive. Participants often expressed appreciation for being involved in the discussion process, emphasizing the importance of dialogue and sharing in a safe environment. This was mentioned both during and after the discussion sessions.

Data Processing and Coding

After receiving consent from the participants, the discussions were recorded and transcribed later using MAXQDA software. Data cleaning and pseudonymization took place prior to data analysis. The coding process for the Lithuanian sample, most importantly, followed an analytical framework, developed through joint discussions and DIACOMET workshops. This framework was organized around three thematic groups: *Media Environment*, *Public Communication*, and *Ethics and Responsibilities*.

While the initial framework guided the early stages of analysis, an in-depth coding process was based on an inductive approach – where further coding categories and sub-categories were derived, mostly based on empirical content of the focus group discussions. However, the internal logic of each thematic domain also shaped category development. For example, within the *Media Environment* domain, the analysis concentrated on two distinct dimensions: the state of news media and professional journalism, and the challenges posed by the digital media environment. The *Public Communication* theme was approached through an actor-centered lens, emphasizing how individuals perceived and navigated the public and media communication landscape. In the domain of *Ethics and Responsibilities*, the focus was on examining core principles, normative values, and identifying key actors responsible for upholding ethical standards.

The coding work was divided between two research groups to enhance efficiency and ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives. The first group was responsible for coding and analyzing content from focus groups involving participants from media and communication professions, and various experts in the field (professional view). The second team focused on data from focus groups composed of members of various community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other civil society actors (societal view). This division of work facilitated a more targeted, analytical approach while also broadening the scope of interpretations.

To maintain the consistency of the qualitative methodology, regular team meetings were held throughout the coding process. It provided possibilities to discuss methodological challenges, resolve discrepancies, and harmonize coding strategies across the various country teams and keeping in line with the research goals. Regular country team and DIACOMET team level discussions provided a robust framework for understanding the complexities and dynamics of personal and professional experiences in relationship to media, public communication, and ethics.

The following three sections – media environment (Chapter 3), public communication (Chapter 4), and insights into ethics and responsibilities (Chapter 5) – present the main findings from the focus group discussions conducted in Lithuania. Each section begins with a brief overview of the relevant national context to help the reader of this report to understand the structural context as well as social and cultural conditions that shape the participants' experiences and perspectives.

3. Experiencing the Media Environment

3.1. Media Context and Current Challenges

To grasp the essence of the Lithuanian media environment and the cultural specificities defining today's public communication landscape, it is crucial to understand most recent media developments and assess the various external and internal factors that have shaped and continue to define its functions (Balčytienė, 2006, 2012).

The end of World War II marked the beginning of the Soviet occupation that lasted until Lithuania restored its independence in 1990. Fifty years of state propaganda, ideological control and media censorship imposed by the Soviet regime were replaced with the liberalization, privatization and democratization processes. In the early 1990s, a new media policy framework based on media freedom and professional journalism was adopted to support the development of civil society and democratic culture (Juraitė et al., 2018). However, the democratization process has been challenged by both local and global forces, including globalization, digitalization, social transformations and growing geopolitical uncertainties.

In the first decades of the 21st century, the Lithuanian media landscape is viable, though it still faces enduring challenges in maintaining high-quality media operations within a small state. In this limited linguistic market, the concentration of media ownership appears inevitable, posing significant challenges to the autonomy of journalists and the survival of small, regional, and community media outlets (Jastramskis & Balčytienė, 2024; Rožukalne et al., 2024).

Since Russia has never ceased its informational attacks on the Baltic countries, the issue of disinformation has raised concerns in Lithuanian media policy since the 1990s. In recent years, combating disinformation has emerged as a central issue shaping strategies across all policy areas, including education, culture, international relations, and defense. Although sustaining risk awareness and media education strategies to combat disinformation have been on the policy agenda for years (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2024), significant drawbacks against the wider application and effectiveness of programs stem from the predominant neoliberalist logic in media policies. This logic stresses individualism by promoting citizen awareness while neglecting more profound inequalities and information vulnerabilities among the general public (Balčytienė et al., 2025; Rožukalne et al., 2024).

Lithuanian Radio and Television (LRT), the public service broadcaster, receives the highest share of public tax funding among media groups. In 2024, LRT's budget from the state was approximately €72.9 million, financed by 1% of personal income tax and 1.3% of the excise duties collected in the previous year. Of this, around 57% (€41.5 million) was allocated to content production, 34.5% (€25.1 million) to staff salaries, 5.6% (€4.1 million) to administration, and 2.4% (€1.8 million) to marketing. This automatic funding mechanism—mandated by the Law on Lithuanian Radio and Television since 2015—ensures independence from both political influence and commercial advertising. The system is overseen by the LRT Council, which appoints the Director General. LRT operates under its own legal framework, the Law on the Lithuanian National Radio and Television, which defines its mission, governance structure, and funding model. According to this law, the LRT Council is composed of 12 members – four appointed by the President, four by the Seimas, and four by civil society organizations – who appoint the Director General and monitor compliance (All About LRT, 2025).

Other major media outlets with considerable market influence include Delfi, 15min, TV3, LNK, and Verslo Žinios, each commanding strong audience engagement across print, online, and broadcast platforms.

In Lithuania, the media ownership structure fluctuates between international and national capital groups. International media owners include Bonnier Group (Sweden), which owns Verslo Žinios; Postimees Grupp (formerly Eesti Media, Estonia), owner of 15min.lt; and All Media Baltics, which manages TV3 Group. National capital groups include MG Group (formerly MG Baltic), owner of LNK Group and BTV; Laisvas ir nepriklausomas kanalas, UAB; and Respublikos leidiniai, which publishes Respublika and Vakaro žinios (Balčytienė & Jastramskis, 2022; Rožukalne et al., 2024). In the early 1990s, foreign ownership was viewed as beneficial for the economic management of media companies, as evidenced by both the business newspaper (Verslo Žinios), still owned by Bonnier Media from Sweden, and the regional Kauno Diena (whose first owners were from Orkla, Norway).



Given the current shortcomings in the transparency of media ownership foreign ownership does not necessarily ensure higher accountability. Anda Rožukalne and colleagues (2024), referring to Baltic media ownership accountability cases, specifically highlight the appointment of editors-in-chief as critical for journalistic autonomy, as these positions are primarily seen as operating in the interest of business representatives. Furthermore, longitudinal assessments from the Media Pluralism Monitor, EuroMo, and other comparative projects, indicate that the Lithuanian media sector faces commercial influence and an enduring risk to inclusion and social cohesion (Balčytienė et al., 2015; Jastramskis & Balčytienė, 2024). Additionally, Lithuanian media regulation – the Law on Provision of Information to the Public – primarily targets media providers by classifying them as media groups, rather than addressing journalists and their working conditions or focusing on the general public and its inclusion in the public sphere (Balčytienė et al., *in preparation*).

The following sections offer a more in-depth examination of how civil society actors perceive changes in the media environment and related challenges, as well as their own assessments of their reactions.

3.2. Perceptions of Media Environment

To examine FGD participants’ perceptions regarding media environment in Lithuania, we applied an inductive approach in the data coding stage and, following the most pronounced and widely discussed topics, we grouped them into three main subcategories, listed in the table below. In general, our data suggest that participants are aware of various transformations happening in traditional media and in the field of professional journalism. In their discussions, they address different aspects, ranging from principles of journalistic ethics (e.g., objectivity, inclusivity, impartiality, etc.) to the decreasing role of traditional media in a public communication environment.

Next to the questions about traditional media and journalism in Lithuania, participants widely discussed the new media environment, focusing on different characteristics, sharing experiences, and emphasizing major issues.

| |
|---|
| Sub-categories |
| <i>Research sub-questions under consideration</i> |
| Transformations of traditional media and the state of professional journalism |
| <i>How participants describe traditional media and its role in a contemporary public communication environment?</i> |
| <i>What problems and opportunities are identified and discussed?</i> |
| <i>How is the role of the journalist defined by the participants?</i> |
| <i>What positive/negative trends in professional journalism the participants name and how they talk about the transformative changes in the professional field?</i> |
| Technology related issues |

*Which digital technology related issues are identified and discussed by the participants?
How do they speak about them? What do they see as important aspects?*

Audience related issues

Which audience related issues affect traditional media and professional journalism and how?

Table 1. Analytical sub-categories and sub-questions under consideration

Next, we will offer an in-depth examination of these selected trends (see Table 1) in our data.

Transformation of Traditional Media and the State of Professional Journalism

Participants recognized the ongoing transformation in traditional media, related to the rapid expansion of the new digital communication tools and discuss different problematic aspects. A rather critical attitude about the recent state of traditional media and professional journalism was demonstrated in the discussions: participants pointed to problems such as biased media coverage, orientation to profit, and decreasing advocacy for public good. In return, they called for more transparency, greater accountability, and a renewed commitment to journalistic ethics.

Based on the most prominent issues discussed in the FGs we will focus on three aspects: (1) deficient media role in a public communication environment; (2) the question of biased media framing and requirement for journalistic objectivity; and (3) the interrelations between constructive dialogue and emotions.

| Categories: <i>Sub-questions of the study</i> | Sub-categories: |
|--|--|
| The state of traditional media <i>How participants describe traditional media and its role in a contemporary public communication environment? What problems and opportunities are identified and discussed?</i> | Deficient role of the media in public communication environment; biased media framing; profit orientation; power relations. |
| Professional journalism <i>How is the role of journalists defined by the participants? What positive/negative trends in professional journalism they see and how they talk about the transformative changes in the professional field?</i> | Objectivity vs. framing; quality news and constructive dialogue; empathy and commodification of emotions; Inclusivity; serving public interest; growth; respectful vs. offensive language; solidarity vs. ignorance. |

Table 2. Participants' remarks regarding traditional media and professional journalism: data overview

Deficient role of the media in public communication environment: Focus group participants expressed concerns regarding the lack of proactive traditional media engagement in a

contemporary public communication environment. Participants argued that traditional media is reluctant to delve into complex issues, preferring more sensational or entertainment-oriented content instead: media often choose to ignore certain issues or present them in a one-sided manner. Our claims will be supported by evidence from the focus group discussions throughout this report.

