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**UNDERSTANDING „INTEREST REPRESENTATION“,
AND „LOBBYING“: REFLECTIONS IN THE LITHUANIAN INTERNET
PORTALS AND IN A SOCIETY**

Understanding a notion of the “interest representation” by the Lithuanian society and its particular segments has been changing since the Soviet period. A notion “lobbying”, inter-connected to some extent with the previous one, has also undergone changes.

The academic research on the topic of interest representation, they have been increasing. The exhaustive work about the legal regulation of lobbyism was published recently.¹ However, reflections in the media and in the society were studied rather fragmentary, the problem was usually mentioned only within the scope of broader studies.² At the same time, it is important from the academic point of view as well as the promotion of democratic developments in practice.

Historically, the meaning of “interest representation” in Lithuanian society was similar to that of its neighbors but there were differences, too. For instance, in Poland, the importance of representation processes and their evident impact on political processes was recognized already during “Solidarnosc” movement. Initiated as representation of labor interests, it had crucial effect on destroying the communist system within a broad geopolitical context during the era of the sunset of communism.

Whereas in Lithuania, societal experience was acquired through examples of different nature. Within Sajudis in 1988-1991, labor unions were not politically an important segment. They are still weak and extremely fragmented today. Business or sectoral interest groups are still fragmented. During the last 20 years of their development, the need for and the possibilities of transparent interest representation do not seem to be adequately understood by the society. Discussions on interconnections with politics are followed by gossip rather than the transparency.

In neighboring Latvia, cliché beloved by media is “oligarchization”, reflection of a party system within the dimension of patronage and clientele with a limited belief that transparent representation of interests is possible.

The gap between activities undertaken by the interest groups themselves and, for instance politicians, is evident. Quite unexpectedly, we found little coincidence between them when we were studying representation of environmental interests. These groups do feel representation as a common interest and they are represented at the European level.³ At the same time, interview with politicians

¹ A. Lukosaitis, *Lobizmas uzsenio salyse ir Lietuvoje: teisinio reguliavimo ir institucionalizacijos problemos. Politologija*, 2011/2, p. 62

² A. Lukosaitis, *Interesu grupes*. (in:) Lietuvos politine sistema: saranga ir raida. Compilers A.Krupavicius ir A.Lukosaitis. Kaunas 2004, p. 343-384

³ R. Povilaitis, L. Mazylyte, *7th Annual International Scientific Conference “New Dimensions in the Development of Society”*, October 6-7,2011, Jelgava. Latvia 2012

show that they do not perceive these groups as having broad support of the society.⁴ They invite environmental groups into a number of committees and working groups within the process of legislation, so this involvement is rather formal.

The task of our research is to fill the aforementioned gap and to study how the perception of “interest representation” and “lobbying” has been formed by the media in the last few years and how the understanding of them is reflected by particular groups in a society.

Research methods such as an analysis of internet portals and focus group interviews were used.

The structure of Lithuanian internet portals allows for making a *primary quantitative* analysis, to compare how frequently the notions were used in the texts. Earlier, this method was shown as useful when analyzing positions towards neighboring nations.⁵ Additional information can be acquired from a *contextual* analysis of these notions. The publications in the recent years in two main Lithuanian portals, *delfi.lt* and *lrytas.lt*, were analyzed with the use of this method, also taking into account materials on the other portals such as *bernardinai.lt*.

Another method used should be called qualitative; they are three *focus group* discussions. The first two groups can be called discussions of „politically active“ persons. These two groups were formed spontaneously from among people attending discussions prior to Lithuanian Seimas elections in 2012. One more focus group, „students“, was formed from among graduates of bachelor’s studies of different Lithuanian universities, continuing studies at Master’s level at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas.

During the discussions, the following notions were presented:

Interest groups

Interest representation

Lobbying

Business interests, their representation

In Lithuania

In the West

In the European Union.

Research results: the analyses of the portals

The analysis of the Lithuanian internet portal *delfi.lt* has been made by calculating the frequency of the groups of words: *Interest groups*, *Interest representation*, *Lobbying*, and *In the European Union*. A period between 2009 and 2012 was taken into account. *Interest groups* phrase was mentioned 506 times in total (122 in 2012, 115 in 2011, 269 in 2009/2010), thus regularly enough.

⁴ L. Mazyliis, L. Mazylyte, *Europeanization as a factor influencing multiple interest representation: Lithuanian environmental policies’ case. Presented Papers from the 20th NISPAcee Annual Conference „Public Administration East and West: Twenty Years of Development. May 23 – May 26, 2012, Ohrid. Republic of Macedonia*

⁵ R. Povilaitis, L. Mažylyis, *Рефлексии межнациональных отношений в литовских дискурсах после 1990 года*. Presentation at the conference „Sabiedriba un kultūra: Mainīgais un nemaingais cikliskuma“. Liepaja, 2012 05 17-18 d.

Publications about Lithuania's interest groups are most frequent (330 in all). We found only 37 publications in connection with the European Union, and that mostly in the context of Lithuania's relations with the EU. 39 general publications about interest groups were found, that also mentioned Lithuania in a broader context. "Interest groups in the European Union" were mentioned 28 times.

