The Portrayal of Syrian Refugees and Islam in Lithuanian Online Newspapers (2016—2019)

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Abstract

The paper reviews how online news portals in Lithuania reported on the Syrian refugee crisis in 2016—2019. I argue that sensationalized negative narratives were given preference to unbiased and fact-checked stories. This was due to a number of factors: predominantly negative public opinion, prominent anti-refugee politicians, and the lack of high-profile Muslim figures in Lithuania. Furthermore, as time went on and it became apparent that Lithuania would only be accepting a small number of refugees and thus the fears of a "refugee invasion" and Islamization proved to be unfounded, the media reporting became marginally more balanced and the number of reports reduced dramatically; however, the reporting did not converge fully to accurately depict the reality of the refugee crisis in Lithuania.

The Portrayal of Syrian Refugees and Islam in Lithuanian Online Newspapers (2016—2019)

Introduction

Europe's claims of unity and pluralism were tested greatly during the Syrian refugee crisis when 6 million refugees were displaced as a result of the Syrian civil war, over a million of whom crossed Europe's borders while fleeing war and persecution.[1] The increasing refugee flows revealed divisions within the European Union with countries like Germany implementing policies of still accepting refugees in 2020[2] and countries like Hungary going as far as holding a national referendum to try and prevent having to accept any refugees.[3] Discussions of how the refugee crisis was going to break up the EU and whether the policy of country-level refugee quotas infringed on countries' individual sovereignty were common, with many predicting that other countries would imminently follow Britain's departure from the EU.[4]

Europe has long struggled with accepting and integrating its Muslim minorities and Islam's perceived "otherness," especially when juxtaposed against Christianity, as Europe's secular identity is still largely intertwined with its Christian history and culture. The "clash of civilizations" rhetoric has often been accepted in Europe and used to justify attempts to limit Islam to private spaces.[5] While anti-Islam discourse predates the refugee crisis, the increasing flows of Syrian (and thus often Muslim) refugees led to it becoming harsher and more prominent in the political arena. The arrival of Muslim refugees in Europe fueled the rise of right-wing populist parties and politicians who often ran on anti-immigration, anti-refugee, and anti-Muslim

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[1] Phillip Connor, "Most Displaced Syrians are in the Middle East, and about a Million are in Europe," *Pew Research Center,* January 29, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/29/where-displaced-syrians-have-resettled/#:~:text=Most%20displaced%20Syrians%20are%20in,a%20million%20are%20in%20Europe&text=Nearly%2013%20million%20Syrians%20are,to%20Pew%20Research%20Center%20estimates.

[2] Melissa Eddy, "Germany to Take In 1,500 Refugees, Easing Burden on Greece After Fires," *The New York Times*, September 15, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/15/world/europe/germany-refugees-greece.html.

[3] Patrick Kingsley, "Hungary's Refugee Referendum Not Valid after Voters Stay Away," *The Guardian*, October 2, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/02/hungarian-vote-on-refugees-will-not-take-place-suggest-first-poll-results.

[4] Antonio Tajani, "The Migration Crisis Threatens to Destroy the EU. We Must Not Let It," *The Guardian*, June 27, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/27/migration-crisis-destroy-eu-collapse-schengen.

[5] Jytte Klausen, *The Islamic Challenge: Politics and Religion in Western Europe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 130.

platforms stoking fears of Islamization of Europe and arguing the threat Islam poses to Europe's Christian values.[6]

While the refugee crisis was declared over in March 2019,[7] the more recent terrorist attacks in France and Austria have brought the question of Islam in Europe back to the forefront of the news and political discourse. Furthermore, Islamophobia was not confined to the refugee crisis—in Austria cases of Islamophobic incidents grew by 74 percent in 2018 while France saw an increase of 52 percent over the same period. Reports of religious discrimination appear to overwhelmingly concern Muslim minorities (e.g., 91 percent in the Netherlands).[8] Furthermore, Muslim communities face persistent discrimination in the housing, jobs, and education spheres in Western Europe.[9] Despite the EU's attempts to enforce non-discrimination legislation, promote employment opportunities, and improve integration of Muslims in Europe, the change has been marginal and slow at best.

European media has been identified as one of the key agents for change with the EU calling for more diversity when recruiting journalists but also ensuring that unbiased, diverse, and comprehensive views are reported.[10] The specific attention to improved media reporting is likely due to the fact that the media's role and influence go beyond simply reporting news events: it has an impact on public opinion, determines what is or is not news, and can set the political agenda for both the elites and the public.[11] At the same time, as media itself has evolved with the internet and the rise of social media, it is also important to understand how and if its role and influence have evolved. This paper analyzes two Lithuanian online news portals, www.delfi.lt ("Delfi") and www.lrytas.lt ("LRytas") and their reporting between January 2016 and March 2019 to understand how refugees were portrayed and what the key themes of

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[6] Matthias Kortmann, Christian Stecker and Tobias Weiß, "Filling a Representation Gap? How Populist and Mainstream Parties Address Muslim Immigration and the Role of Islam," *Representation (McDougall Trust)* 55, 4 (2019): 435-56, https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2019.1667419.