"It is often very hard to get the media's attention when working with uncomfortable, sensitive topics. It seems that someone from above presses a button and does not allow the information to be covered and shared. And because of limited resources, for us it is very hard to get public attention." (Community Focus Group (Sept. 30, 2024), Pos. 46)

"When we discussed the Lithuanian Family movement, the media, including public broadcasters, were very biased, there is no doubt. The way it was presented was just wrong. As a sociologist, I can confirm that it was presented in a very biased manner." (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 22)

As a result, there was a call for traditional media to "democratize from within" to pursue a more proactive role in amplifying the voices of vulnerable communities and advocating for their interests and common good in general.

"Let's not forget that we have a public broadcaster that should represent the diversity of interests of members of society. But do we, ourselves, as citizens, as a society, know how to demand this kind of inclusiveness and orientation to public good?" (Community Focus Group (Sept. 30, 2024), Pos. 98)

Biased media framing vs. journalistic objectivity: Participants criticized media of failing to maintain balance and objectivity in its coverage. They argued that news is often constructed around certain narratives and information is filtered and edited to present a particular perspective rather than purely objective knowledge: it is often influenced by financial and power dynamics, with media outlets catering to the interests of advertisers, politicians, and other powerful entities.

"When media comes, journalists do their job: they talk to one side and talk to the other side. But in the final story usually you can feel media's support for those in power, for government - because they have money, they have budgets, they provide financial support." (Community Focus Group (Sept. 30, 2024), Pos. 93)

Furthermore, participants elaborated that the lack of journalistic objectivity may result in social marginalization and sensationalism, leading to moral panic and public outrage.

"Also, it seems to be OK for the media to demonstrate a bad attitude towards people who go out into the streets, who protest and want to be heard. The media portrays them like rebels, who are never satisfied, who do not know what they want." (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 42-45)

"This is the latest case of a child being taken from a family and filmed and posted on Facebook. I personally felt that the Children's Rights specialists were afraid that their every word and move

would be recorded and posted. They did nothing wrong because we know how terrible the situations are. However, it was reported all over Lithuania that the specialists were monsters. The media wanted to devour them. They need a show so that someone could be punished.” (Focus Group on Child Welfare (Apr. 8, 2024), Pos. 45)

Emotions and constructive dialogue: Participants articulated two-dimensional assessment regarding the role of emotions in constructive dialogue. On one hand, journalists were accused of prioritizing sensational and emotional information over nuanced, thoughtful reporting, in such a way supporting the phenomenon of the commodification of emotions in media coverage. On the other hand, they were longing for true emotional connections and compassionate, empathy driven listening from the side of journalists.

“While working on various projects and campaigns, we had to communicate a lot with the media. The general experience is that, when faced with a complex, sensitive, or problematic topic, the media doesn’t want to delve into it. So, to get the media’s attention, we use different tactics, such as approaching the problem creatively.” (Community Focus Group (Sept. 30, 2024), Pos. 73)

“Ideas of patriotism and togetherness should be communicated louder now, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine and increasing threats from Russia. It is important to talk to people. Both the government and journalists should engage with the public. It’s sad that patriotism and pride in our country are being left aside; they could bring people together.” (Community Focus Group (Sept. 30, 2024), Pos. 9)

Reflecting on the problem of journalists losing touch with ordinary people, especially with some social groups, participants shared expectations to strengthen ties between media and people through dialogue. Participants articulated the need for more respectful and intelligent discourse in media, which could promote respect and include diverse voices, in turn fostering a common understanding.

“Traditional media should somehow connect those opposing sides in a measured way, and everyone should be eligible to engage in dialogue.” (Community Focus Group (Sept. 30, 2024), Pos. 22)

Digital Media Landscape

While participants of some focus groups (e.g., community members, social workers) were explicitly addressing the role of traditional media in the contemporary public communication environment, in other groups, meanwhile, participants approached media from a broader perspective, discussing the digital media environment as an integral and dominant part of contemporary public communication.

“When we talk about the public sphere, we have in mind the entire media ecosystem in which we live. We are residents of this media ecosystem, even if we are not active members. We simply live in

such a media ecosystem machine where phenomena such as cancel culture, trolling, and categorization were born.” (Focus Group III: Good Communication (Jan. 22, 2025), Pos. 41)

Participants questioned their experiences as being part of this media environment and discussed various technology-related issues, in particular they focused on the effects of algorithms, public empowerment vs. silencing others, and the issue of anonymous communication.

| Categories: <i>Sub-questions of the study</i> | Sub-categories: |
|---|--|
| Technology related issues <i>Which digital technology related issues are identified and discussed by the participants?</i> <i>How do they speak about them? What do they see as important aspects?</i> | Effects of algorithms; public empowerment and silencing others; anonymity; viral content and commercialization; weak social interactions; dissonance of emotions; security issues. |

Table 3. Describing digital media environment: data overview

Effects of algorithms: Participants acknowledged the increasing role of algorithms in contemporary public communication environment and emphasized the problematic relations between technology and human choice. Interestingly, the question here seems to be no longer “Do we really want/choose this kind of communication and media ecosystem?” Instead, it is, “Can we still make an independent choice?”

“We are talking here about willpower, about the effort to engage in dialogue, as if everything were our choice and decision. But the truth is that much of it is created and managed by algorithms. Technology brings us into 'dialogues'; it's not really our decision or choice.” (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 47)

The participants discussed many ways in which algorithms shape the media environment. They acknowledged that by favoring viral and emotionally charged content, it supports public conflict and creates unfavorable conditions for constructive dialogue. This, in turn, contributes to the rise of phenomena like “cancel culture” or online public attacks and further increases the polarization of public discourse.

“Social media algorithms strongly support conflict in public communication. (...) Well, the entire world's infrastructure serves this conflict, and we enjoy it, sometimes even sitting quietly, hiding in our safe places.” (Focus Group III: Good Communication (Jan. 22, 2025), Pos. 41)

“In our current situation, no one is interested in reducing that anger because it is useful for social networks, the media, and politicians. If they “catch that wave of anger,” they can ride it.” (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 28)

Public empowerment and silencing others: The further insights focus on the question of the digital media effects on citizens. Participants argued that the public empowerment expected from digital communication technologies is overshadowed by negative effects such as canceling, neglecting, or silencing others.

"Everyone of us becomes a channel of communication. And this is empowering. It means you can be heard; you can easily attract attention. Also, you can say something to a person who is in a position of power, to the representatives. (...) So, when we talk about "venting" online, it's not just venting, it's also some kind of empowerment." (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 24)

"Those in between, I think they exist, but they do not manifest themselves. Maybe those people are afraid to articulate their opinion, because when you don't clearly align with one of the opposing groups, you risk that everyone will attack you. (...) It seems that you can only be for or against. And there is nothing in between. So, how do you stand up for your ideas? Or do you just keep quiet?" (Communication Students' Focus Group (Apr. 5, 2024), Pos. 103)

FGD members recognized that in many instances the digital technologies empower individuals who may feel unheard but also those actors of doubtful reputation with unknown, unclear goals: trolls, fake accounts, and bots contribute to the disruption of public discourse.

"Sometimes I feel that it doesn't matter what you think about common humanistic rules or rational perspectives of human values coming from the Enlightenment. Various groups consider them completely unnecessary "remnants of the past," which only hinder and mislead. The only thing that matters is recognition." (Focus Group III: Good Communication (Jan. 22, 2025), Pos. 5)

Anonymity: Another feature of the digital media environment is anonymity. Participants discussed anonymous online actors as a group with specific characteristics: people who feel empowered yet not responsible for what they say or do online; who let themselves to vent their negativity, frustration, or hate.

"These are the anonymous people who think they are "the knights of the cable," who think that no one knows who they are and they are safe on their couches." (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 33)

"In their own online space, they broadcast positivity. However, they post disgusting comments under under the news portal posts. (...) Perhaps anonymity is one factor at play here. Even though you are not truly anonymous online, it is still a public space where you can be identified. Yet, for some reason, they feel free." (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 18-20)

Discussions also highlighted the dissonance between online and offline emotional expressions, as well as the difficulty in understanding the tone and nuance in digital communication, which can also contribute to increased misunderstandings and hostility.



This, according to the participants, reinforces the escalation of public conflict and disagreement instead of supporting dialogue or constructive discussion.

"Now it has become popular to post videos of social workers visits. After that all kinds of bullying and swearing at social workers appear in the comments. I saw a video where a social worker came to submit a support plan, and people cursed at him, chased him out of the yard, and mocked him in the comments." (Focus Group on Child Welfare (Apr. 8, 2024), Pos. 66)

Audience-related Issues

Participants brought up various audience characteristics, which were determined by the digital media environment and the effects it has on social life. Emotional well-being, emotional literacy, attention-seeking behaviors, critical thinking, and media literacy were among most widely discussed issues.