Lobbyism (globally) was mentioned 37 times, specifically about Lithuania in more 45 publications. Thus the notion of „lobbyism“ is reflected on the portal 6 times less frequently than an „interest representation“. Possibly, there is an interconnection with the society not understanding it clearly.

Analysis of the portal *Irytas.lt* shows similar tendencies.

Reservations are to be made, two or more phrases analyzed are mentioned repeatedly; thus, quantitative analysis gives only a primary illustration. On other portals frequency was lower due to an overall smaller size of the portals themselves (for instance, *bernardinai.lt*).

Research results: focus groups

Although it is a qualitative research method, it reflects to some extent the understanding of the issue by the appropriate segment of the society. The picture within the two groups provisory named "politically active persons" is similar, and looks as follows.

„Kind of a narrow interest unite people“. „These interests are usually bad“. „Can be different – not always bad“. „To secure something“. „Can be good and bad interests“. „For me association is bad“. „Striving for a goal, but rather self-interested“. „For me no bad emotions. I know businessmen, they have their interests. Not always bad“. „For me associations with richer people than poor“. „It's a clan, lobbyism“.

„Lobbyism – to push through projects, laws, usually dirty, in legislation“. „Lobbyist, it's just a manager. Everywhere are goods, here the goods such as legal acts are sold“. „Completely legal thing“. „Even pensioners can have their lobbyists“. „Nothing negative“. „Theoretically. But it is pushing through, and it is suspicious“. „Usually they have money, poor [people] don't have means to pay“. „*Lobsta* (in Lithuanian language this word has a meaning „becoming richer“), making money“.

„I meant only Lithuania. It seems, here the situation is worse than in the West“. „For Lithuania, to grow and to grow to democracy“. „We were doing nothing for 50 years, just stealing, and they were working“. „Abroad, they see not only themselves, [ordinary] people too“. „We lack information in this matter“.

The „Students“ group does use academically correct terms. They also show higher factual knowledge compared to the two other groups. Also, there is less negative connotation of the notions analyzed in the students' group.

However, the context is understood by them similarly to some extent. *Interest representation* does border on corruption, it is understood mainly as a business interest representation rather than societal, "ideal". *Lobbyism* is understood as a legal representation of interests.

„*Interest group*“ is a broad term describing a group of people united in their economic, cultural or ideational activities – and can be culturally and economically together: can be a united, organizational unit. For instance, the Greens, against the atomic energy“. „In broader sense – to help others“. „Lacking activity in

Lithuania in representing groups“. „Due to young democracy“. „With a political participation, political sophistication differs in Lithuania and in the West. In my bachelor’s thesis I analyzed it – the gap is very big“.

“Lobbyism – representation of positions of interest groups but more with intervention, influence“, „Persons representing interests of firms and organizations“. „Representing [those] oriented towards profit“. „Lobbyism is young in Lithuania“. „People do not differ, [they] associate it with corruption“. „Corruption – based on not very legal means“. „Lack of education“. „I learnt [about it] at the university, not from media – for 23 years, and namely in the political sciences.“

There was a dialog based on correct knowledge about interest representation in a Europe only in a group of „students“.

“I would connect the European Union and interest groups as common [...] effort to represent a common position and common goals“, „Going towards it“, „In the European Union, states themselves are kind of interest groups“, „My bachelor’s work was about the Greens, I surveyed the organizations – they participate in the meetings of the European Union with other Green Parties in the European Parliament“. „Though results do not correspond with what would be wished“.

Discussion and conclusions

Understanding “interest representation” after 20 years of post-communist development in a society is rather ambiguous. A kind of equilibrium between positive (societal sector, partly including business interest representation) and a negative perception (corruption) of striving to represent one’s interests can be noted. A similar situation is with understanding lobbyism, too. They say it’s legal, but with reservations about self-interest.

Reflections on things mentioned above are quite parallel.

It would be difficult to make conclusions about inter-relations of the factors or, moreover, a causal relationship: what goes first – reflections in the media or the understanding in the society. We have to also take into account a fuzziness of these notions, not transparent implications of the novelty of phenomenon and the lack of deep democratic traditions.

“European” lobbyism, after 8 years of a Lithuania’s EU membership, is still recognized fragmentary and superficially. Quite surprisingly, the understanding of striving to represent one’s interests on “Brussels’ level” is still not deep. There is a gap between the perception of a “Brussels route” mastered by interest groups themselves and reflections of these processes in the media and in the society. Especially in the society, “representing interests” on European level is generally understood as representing interests of Lithuania as a whole. Moreover, European institutions are understood incorrectly, more functions are attributed to the European Parliament than to the European Commission or the Council.

One can assume, that there is a relation between a negative connotation and the lack of information.

Enhancing the level of knowledge among citizens and increasing sophistication is a multidimensional problem. The society does not show any aspirations and the media do not seek to change societal stance on how to understand “interest groups”, “interest representation”, and “lobbyism”. It is convenient for the media to keep an unclear borderline between “interest representation” and “lobbyism” on one side, and “corruption” on another.

It seems that critical mass should be reached for a critical juncture to break the aforementioned vicious circle of understanding. A political decision such as the change of a legal basis of lobbyism could help in improving the situation. Finally, interest groups themselves should demonstrate efforts to educate the society, since they have opportunities to share European experience and receive the European financial assistance.

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