The blurring line between the real world and virtuality is questioned, noting that negative experiences from the digital realm spills over into the real world, leading to significant problems, for instance for young people, who struggle to learn and communicate effectively in the physical reality after the pandemic.

| Categories: <i>Sub-questions of the study</i> | Sub-categories: |
|--|---|
| Audience related issues | Emotional well-being and emotional literacy; attention seeking; critical thinking and media literacy. |

Table 4. Describing audiences of digital media environment: data overview

Emotional well-being and emotional literacy: Participants also recognized different negative effects of digital media on citizens. For instance, they discussed the role of social media platforms in amplifying emotional reactions and creating an environment that encourages prolonged engagement, even if it comes at the expense of users' emotional well-being. Participants agreed that this dynamic can be particularly problematic for vulnerable individuals, such as young people struggling with issues like substance abuse and mental health challenges.

"Communicating online is like living in the World of Mirrors, where you see each other's reflections, but you don't understand each other, causing you to question reality and truth. We think it belongs to us, but they think it belongs to them. Finding oneself on one side of such a dialogue is very difficult and challenging for one's mental health." (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 33-34)

Participants also expressed concerns about the manifestations of online polarization through extreme attacks, hate speech, and offensive language. Participants noted that social

media discussions often veer off from the main topic, with people using the comment sections to vent their frustrations, express political views, or engage in ideological debates that have little to do with the original subject topic. This form of negative emotional release or "ventilation," often challenges emotional health, as people struggle to understand how to react and behave in such situations, how to engage with those holding radical or anti-democratic views, so they choose to stay silent.

"Somehow it seems that very often comments below the online media articles deviate from the main topic. If you start reading comments, you will for sure find political debates, where people cannot agree, what, which government was the best or worst? Which president was the best or worst? (...) Originally, it's an article about, let's say, a minor's suicide or overdose. Somehow it seems that people are releasing some of their inner anger or confusion in an inappropriate place. Then those conflicts develop from absolutely nothing." (Communication Students' Focus Group (Apr. 5, 2024), Pos. 78)

"Society is clearly divided, which we see when communicating with people, when voting during elections, and so on. Where, for instance, one side supports the Istanbul Convention, and the other one strongly disagrees with it. When we have discussion on this topic online, it is obvious that there are not many people who will speak up because it can be exhausting and stressful." (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 4)

The discussions also touched on the challenges of emotional literacy and the ability to understand tone and nuance in online communication, where the lack of nonverbal cues can lead to misunderstandings and escalating conflicts.

Attention seeking: Participants noted that the online environment is driven by "market square logic," with attention-seeking behaviors - the louder you shout, the more attention you get, the better business you have. This logic might be and is attractive to some populist actors in political arenas. Participants discussed the threats posed by attention-seeking behaviors: they elaborated that it can result in dominance of individuals who are driven by emotions or limited knowledge; it can also open possibilities for manipulation and create favorable circumstances for the spread of misinformation and disinformation.

"This market logic dominating online invades politics – everyone is shouting, provoking. The more attention you have, the more successful you are. (...) Political shouting indeed helps gain dividends and supporters. But this is far from dialogue." (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 32)

"Some people do this consciously - they consciously create certain storms around themselves. But we must not forget that often they also attract people in those discussions who may not understand that all this was done consciously, that this is the way to gain popularity, attention, or support." (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 49)

Critical thinking and media literacy: Participants agreed that general trends point to the normalization of low critical thinking and media literacy online, and they see it as one of the

main problems and challenges and articulate the necessity of finding ways to increase public critical thinking and media literacy, starting with oneself, one's family, and one's personal examples.

"Social media makes illiteracy almost mandatory. The dumber you are, the more famous you can become online, you just need to be loud. And since we live in that era of three-second information consumption, the loudest voices get all our "three-second" attention, and people accept their messages as correct and reasonable." (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 27)

"Online discussions are dominated by people who give in to their emotions and perhaps have limited knowledge, making them susceptible to lies. They easily get involved. They actively participate and express themselves. They form communities which expand. (...) But they lack the understanding and critical thinking to grasp where those discussions can lead. And they can lead to real, very scary things." (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 41)

"Instead of AI, artificial stupidity will develop, when people will be unable to make a table, when people are no longer able to process information. Fortunately, we now know how to do this ourselves without AI. Using AI saves us an hour or half an hour. But it does not diminish our ability, it only speeds it up. But what will happen to the next generation, who will then have to perform these tasks and assume AI can do it? At the same time, they will no longer be able to do it without AI. This may or may not be a problem. It's like when my child, sitting in a replacement car and seeing that the window opens by turning a handle rather than pressing a button, looks with wide eyes and asks, "What's wrong here?" (Focus Group on Academic Ethics and AI (Oct. 29, 2024)).

4. Engaging with Public Communication

The primary focus of the focus group research was on the role perceptions and professional/personal experiences of public communication actors. Following the same approach as in the previous section 3, we begin analyzing our data by establishing a national context with specific details on the Lithuanian public communication environment.

4.1. Public Communication: Political, Social, and Technological Dimensions

For many years, Lithuania was regarded as a politically moderate country with a strong consensus around Euro-Atlantic values and low levels of internal polarization. However, the State Security Department's 2024 National Threat Assessment revealed a shift during the 2024 presidential election. The department noted that several candidates advocated positions deviating from the country's strategic orientation, and that "pro-Kremlin forces engaged the highest possible number of pro-Russian voters during last year's elections," even though no direct vote manipulation was detected (State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania, 2024; Valstybės saugumo departamentas, 2024). These positions

included open criticism of NATO and EU membership, calls for bilateral treaties with Russia and Belarus, and public statements undermining Lithuania's constitutional order. Such developments indicate an increasing susceptibility to hostile foreign narratives and a growing erosion of the political center.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Lithuania has significantly boosted its defense support. According to the Ministry of National Defence, the 2025 defense budget, approved by the Seimas, amounts to approximately €3.22 billion, equating to about 3.93% of the GDP, when including additional funding sources such as EU assistance and national solidarity funds (Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, 2025). Furthermore, at a January 2025 State Defense Council meeting chaired by President Nausėda, Lithuania formally committed to increasing defense spending to 5–6% of GDP annually between 2026 and 2030—a historic pledge and a first among NATO members (Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania, 2025). This transformation highlights Lithuania's strategic pivot toward securitization and militarization, with defense policy now firmly focused on modernizing military capabilities and providing sustained support to Ukraine.

Disinformation and manipulative operations conducted by foreign actors are explicitly recognized as a critical national security threat in Lithuania's XIX Government Programme. The document states: "We will strengthen civil resilience to disinformation and hybrid threats, including through systemic cooperation between public institutions, academia, NGOs, and media outlets" (Republic of Lithuania, 2024). This formulation reflects a clear political consensus that information integrity and communication resilience are not merely sectoral concerns but fundamental pillars of national security. By embedding these priorities into the formal government agenda, Lithuania institutionalizes risk awareness as a state-level objective. While implementation mechanisms are addressed elsewhere, the program itself marks a strategic turning point: disinformation is no longer treated as an incidental phenomenon but as a systemic threat requiring coordinated, long-term countermeasures.

The National Crisis Management Centre (NKVC) was officially established at the Government Chancellery on January 1, 2023, following amendments to the Civil Protection and Crisis Management Act passed in December 2022. Its primary mission is to provide around-the-clock situational awareness and coordinate national responses to threats and crises, including cyberattacks, hybrid threats, and other emergencies. As stated in the Government's official activity report, "On 1 January 2023, the National Crisis Management Centre was launched at the Government Chancellery to ensure effective prevention and response to emergencies and threats" (Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 2023, p. 10).

Media literacy in Lithuania is considered relatively high: According to the Digital Decade Country Report 2023 (Ministry of Economy and Innovation, 2024), 49% of adults aged 16–74 possess at least basic digital skills, with 23% demonstrating above-basic proficiency.

However, in ministerial strategies and policy programming, these efforts are mainly delegated to the NGO sector, excluding programs targeting libraries (Ministry of Economy and Innovation of the Republic of Lithuania, 2024). The Ministry of Culture plays a key role in monitoring and policymaking within the media sector. One of the primary focuses of media education – a policy shared among several ministries – is enhancing media and communications competency. Nevertheless, there is also a need to increase awareness of the evolving news media landscape and the roles of traditional media and journalism as essential pillars of daily democratic life (Balčytienė et al., 2025).

Changes and technological advancements in the media sphere present significant challenges, impacting media habits, public perceptions of journalism, and trust in institutions. According to Eurostat (2024), 72% of 16–24-year-olds and 71% of 25–34-year-olds in the EU (including Lithuania) possess at least basic digital skills, while only 34% of 65–74-year-olds do. Although this data refers to the wider EU, Lithuanian national reports align closely, showing that younger Lithuanians, increasingly, rely on online and social media for news, whereas older adults predominantly consume television and radio. Furthermore, trust in media in Lithuania remains notably low: Eurobarometer data from late 2023 indicates that only about 28% of respondents trust news media, with confidence in parliament and political parties even lower – under 25%. This reflects a broader crisis of trust in public institutions. These trends illustrate divergent media consumption and trust patterns across generations and underscore the evolving challenges to democratic resilience.

According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Lithuania dropped from 7th to 13th place in the 2024 World Press Freedom Index due to increasing concerns over the governance of its national public broadcaster, LRT. The RSF country profile highlights that the LRT Council, composed of members appointed by political bodies, has been unable to fully protect the broadcaster from political influence (RSF, 2024). This structural vulnerability raises questions about editorial independence, even in the absence of direct censorship. Furthermore, Lithuanian journalists have reported restricted access to public information, often facing refusals or delays without clear justification. RSF notes that while the media environment remains broadly pluralistic, these governance issues represent a systemic weakness that threatens the sustainability of independent public service journalism in the country (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Lithuania is among Europe's most digitally connected countries. As of early 2024, 89% of the population were internet users (approximately 2.41 million people), and 90.4% of households had broadband access, including 92.7% in urban areas and 85.3% in rural regions, indicating virtually universal online connectivity. On social media, as of September 2024, Facebook led with approximately 2.17 million users, followed by Messenger (1.82 million), Instagram (1.02 million), and LinkedIn (210,800) (Statistics Lithuania, 2024).



According to Eurostat (2024), 69.8% of individuals in Lithuania aged 16 to 74 used the internet to participate in social networks during the three months preceding the survey, closely aligning with the EU average of 70%. While official statistics do not disaggregate usage by specific platforms, this high level of engagement clearly indicates the central role of social media in daily life. Given broader European trends, it is reasonable to infer that platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok are among the most accessed, particularly among younger demographics. This pattern reflects Lithuania's deep integration into the digital communication landscape and highlights the importance of social media in shaping information consumption habits and public discourse.

We proceed with a more thorough examination of how FG participants perceive public communication, their lived experiences, and their areas of focus.

4.2. Perceptions of Public Communication Environment

The inductive thematic analysis of focus group transcripts naturally led to the development of subcategories aligning with the logic of an actor-centered approach to public communication. This analytical approach was also supported by the structure and organization of focus group discussions.

The analysis began with the coding of various characteristics and challenges arising from the contemporary public communication, as identified and discussed by the participants. Further, we examined the participants' emotional responses and reactions to problematic public communication situations, as well as potential solutions they proposed. This approach enabled us to construct a rather comprehensive, actor-centered perspective on current public communication practices. Specifically, we identified different problematic situations, explored how different actors felt and reacted to these situations, and analyzed proposed strategies for conflict resolution and the promotion of constructive dialogue.

Table 5, below, summarizes the main sub-categories of the Public Communication theme and provides with short descriptions and discussion excerpts.

Sub-categories

Research sub-questions under consideration

Characteristics of the public communication environment

How civil society actors do characterize and define a public communication environment?

What metaphors and adjectives do they use?

Which broader contextual circumstances are named to describe and explain contemporary public communication?

Problems

What problems of contemporary public communication environment different actors identify?

How do they describe them?

Individual feelings and responses

*What feelings do the participants articulate when talking about experiences in the contemporary public sphere?
How do they handle and cope with their emotions?*

Solutions

*What measures do the participants suggest embracing for the changing conditions of the public communication environment?
What strategies and tactics does the participant practice and how do they reflect on them?*

Table 5. Analytical sub-categories and sub-questions under consideration

In the following section of this chapter, we present a descriptive analysis of the most salient topics emerging from our data, in particular, discussing (1) characteristics of the public communication environment and related problems; (2) the participants' feelings, emotional responses, and proposed solutions to the problems identified.

Problems in the Public Communication Environment

While discussing the contemporary public communication environments, participants frequently referenced a range of broader contextual factors, including social, (geo)political, and technological dimensions. To gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions regarding the influence of context on public communication, we developed the following analytical questions: (1) How do the participants characterize and define current the public communication environment? (2) What metaphors and descriptive language do they employ to articulate their perceptions and experiences? (3) What broader contextual factors are identified in order to describe and explain contemporary public communication?

| Categories: <i>Sub-questions of the study</i> | Sub-categories: |
|--|---|
| Characteristics of the public communication environment <i>How civil society actors do characterize and define the public communication environment? What metaphors and adjectives do they use? Which broader contextual factors are identified to describe and explain contemporary public communication?</i> | Metaphors and adjectives: "Humans trapped in information bubbles"; Social media as a "meat-grinding machine"; Tourism in search of "Lost Paradise"; New Middle Ages; Living in a "War Theater"; "War of all against all"; "Broken World"; "Lost World"; Users behaving as "city gangs"; Public sphere like a "zoo"; "Society of disgust"; "Social experiment"; Playing "blame games"; etc. Contextual factors: Disruption and transformation; Social acceleration and temporality; Uncertainty and existential risks; Distraction and chaos; Emotional communication; Democratization and liberalization; Human and technology interactions. |
| Problems <i>What problems of contemporary public communication environment different actors identify? How do they describe them?</i> | Polarization; Hate speech and attacks on groups and people; Power abuse and inequality; Commercialization and commodification; Ignorance to traditional human right; Detachment from the community; Disinformation and misinformation; Lack of media literacy and critical thinking; Populism and manipulation; Fragmentation; No solidarity and support; Self-display and attention seeking; Distraction and loss of common goal; No guidelines dealing with conflict; Responsibility vs. |

impunity; Decreasing trust in institutions; Selfishness and double standards; Decreasing professionalism.

Table 6. Contextual characteristics and problematic aspects of the public communication environment: data overview

Participants frequently employed vivid metaphors and descriptions, such as “meat grinder,” “New Middle Ages,” “war theater,” “war of all against all,” “broken world,” “lost world,” and “public sphere like a zoo”, to characterize the current state of public communication (environment). This metaphorical framing conveys the perception that the communication environment is deeply problematic, destructive, and chaotic. FGD members particularly emphasized the challenges arising from ongoing processes of disruption and transformation, the acceleration of social dynamics, and a pervasive sense of uncertainty linked to existential risks (see Table 6).

Disruption and transformation: Participants across different categories reported a pervasive sense of disorientation and uncertainty as they attempt to navigate constantly changing and transforming public communication landscape, where conventional norms and standards of behavior have become increasingly ambiguous and difficult to enforce. Participants expressed concerns regarding increasing difficulty in understanding and adapting to new moral and ethical frameworks, they discussed the changing nature of political identities and the shift away from traditional political narratives; erosion of traditional media structures; and effects of democratization of communication channels through social media.

“As a moral education teacher, I feel that everything we had in terms of a culture of public discussions and a culture of debate for the emerging civil pluralism is currently collapsing and completely transforming. And we see completely different conditions in the world that directly affect us. We are no longer behind any Iron Curtain, of course, as before, thirty or forty years ago. Yes, we are part of the world. And although we still have some kind of common ground, protected by modern science and loosely connecting all the surfaces. But behind that surface, the strangest things happen. Even such common knowledge, like common facts about the commonly experienced world, can no longer have such a unified discourse.” (Focus Group III: Good Communication (Jan. 22, 2025), Pos. 5)

“If, in the West, there is a lot of talk about the collapse of the traditional political identities, we here [in Lithuania] didn't have time to establish strong identities after we gained independence. And today, our people still need to somehow make sense of themselves in that fluid political field. Then they may not be clinging to those all-encompassing political narratives of social democracy, liberal, or something else, but to that low-hanging apple that I can identify with myself and then somehow place myself in that political field.” (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 17)

“With the new Trump administration, we can expect an even deeper change in the media, not only in the US. I'm afraid that something bad could happen. As we can see, Trump is taking cues from Russia on how to deal with inconvenient media outlets, so it will be interesting to see how things change.” (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 45)

Social acceleration and temporality: Closely tied to the themes of disruption and transformation, the concepts of social acceleration and temporality emerged as another prominent issue of contemporary public communication, widely discussed by our participants. Emphasizing the fluid and ever-changing nature of the digital environment, participants reflected on the effects of social media, especially the increasing pace of information consumption, the temporality of public memory and limited accountability.

"We live in that era of three-second information consumption." (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 27)

"Lying is not a virtue these days. Mrs. Blinkėvičiūtė [leader of the Social Democratic Party] lied all the time, but for some reason people don't get mad at her. They still somehow support her and support her and so on. So, where is all that moral framework and backbone?" (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 21)

"Although sometimes public figures cannot get away with doing wrong or saying something wrong, but I wouldn't say that they necessarily ruin their careers. The wheel turns, the media's memory is erased, and suddenly they become heroes again." (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 33)

Uncertainty and existential risks: Participants also expressed concerns regarding contemporary global threats and uncertainties. They questioned how global risks and crises, especially geopolitical unrests and increasing threats from Russia, shape public communication. They also discussed the Trump administration's role in increasing global uncertainty and the undermining effects of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories on truth.

"What we are doing since the invasion of Ukraine started - we look for enemies. Since we cannot defeat Russia, we fight internal enemies. And this is nothing new: societies that sense danger and are full of fear are constantly looking and fighting internal enemies - it is a normal practice." (Focus Group III: Good Communication (Jan. 22, 2025), Pos. 17)

"Young people are stressed about communication online and it turns out that even experienced professionals today are so confused and don't know how to speak in this new Trump Era (Focus Group III: Good Communication (Jan. 22, 2025), Pos. 15)

"Well, if you start denying the very existence of truth and objectivity as such, you're denying reality itself. The whole system is eating itself from the inside. That's where the danger lies. For example, in the USA, there are now many influential actors who can easily and completely push conspiracy theories." (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 62)

These rather pragmatic discussions further developed deeper reflections on essential contemporary dilemmas regarding the social construction of knowledge and truth. For instance, they recognized the rise of new types of communication actors (often of



questionable reputation) on social media platforms, fueling the erosion of the concept of objective truth and the rise of conspiracy theories.

The contemporary public communication environment is characterized by participants as chaotic and unstable, shaped by broader contextual forces such as digital disruption, social transformation, and existential uncertainty. A more in-depth thematic analysis further reveals specific aspects of public communication that participants perceive as problematic. Notably, issues such as polarization, hate speech, and the abuse of power are recurrent themes in their reflections. At the center of many of the discussed issues, the distinction and increasing separation between we/they or in-group/out-group is evident.

Sub-categories

Polarization: Power dominance; Inequalities, disparities; Ignoring, silencing others; Radicalization; Generalization and oversimplification; Viewing opponents as enemies; Voluntary self-isolation; Desire to win; Biased media communication; Algorithms; Polarizing power of discourse.

Hate speech: Disrespectful reactions to opposing ideas, ignorance and inability to control ones' (mostly negative) emotions while communicating with opponents; Seeing and treating opponents as enemies; Emotional venting out (anger, offensive language, public attacks); Cancel culture and ignoring, silencing others; Lack of empathy and inability or unwillingness to listen/hear other opinions (including constructive criticism); Normalizing offensive speaking in political culture (Trump era communication); Public attacks and moral accusation related to the group you represent; Anonymity leads to feelings of no responsibility and lack of respect to others; Fake profiles online; General public dissatisfaction and frustration.

Power abuse: Fear to speak up; Polarization and silencing other (those in-between); Power based communication and propaganda online; Interest groups; Orientation to profit vs. orientation to public good: public needs ignored; Benefit driven communication; Criticism perceived as threat, especially in hierarchical power positions: silencing others; No dialogue with community while making important decisions.

Table 7. Problematic aspects of contemporary public communication as identified and discussed by participants of focus groups in Lithuania

Polarization: The polarization issue is often described through increasing societal divide (us vs. them), where certain groups or individuals, in positions of authority, seek to silence or marginalize those with differing views, labeling them as enemies or undesirables. The role of the traditional media and social networks is recognized, raising concerns of biased coverage, sensationalism, and algorithms, which further exacerbate polarization. Discussions also touched on regional disparities, where the concerns and experiences of those outside the major urban centers are often overlooked or dismissed by the political and intellectual elite. This contributes to a sense of alienation and a breakdown in social cohesion.

"In addition to biased media, we also have a very strong "intellectual bubble" with a lot of criticisms for different views. And well, I personally, as a scientist, experienced real attacks, and strong pressure from them." (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 13)

"Media is not helping to communicate sensitive topics. There is often a negative attitude towards people who protest, who go out into the street. The media coverage is mainly negative: 'what do they want? They are never satisfied. They are bad'." (Community Focus Group, (Sept. 30, 2024), Pos. 42-45)

"But the social feelings of those who participated in the protests were so devalued and belittled. That was scary. Judging by the scale, those people were really belittled and dehumanized. (...) In general, public communications was very biased. The main message was that those who came to the Family March were mistaken in thinking that they exist. But they do exist. They have their own opinions; they have their grievances that were not addressed in any way. They were turned into those fools, misled by communication." (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 11-13)

Hate speech: Participants further discussed how online discussions often devolve into hostile exchanges, with people resorting to insults, hate speech, and aggressive rhetoric rather than engaging in meaningful dialogue. Participants addressed different manifestations of hate speech, including treating opponents as enemies, canceling, ignoring others, or giving in to uncontrollable emotional venting.

"Sensitive topics like feminism or sexual abuse in Ukraine are hard to communicate even at an institutional level. (...) Sometimes, if you communicate an uncomfortable position, you even risk becoming an "enemy of the state." (Focus Group IV: Good Communication (Jan. 23, 2025), Pos. 15)

"It doesn't really matter if we talk about the Istanbul Convention or any other sensitive topic. (...) Actually, the topic of making public "emotions boil" is not necessarily the main problem. It just provides citizens with an arena for the venting of some deeper, suppressed frustration and dissatisfaction." (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 17)

Different causes of the phenomenon of hate speech are questioned: for instance, participants noted that hate speech is often exacerbated by the anonymity and lack of accountability provided by social media platforms. Moreover, they argued that the current media and political landscape incentivizes and rewards this type of confrontational behavior, as it generates attention and engagement. Participants also recognized psychological and social factors underlying the phenomenon of hate speech, suggesting that it often stems from deeper frustrations, resentments, and a lack of understanding or empathy towards those with differing views.

Power abuse and inequality: The issues of power abuse and inequality often emerged while discussing the participants' experiences with formal authorities or institutions. Personal examples of being punished, dismissed for communicating "unconformable truth," or criticizing those in power are shared by the participants.

"The media must inform and be neutral, but not support either side, simply telling it like it is. In this case, it is the government on one side and society on the other. The government is above the people: it sets agendas, adopts laws, and has experts. Society is the weaker side in this case because it cannot pass resolutions. (...) Journalists should perhaps support those people more, support them, raise them up to the government, so that they can be heard." (Community Focus Group (Sept. 30, 2024), Pos. 84)

Unequal access to knowledge and communication channels is another issue under consideration. Participants elaborated that certain groups, such as marginalized communities and NGOs, face challenges in accessing and utilizing communication platforms, often due to financial constraints or institutional barriers. This limits their ability to voice their concerns and participate in public discourse.

"Power is an important thing in communication. I can confirm this from my own experience, it is often decided by power if we have easy or difficult access to knowledge. And so if we want to create a dialogue connecting those empowered and those vulnerable, adequate conditions must be in place." (Focus Group III: Good Communication (Jan. 22, 2025), Pos. 37)

FGD members see the contemporary public communication environment as deeply problematic, destructive, and chaotic. Due to an increasing sense of uncertainty, disruption, and transformation, mostly determined by digital technologies, traditional forms of public communication are under unprecedented challenges. Participants voiced difficulties in maintaining open and constructive communication and name polarization, hate speech and power abuse as leading disruptive phenomenon.

Participants elaborated that these issues lead to a lack of genuine dialogue, as people become entrenched in their positions, unwilling to understand or empathize, and instead are becoming more hostile, hateful, and oriented to their own or in-group well-being. Participants mostly blamed traditional media biases and the profit-oriented nature of online social media. Therefore, they called for more nuanced and balanced reporting, as well as an expansion of social media regulations to increase accountability and responsibility.

In addition, social and psychological aspects were also recognized as contributing to the changing conditions of public communication environment. In particular, the inability or unwillingness to empathize with others and the increasing trend to prioritize individual well-being over public good, among others. Participants called for a more holistic, inclusive approach to public communication to foster common understanding, empathy, and a shared sense of community.

Emotional Responses and Proposed Solutions

Recognition of the problematic state of the contemporary public communication environment, further leads us to the question of how people feel and react to daily situations

of public communication and how do they reflect on their experiences. Hence, in this section we discuss participants' articulated feelings and responses, as well as proposed solutions in order to analyse their abilities to deal with "uncomfortable" situations and identify their needs.

| Categories: <i>Sub-questions of the study</i> | Sub-categories: |
|--|--|
| Individual feelings and responses <i>What feelings do the participants articulate when talking about experiences in a contemporary public sphere? How do they handle and cope with their emotions?</i> | Feelings: Emotional distress (emotions reflecting general psychological discomfort, anxiety, or low mood): Sadness and disappointment; Fear; Feeling powerless; Loss of motivation; Confusion; Feeling surprised; Feeling traumatized. Social disconnection (feelings linked to interpersonal exclusion or lack of understanding): Exclusion; Feeling uncomfortable; Feeling lonely; Feeling misunderstood; Feeling surprised. Anger and irritation (reflecting frustration or hostility): Anger; Irritation; Disgust. Responses: Activism or reactivity; Ignorance and withdrawal; Resilient coping strategies; Attentive listening; Advocating; Questioning; Setting boundaries. |
| Solutions <i>What measures do the participants suggest embracing for the changing conditions of the public communication environment?</i> <i>What strategies and tactics does the participant practice and how do they reflect on them?</i> | For democracy: Accepting transformations as a normal thing, embracing uncertainty; Reassessing the role of conflict in democracy. For dialogue: Creating and protecting special spaces for dialogue and constructive discussions (e.g., specialized publications), which must be separated from mass-communication; Going back to traditional normative rules; Learning to exit "safe spaces" to create dialogue; New people and new approaches are needed. Good examples: Discussions at universities; Special publications; Clubs; Online and offline platforms. |

Table 8. Responding to and reflecting on the “uncomfortable” situations of contemporary public communication

Articulated feelings: Participants expressed deep emotional distress and a sense of powerlessness in the face of contemporary public communication, in particular, they articulated feeling confused, anxious, frustrated, or even traumatized.

“I have noticed that I am less willing to communicate and speak in public. I mean the social network Facebook. Because I no longer understand what is good, what is bad, what is good behavior, what is bad behavior. So, now, for a while, I have been silent.” (Focus Group III: Good Communication (Jan. 22, 2025), Pos. 7)

“If we want to have a good relationship with institutions and mainstream media and cooperate or attract funds and receive financing, then we are being pushed into a corner where we cannot speak

the truth or discuss some real, sensitive issues that are happening in Lithuania." (Focus Group IV: Good Communication (Jan. 23, 2025), Pos. 11)

Many expressed sadness, disappointment, and a loss of motivation, struggling with confusion over what constitutes right and wrong behavior. The stress and overwhelming nature of navigating these conflicts leave some feeling tired, exhausted, and fearful for the future. There is a pervasive sense of being trapped, unable to effectively challenge problematic narratives or advocate for their values.

"On social media, they broadcast positivity. However, in the comments section of news portal and politicians' posts, they pour out disgusting things. It's simply impossible to understand where such hatred can fit in one person, and it's truly scary that they feel they can act this way. This probably has to do with morality in general, society, togetherness, and humanity. The question is, how can you afford to write such things?" (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 18)

Feelings of social disconnection are also common among participants, especially when discussing professional challenges. Participants expressed a lack of professional solidarity and support; therefore they often feel like "lonely fighters". Anger, irritation, and disgust are common reactions to the perceived toxicity and divisiveness of public discourse.

"Based on my experience, it is very difficult to correctly apply the norm. Not because it is unclear or complicated, but because of how they are interpreted by interest groups. (...) And if you really want to hold a normative position consistently, it is very difficult, you may be left completely alone with your principles and your views." (Focus Group III: Good Communication (Jan. 22, 2025), Pos. 11)

"Thank you again. This focus group is like a mutual aid group. It's so helpful to share these experiences and reflections. Sometimes I feel so lonely in this. It's as if I'm being pulled in two directions and need to choose one side. It was a great experience; I really enjoyed it. Thank you." (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 57)

"Well, perhaps those stories you encounter on the ground drive you forward. It's really frustrating when people don't leave the "Vilnius bubble" and talk about the problems, though they don't see what's happening beyond our capital." (Focus Group IV: Good Communication (Jan. 23, 2025), Pos. 25)

Emotional responses: Participants further reflected on various ways they respond to "uncomfortable" public communication situations. Withdrawal from such situations or complete "emigration" from the public sphere is often chosen as a way to save one's mental health and peace of mind. In contrast, others try to find ways to communicate and advocate, using strategies like attentive listening, presenting broader context, and sharing personal stories to engage the other side.

"I have been feeling like an internal emigrant from the public space for about a year. If someone asks me, I will answer. But I no longer have any desire to convince anyone or to talk at all. Why? Because I no longer believe in goodwill. Goodwill conversations. There is no goodwill. No one came

to hear another opinion. Everyone came to convince me.” (Focus Group III: Good Communication (Jan. 22, 2025), Pos. 17)

“I was staying in the dialogue. I was trying to understand them [the other side]. Also, I believed I had the skills and methods to do so. (...) I also believed it was the right thing to do – to stay, to try and understand, to listen. And although I had a totally different opinion about the Istanbul Convention, I did not hide my position. And it was not easy, but it was important and the right thing to do.” (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 34)

Notably, personal experiences of more resilient responses were often discussed within a strong emotional context. Participants articulated being uncomfortable or scared, however being oriented to “the right thing to do” or to the common good, they found creative ways to stay and communicate.

Proposed solutions: Participants suggested that the key for public dialogue and democracy to flourish is finding a common ground, which is far from trying to change each other's views and opinions. Talking about dialogue, participants distinguished between two forms of dialogue: the “formal one” and “public one.” Formal dialogue, such as scientific discussions or political deliberations leading to legislations, national/international strategies, etc., should happen in dedicated spaces that allow for in-depth, nuanced discussion, rather than in public forums prone to polarization and “noise.” Examples include academic institutions, specialized clubs, and carefully curated media outlets that prioritize thoughtful debate over sensationalism.

“I see a big problem in Lithuania: we don't really have any space to talk about educational science, some kind of accessible space for society. Maybe a site. (...) We have all kinds of journals on pedagogy, education, and social education, but they remain in the realm of academia. I always want other people to read these things and apply them. Apparently, we don't have enough of that. ” (Junior Researchers’ Focus Group (June 5, 2024)).

On the other hand, public dialogue is something different but equally important. Participants especially recognized the importance of reaching out to those who may be misinformed or misguided (vulnerable groups), not through confrontation but by providing broader context and information. Cultivating a culture of respectful, intellectually fueled dialogue, even across deep divides, is seen as essential for a healthy democracy.

“As social workers, we do not have a representative figure that reflects us. As far as I have noticed, people need someone they can identify with. For example, on Mother's Day, the police Facebook page posted a picture of a policewoman with her children. On Women's Day, they shared a picture of men with flowers. They know how to represent themselves in an attractive way, people identify with them, saying, “We are the same as them.” Perhaps we lack such representation.” (Focus Group on Child Welfare (Apr. 8, 2024), Pos. 84).

5. Reflecting on Communication Ethics

In this section, we follow the same scheme tested in the two other themes: media environment (Chapter 3) and public communication (Chapter 4). First, we provide details from the context and then adopt a participant's perspective to reflect on their experience.

5.1. Media and Communication Ethics

Lithuania employs a dual approach to media oversight, combining statutory supervision and self-regulation under the Law on the Provision of Information to the Public (2024). The Žurnalistų etikos inspektorius (Inspector of Journalist Ethics) is an independent state official, appointed by the Seimas for a five-year term (Republic of Lithuania, 2024). Their primary functions include monitoring media for violations concerning the protection of minors, hate speech, privacy rights, and other media standards. The Inspector can initiate investigations both ex officio and in response to public complaints, make legally binding decisions, and even issue administrative penalty protocols for breaches of ethical standards (Inspektorius veiklos reglamentas, 2004; Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2024).

Meanwhile, media self-regulation is overseen by the Public Information Ethics Commission (VIEK), a non-governmental body composed of journalists, publishers, academics, and independent members. The Commission processes complaints based on the Journalists' and Publishers' Code of Ethics, focusing on issues such as misleading headlines, lack of balance, discrimination, and privacy violations. (Public Information Ethics Commission [VIEK], 2024). Although VIEK's decisions are not legally binding, they bear significant moral authority and often lead media outlets to issue public corrections or apologies.

Next, we'll take a closer look at how FG participants view their responsibilities, and which principles are lacking in communication settings.

5.2. Perceptions of Moral Responsibilities and Communication Ethics

Moral and normative considerations regarding the participation of citizens in a contemporary public communication environment were evident across all the data. The shift from traditional democratic values raises fundamental ethical questions, such as: What are the core principles mapping our future? Whose responsibility is it to safeguard true human values? And where do ordinary people find support and assistance in conflict situations? The following sections are dedicated to address these questions as they were discussed by the participants of Lithuanian focus groups.

Sub-categories

Research sub-questions under consideration

Principles and moral aspects

What are the ethical principles the participants name or indirectly discuss as essential for contemporary public communication?

Which moral aspects are identified and questioned as a reaction to changing conditions of public communication?

Moral support recourses

What are the sources of support to stand strong for the moral values and ethical principles?

Responsibilities

Who and in what way is/should be responsible for protecting fundamental human rights, principles and democratic values in contemporary public communication environment?

Table 9. Analytical sub-categories and sub-questions under consideration

First, we explore ethical principles and moral aspects that participants identified as vital for public communication. Second, we examine the individual support resources that help participants stand strong for their moral values and ethical principles. Finally, we question the responsibilities of different stakeholders to understand participants' expectations and determine who should safeguard moral principles (Table 9).

Ethical Principles and Moral Aspects

Several key principles and moral aspects were addressed by the participants as central in contemporary public communication. Inclusivity, equality, truthfulness, and empathy were among the most frequently referred. Participants often discussed ethical principles and reflected on moral aspects by telling personal stories, discussing relationships within society (within or outside the group they belong) and assessing contextual factors of transformation, such as algorithms on social media or AI-generated content.

| Categories: <i>Sub-questions of the study</i> | Sub-categories: |
|---|---|
| Principles and moral aspects <i>What ethical principles participants name or indirectly discuss as essential for contemporary public communication?</i> <i>Which moral aspects are identified and questioned as a reaction to changing conditions of public communication?</i> | Inclusivity and equality; Truth, truthfulness and truth telling; Empathy and compassionate listening; Being constructive; Respect; Critical thinking; Freedom of speech and responsibility; Support and solidarity; Openness and honesty; Public good; Trust; Unity; Privacy and data protection. |

Table 10. Core principles and moral aspects of public communication (named by participants of focus groups in Lithuania)

Inclusivity and equality: Principles of inclusivity and equality were most widely discussed, indicating participants' understanding of the value of diverse voices in democracy and

dialogue. Different actors discussed these principles in various contexts. Most notably, they emphasized the importance of creating an open and respectful dialogue, where differing views could be heard without judgment.

"Having a dialogue means including people with different views and opinions. We don't engage in dialogue with like-minded people. In that case, we only echo each other. But the problem is, how do we talk to those who think differently?" (Focus Group III: Good Communication (Jan. 22, 2025), Pos. 17)

The participants also expressed concerns over the suppression of certain narratives, particularly around issues of sexual violence and gender-based discrimination and articulated the necessity for more inclusive and more equal representation in public discussions when dealing with sensitive topics. But also the topic of journalist ethics and the consequences of presentation of sensitive topics or controversial cases were questioned.

"It has become popular to post videos of child abductions, a social worker visiting, and in the Tik Tok space, live broadcasts are held when child rights specialists and social workers visit, and then all kinds of social worker bullying appear in the comments. We have to protect social workers from aggressive comments." (Focus Group on Child Welfare, (April 8, 2024), Pos. 66)

The role of power dynamics in communication was also covered in the focus group discussions. Participants articulated personal experiences and explained how access to information and decision-making can be influenced by one's power position. FGD members advocated for greater transparency and community involvement in decision-making processes, to ensure inclusivity and equality. The need for fostering a sense of community and belonging within organizations were highlighted, as this can enable more open communication and the sharing of diverse ideas.

"If interest groups are pushing projects, they must be smart. These projects must be communicated to the public in their initial stages so they can have a say. In other words, those who want to push it forward should present their arguments and facilitate the discussion. They shouldn't just announce that the project is done and the decisions have been made. "Dear Kaunas citizens, here's a little gift for you." (Community Focus Group (Sept. 30, 2024), Pos. 22)

"I am a teacher, and we have regular staff meetings where we discuss all the issues and there is such a direct connection, because sensitive questions are asked. What do you think about this? How do you deal with that? Different opinions are shared and acknowledged, and you understand that there are no barriers here and it feels good. (...) But for example, when I worked in the editorial office I had totally different experience. I felt like a little animal thrown into the water without knowing how to swim." (Communication Students' Focus Group (Apr. 5, 2024), Pos. 57)

Truth, truthfulness and truth-telling: Focus group discussions highlighted the complexities and nuances involved in navigating the principles of truthfulness and truth telling in the digital age. These principles were often discussed by the participant in the context of

disinformation, especially emphasizing the responsibilities of media and government institutions, for instance, to fact-check and verify information.

"In general, what are the prevailing trends? Take, for example, Facebook decision to abandon fact-checkers, first in America and then probably everywhere else. This is a political and economic decision because it doesn't cost anything. But there is also the reason that those who reduce the amount of information that incites anger and make the content more boring are being rejected quite strongly because verified content is boring; it is no longer provocative." (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 28).

Participants also elaborated on the difficulties in upholding the principles of truthfulness. They explained that it is getting harder not only to understand what is and what is not true; but also to be honestly truthful and firmly "stand for the truth" (especially when discussing sensitive issues). In toxic communication environment where lines between true and fake information is blurred the *need to be brave and proactive* in pursuing the truth and building common knowledge which is opposite to "owning the truth", is essential. Some participants suggested that the pursuit of truth is not about finding an absolute or objective truth, but rather about finding a mutual understanding and agreement.

"I don't hide my position. I never did. I am always truthful with people who have different values than I do, and I think it's important for someone with different values to be able and willing to communicate them." (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 34)

Empathy and compassionate listening emerge as a crucial moral principal for public communication: participants emphasized the importance of understanding people's perspectives, emotions, and life circumstances (as opposed to ignorance, selfishness, and denial of other positions); but also agreed that this is very much lacking in contemporary communication environment.

"Why are you going into that dialogue? Why? They just need to wake up. Their thinking is wrong, they don't understand. Yes, they are not necessarily right, but maybe we need to understand what hurts a person and then engage in dialogue. Maybe we don't understand or notice something because our experiences of the world are completely different." (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 17)

"I think that a person can believe that the Earth is flat, so we have to understand that he has the right to believe that. We must understand why they believe the Earth is flat, which requires further study. This is very important for the social sciences and humanities. From an anthropological, sociological, and political science perspective, it is important to understand, "Why"? Why do they believe the Earth is flat?" (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 22)

"One gets very angry because you bear even greater responsibility for that little person, not for the parents, because the parents are adults and responsible for themselves. I take responsibility for that child. How does he feel about that? You alone see that it's wrong, but others say, "No, maybe your expectations are too high." (Focus Group on Child Welfare, (April 8, 2024), Pos. 37)



Participants also recognized other necessary aspects for public dialogue to be built. They emphasized *being constructive, being critical, and being honest, open and supportive*. The need for critical thinking, for instance, was explained through public concerns dealing with disinformation online; openness and honesty, meanwhile, were seen as foundational, with participants advocating for transparent and accountable communication practices; moreover, the balance between public good and private interests was highlighted, underscoring the need for communication that serves the broader societal well-being, rather than narrow, private or political agendas.

Moral Support Resources

The necessity to build an inclusive, truthful, and compassionate environment, where diverse perspectives would be valued and marginalized voices could be amplified, is a challenging goal. As we saw from the previous analysis (see Public Communication section), participants often felt lonely, hopeless, and powerless in pursuit of truth and attempt to protect the weaker or to invite minorities to the common discourse. Moral support resources, therefore, are critical for (often) personal initiatives to succeed. Whether it is family, local community support groups, professional online/offline forums, meetings with friends, or random acts of kindness, it motivates, gives strength and meaning to stand up for ones’ moral principles and be brave enough to fight for them.

| Categories: <i>Sub-questions of the study</i> | Sub-categories: |
|---|--|
| Moral support recourses <i>What are the sources of support to stand strong for the moral values and ethical principles?</i> | Friends, family support; Professional solidarity; Support from the community; Online support groups. |

Table 11. Moral support resources discussed by participants of focus groups in Lithuania

The most prominent support sources named by the participants were *friends, family, support from the communities and professional solidarity*. For instance, neighborhood gatherings where people can come together, connect, share their everyday worries, and find a sense of togetherness and inclusivity were discussed alongside family support as essential resources of moral support. Participants explained how important it is for them to have a balanced life, where stability, happiness, and love of family and friends gives one strength to pursue professional or personal goals. For the cases of childcare systems and children with special needs – there is a variety of support mechanisms depending on the needs of the child, family, school teachers, parents, professional social workers – the support mechanisms such as crises centers where parents are taught social skills, coworker support, NGOs, school buses, social workers, assistants, and community involvement are important.

"Community is a very important part. For me, community is a place where we can meet like-minded women and support each other. (...) And if we are in a totally different place in our lives, we still share so much. (...) It inspires to keep going." (Focus Group IV: Good Communication (Jan. 23, 2025), Pos. 29)

"Family is where I find my support. My work is absolutely chaotic and stressful. And when I come home, I feel like a rabbit in a cozy cave. (...) This helps me "recover" and regain energy for the next day." (Focus Group IV: Good Communication (Jan. 23, 2025), Pos. 29)

"In rural areas, buses take children to school, so that children could attend educational institutions. In those remote rural areas, the elders, the eldership, and the entire community provide help." (Focus Group on Child Welfare, (April 8, 2024), Pos. 14)

Local and international professional communities, united by a shared mission and purpose, were discussed by different actors as another important source of professional support, encouragement, and motivation. Some of the examples from focus groups provided rather explicit comparisons on how support from your colleagues makes it easier to stand up for justice even when it is very uncomfortable and stressful.

"Fact-checkers have a very strong international community, which is very much different from the support that regular journalists have. This is a very strong community of people, united by a mission and a shared goal. In moments of crisis, we came together and feel that we can make a change." (Focus Group IV: Good Communication (Jan. 23, 2025), Pos. 27)

"As social workers, we can talk to each other to console ourselves, discuss how to proceed, share our situations. We can only help each other." (Focus Group on Child Welfare, (April 8, 2024), Pos. 57)

The role of personal values, principles, and a strong sense of purpose were also considered by the participants as driving forces that keep them motivated and resilient in the face of conflict or other challenges.

Responsibilities

Even though participants recognized that individual choices in communicating truthfully, openly, and with compassion are important for critical change to occur, broader systemic and institutional alterations are necessary. Therefore, we address the question of the responsibilities of various actors in upholding moral principles and addressing societal issues.



| Categories: <i>Sub-questions of the study</i> | Sub-categories: |
|---|--|
| Responsibilities <i>Who and in what way is/should they be responsible for protecting fundamental human rights, principles and democratic values in a contemporary public communication environment?</i> | Professionals; Policy makers and institutions; Journalists and media; Society and citizens; Private organizations and their leaders; Other public figures. |

Table 12. Public communication actors and their responsibilities as discussed by participants of focus groups in Lithuania

Professionals, policy makers, and journalists were most frequently named as actors expected to take actions and responsibilities for the quality of public communication. However, significant emphasis was placed on collaboration and the need for different stakeholders to work together toward a common goal.

Professionals: Participants elaborated that professionals from different fields (e.g., educators, scientists, university professors, social workers, etc.) have a special duty to bridge the gap between society and informed authorities by engaging in dialogue, actively listening, seeking understanding, and patiently providing nuanced perspectives on complex issues to the public. The strength of the relationship between society and professionals is critical in vulnerable situations and may determine whether a conflict or crisis is responded to successfully. This is especially important when talking about the most vulnerable groups in society. Furthermore, participants expected professionals to not only engage with citizens but also to advocate for minority interests by putting them on both, political and public agendas.

“It is very difficult to talk about sexual violence among immigrants. People wonder if immigrant women are the only ones experiencing sexual violence? (...) There was such a strategy to tell about a woman who suffered, about her life, showing that she is just like you or me.” (Focus Group IV: Good Communication (Jan. 23, 2025), Pos. 15)

“It's good that scientists who study society are brave enough to talk about sensitive issues, address actual problems, and look for solutions.” (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 27)

Professional solidarity and support for each other (and close collaboration with other institutions and specialists) were named as another required responsibility for professionals, as participants recognized that individual and unorganized attempts to fight injustice are not enough.

“When we talk about people who disseminate misleading information, we must consider whether that person is consciously spreading disinformation and is connected to groups that perhaps pursue some larger goals? Or is that person simply misled and lost in all that information

environment? (...) I am not talking about the first group. It is probably not the job of journalists to talk to them, but rather other institutions and specialists should be involved to assess the possibility of threat to national security.” (Focus Group IV: Good Communication (Jan. 23, 2025), Pos. 36)

“As an educator, I have the idea that my goal is to be in dialogue, not to prove something. I try to understand those people, not to push them further into radical corners.” (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 31)

“In our case, this is probably teamwork, when the team that is fully involved in the matter, and the child welfare team, should somehow still choose a direction, go the same direction, know what the other team is doing. And, of course, the experience of each team member is different.” (Focus Group with social workers (April 8, 2024), Pos. 26)

Policy makers and institutions: Policy makers and public institutions are, foremost, expected to meet the true needs of ordinary citizens by coming closer to their everyday lives, listening more carefully, and getting a better understanding of their needs and worries.

“if we want better quality in public discussions, first we need to look at the ordinary citizen, how he/she feels, what their environment is like, what their well-being is like, how they communicate with their family members, with their friends. All those tensions, dissatisfactions, distrust in institutions, the media, all of that comes from daily personal experiences. It just seems to me that it is a big challenge. And all of this is related to the strengthening of public sector, non-governmental organizations. And there is a very, very long way to go. And there is not necessarily the will for this.” (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 55)

This would also be helpful in corresponding to the second request from the participants, to ensure equal public capacities when accessing, understanding, and applying knowledge in everyday life. This requires fostering media literacy and critical thinking, most importantly by supporting teachers and empowering them. Finally, participants call for the protection of dialogue-supporting environments, which can be found at schools, universities, libraries and other places.

“It seems to me that strengthening critical thinking is very important, because without it we are stuck here. And this is a question of the education system. However, how can the education system strengthen critical thinking when the teachers themselves, sometimes, initiate and support destructive discussions?” (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 55)

“Universities arose as spaces for elite groups to build dialogue and search for certain knowledge. Those people who wanted to search for knowledge and dialogue about that knowledge were concentrated there.” (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 54)

Journalists and media: Journalists and media are seen as having a crucial role in bringing attention to important matters and facilitating dialogue, but the requirement for journalistic objectivity, impartiality, and balance (among other contextual circumstances) seems to restrict journalists from a more active and engaged role in a public communication environment. However, the discussions suggest that citizens are asking for stronger and

closer advocacy from journalists and mainstream media. Interestingly, individual journalists themselves articulate a desire for change to open-up for the public and make more efforts to engage them in dialogue.

"Journalists should perhaps support the side of those people more instead of mainly covering the agenda of policy-makers. (...) Neutrality is important, but so is the support of the weaker side so that the stronger side would simply hear." (Community Focus Group (Sept. 30, 2024), Pos. 84)

"We came to one mainstream media channel with the idea of a talk-show in which we would be interviewing marginalized, eliminated social groups and people. It was a suggestion to expand the circle of dialogue and they agreed. So, we do not do it radically quickly, because the audience needs time to adapt. But this is an example of change and how we can make it happen." (Focus Group II: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 39)

"Just like journalists strive for objectivity, they should also strive for some kind of public dialogue." (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 62)

In addition to that, participants talked about public figures (including politicians and celebrities), private and non-profit organizations and their leaders, and about the citizens themselves, as important actors having responsibilities in a public communication environment. Politicians, influencers, and other public figures are expected to be mindful of the impact of their actions and statements, as they can significantly influence public discourse; organizations and their leaders are responsible for fostering a culture of open communication and critical thinking within their institutions; and citizens (and communities) themselves have a role to play in cultivating empathy, emotional intelligence, and a sense of responsibility and civic engagement.

"Social advertising has a huge impact on society solving some of its social issues, because it is real. Why did our children start fastening the safety belts in cars? Because for a year, an advertisement was broadcasted, showing a child flying out of the back seat through the front windshield. Children saw that. This is life. In that sense, you need to show how it is. But when you air social advertising, it constantly becomes social because it affects every member of the audience." (Focus Group on Inclusive Education (June 19, 2025), Pos. 50)

The responsibilities of safeguarding democratic values and the fundamental principles of public dialogue are indeed shared by professionals, governmental institutions, the private sector, the media, and society at large. Therefore, a holistic approach is needed to address the ills of contemporary public communication, with a requirement for close and genuine collaboration between various actors and institutions at its center.

6. Conclusion

Our goal in this report was to put individual responses into the broader context of media and communication developments. We asked guiding questions to explore how participants perceive new challenges in mediated public communication settings. How do they describe these developments? Are there any key local or national factors in Lithuania that influence how meaning is created, and public communication culture is shaped?

The provided examples reveal how different civil society actors reflected on the media environment, public communication culture, ethical values, and responsibilities. Specifically, they demonstrate how these actors incorporate their lived practices, both personal and professional, and reflect on current problems by drawing on their knowledge and experience. The examples also disclose the emotional side of participants' individual stories, including aspects of how they articulated these changes and which communicative-processual characteristics they emphasized the most.

The participants' reflections suggest that the overall communications arena in Lithuania aligns with a rapidly evolving, structurally unmanaged, chaotic, and highly polarized public sphere. The growing polarization is an alarming trend in Lithuania, initiated and accompanied by the rise of disinformation and the proliferation of manipulative content, especially on social media platforms. This observation aligns with the findings of policymaking and the steps taken in media governance, which has attempted to initiate structural reforms and intervention programs to advance the development of adaptable forms of civic resilience among various public groups (minors, senior citizens, national minorities, and other socio-demographic groups) (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2024; Balčytienė et al., 2025).

Although it addresses insights on a micro-level, this qualitative study and rich empirical findings draw our attention to serious flaws at both the macro and mezzo levels. Current analyses in the related areas of analyzing toxicity in communications and aimed at countering disinformation and related disruptions, highlight several challenges that obstruct a more organized implementation of resilience-building measures in the country (ibid.). While societal resilience construction within the broader context of securitization policy is essential, reliance on political cycles affects which aspects of that policy take precedence at both government and ministerial levels. Practical collaboration among policymakers tends to focus on short-term initiatives, resulting in a lack of longer-term, sustainable exchanges of best practices. Consequently, decision-making practices at both macro and mezzo levels often fail to translate into daily operations, revealing flaws and a deficiency in sharing and collaboration among various actors (NGOs, media, academia, IT specialists, and ministries).

"Having a dialogue means including people with different views and opinions. We don't engage in dialogue with like-minded people. In that case, we only echo each other. But the problem is, how do we talk to those who think differently?" (Focus Group III: Good Communication (Jan. 22, 2025), Pos. 17)

At the same time, another aspect of the dominant governance culture, in the broad area of public communication, is a tendency to shift responsibility to individual actors, while support for systemic approaches to assist individuals in their daily communication performance and media selections remains notably weaker. Our qualitative study report also reveals elements of the so-called "individualistic thinking" culture. As shown in FG examples, remaining actively engaged and participating in public communication and information exchanges can be a highly demanding endeavor, even for groups that are not typically categorized as information-deprived and vulnerable in a more conventional sense (for example, based on socio-demographic categories).

Finally, the analysis reveals that contemporary public communication scenarios require proper preparation, practical skills, and a support structure to develop such (adequate) capacities, including training sessions and examples of effective communication from traditional news media. The examples indicate that participants' lack of preparation in both epistemic and moral dimensions hinders effective communication, leading to unmet needs for those involved in a communication situation. Focus group participants note that the overall communication environment feels emotionally unstable, burdensome and even toxic. This emotional strain stems mainly from aggressive responses or public confrontations aimed at those who hold differing views and opposing opinions. Moreover, participants highlight the absence of public empathy and the reluctance to participate in respectful, and meaningful conversations. They also address the importance of responsible journalism and a nuanced understanding of patriotism within the current complicated geopolitical landscape.

"Just like journalists strive for objectivity, they should also strive for some kind of public dialogue." (Focus Group I: Good Communication (Jan. 16, 2025), Pos. 62)



Given our complex and ever-changing media and communication environment, the lessons learned from the Lithuanian civil society actors provide rich empirical evidence for understanding key ethical concerns, tensions, and value conflicts, as well as violations, moral ambiguities, and vulnerabilities. Research findings also promise further insights into the dialogic potential of the public communication ecosystem and the need for a civic accountability framework that prioritizes listening, understanding, and deliberation.

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Annex 1. Overview of Focus Group Discussions

| | Involved actor categories | Description of the case/ discussion | Participants (n)/ Gender (M/F/X) | Session date |
|----|---|--|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. | Attention workers | Junior Researchers' Focus Group: discussion on academic ethics issues and challenges junior researchers have been facing in their early stage of academic career | N=4 0/4/0 | March 26, 2024 |
| 2. | Attention workers | Communication Students' Focus Group: students in journalism and communication studies discussing professional ethics case and challenges they've been facing in their early professional practice, including internship | N=6 1/5/0 | April 5, 2024 |
| 3. | Attention workers, representing attention-deprived and disadvantaged groups | Focus Group on Child Welfare: discussion with social workers on the case of child welfare and lack of dialogue among the institutions and community members | N=6 0/6/0 | April 8, 2024 |
| 4. | Attention workers | Junior Researchers' Focus Group: discussion of academic ethics issues and challenges junior researchers have been facing in their early stage of academic career | N=3 0/3/0 | June 5, 2024 |
| 5. | Attention workers, attention-deprived | Focus Group on Inclusive Education: teachers, social workers, educators and parents discussing the issues of child rights with special needs and challenging dialogue between parents and educators | N=5 2/3/0 | June 19, 2024 |
| 6. | Attention workers, attention-deprived | Community Focus Group: community members discussing the challenges of community when addressing to authorities and mass media | N=11 4/7/0 | September 30, 2024 |
| 7. | Attention workers | Focus Group on Academic Ethics and AI: a group of researchers and members of VMU Research Ethics Board discussing the challenges and opportunities of AI in academic research and university education | N=6 3/3/0 | October 29, 2024 |
| 8. | Attention magnets, attention workers | Focus Group I on Good Communication: a group of experts | N=4 3/1/0 | January 16, 2025 |

| | | | | |
|---------------|---|--|-----------------|-------------------|
| | | and a journalist discussing the quality of today's public communication and potential for good communication | | |
| 9. | Attention magnets, attention workers | Focus Group II on Good Communication: a group of experts, influencers and podcasters discussing the quality of today's public communication and potential for good communication | N=4 2/2/0 | January 16, 2025 |
| 10. | Attention workers | Focus Group III on Good Communication: a group of experts and public activists discussing the quality of today's public communication and potential for good communication | N=5 4/1/0 | January 22, 2025 |
| 11. | Attention magnets, attention workers | Focus Group IV on Good Communication: a group of influencers and journalists discussing the quality of today's public communication and potential for good communication | N=3 0/3/0 | January 23, 2025 |
| 12. | Attention workers, representing attention-deprived and disadvantaged group | Social Work Focus Group: a group of social workers discussing intra- and interinstitutional dialogue in the probation service and social support interventions taken by the prison and other stakeholders | N=5 0/5/0 | February 26, 2025 |
| 13. | Attention workers, representing attention-deprived and disadvantaged group | Social Work Focus Group: a group of social workers discussing intra- and interinstitutional dialogue in the probation service and social support interventions taken by the prison and other stakeholders | N=5 1/4/0 | February 28, 2025 |
| 14. | Attention workers, representing attention-deprived and disadvantaged group disadvantaged group | Social Work Focus Group: a group of social workers discussing intra- and interinstitutional dialogue in the probation service and social support interventions taken by the prison and other stakeholders | N=5 1/4/0 | March 17, 2025 |
| Total: | | | N=72 21/51/0 | |