[7] European Commission, "The European Agenda on Migration: EU Needs to Sustain Progress Made Over the Past Four Years," accessed on 7 December 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_1496.

[8] Enes Bayrakli and Fariz Hafez, "European Islamophobia Report," 2018: 11-12, http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/EIR_2018.pdf.

[9] EUMC, "Muslims in the European Union: Discrimination and Islamophobia," accessed on 7 December 2020, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/1936-EUMC-highlights-EN.pdf.

[10] EUMC, "Muslims in the European Union: Discrimination and Islamophobia," 4.

[11] Arjen Van Dalen, and Peter Van Aelst, "The Media as Political Agenda-Setters: Journalists' Perceptions of Media Power in Eight West European Countries," West European Politics 37, 1 (2013): 42-64, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2013.814967.

reporting were, including how salient Islam was amongst them. As Lithuania has a negligible Muslim population and most Lithuanians would not be exposed to Islam in their day-to-day lives, I consider that the media had significant influence in shaping public opinion towards the refugee crisis and the Muslim refugees. I also compare news stories with public opinion polls, as well as prominent politicians' discourse to understand the underlying reasons for how the media reported on the refugee crisis and whether it formed, as well as reflected, public opinion. Based on my analysis of 798 articles across the two online news portals, I conclude that online news in Lithuania reported biased negative narratives about Muslim refugees, frequently failing to hold politicians who were fearmongering and spreading negative stereotypes accountable for their disinformation. The news portals often utilized sensationalized headlines and narratives to keep their readership interested instead of neutrally reporting factual information. The reporting overall became only marginally more balanced over time yet remained mostly negative towards Islam despite the fears of Islamization and uncontrollable refugee flows being proven as unfounded (i.e., the reporting did not converge to reflect more accurately the on-the-ground reality in Lithuania).

Literature Review

A small number of Lithuanian scholars have analyzed the Lithuanian media discourse on the refugee crisis with the analysis to date mostly consisting of either a review of short-term periods (e.g., certain months) or aggregate analysis up until 2017 without disseminating whether and how the discourse changed over time and how it differed between news outlets. The existing scholarship also addresses at a more general level the key themes found in reporting on refugees. While it offers some analysis over how Islam and Muslims specifically are depicted, it often does not quantify how prevalent the theme was compared to other narratives or how often negative depictions of Muslims and Islam appear compared to positive or neutral reports.

The key themes found in media reports in the existing scholarship tend to be those of integration, economic migration, and security/terrorism. Darius Matas found, having analyzed 675 articles published in July 2015, November 2015, and January 2016, that 72 percent of the reports on refugees were negative and refugees were portrayed largely as violent criminals,

terrorists, and welfare recipients.[12] By contrast, analysis of articles published between March 2015 and February 2017 found that, while the discourse in Lithuanian media often echoed the negative reporting found elsewhere in Europe, the key themes were the integration of refugees, what accepting refugees may mean to Lithuania and its society, as well as reports on other countries' negative experiences.[13] Themes of an economic and financial burden as well as cultural and religious incompatibility also featured.[14] Ieva Balsiunaite reviewed articles published in August—October 2015, analyzing specific instances of hate speech and negative reports and found that the press often reported refugees to be radical Muslims, terrorists, and criminals.[15]

The existing research also found that the negative stereotypes and reporting often did not stem from specific experiences of Lithuanians or the actual situation in Lithuania. For example, narratives such as cultural clashes or refugees' inability to integrate into the Lithuanian society were posed as facts while actually reflecting journalists' own biases and opinions.[16] Frejute-Rakauskiene found that Lithuanian news outlets often based their reporting on experiences of Western European countries that did not reflect the on-the-ground situation in Lithuania.[17] Furthermore, Matas found that, when reprinting reports from other international news sources, Lithuanian media did not fact-check the reports or strive to portray a variety of opinions.[18] Negative reports of crimes carried out by refugees were often based on testimonials of unnamed witnesses.[19]

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[12]Darius Matas, "The Image of Refugees and the Features of Its Development in Lithuanian Online Newspapers," *Žurnalistikos Tyrimai* 10, 10 (2017): 104-108, https://doi.org/10.15388/ZT.JR.2016.10.10701.

[13]Monika Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, "Real or Created?: Representation of the "Refugee Crisis" in Lithuanian Press Discourse 2015-2017," *Informacijos Mokslai* 88 (2020): 42-43, https://doi.org/10.15388/Im.2020.88.30; Lietuvos Socialiniu Tyrimu Centras, "Reikminių Tyrimų Projektas „Prieglobstį Gavusių Užsieniečių Integracijos Politikos Įgyvendinimo Vertinimas Ir Integracijos Procesų Stebėsena" [Evaluation of Refugee Integration Processes]: 90-115, http://www.ces.lt/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Baigiamoji-ataskaita1.pdf.

[14]Giedre Blazyte, Monika Frėjutė-Rakauskienė and Vilana Pilinkaite-Sotirovic, "Policy and media discourses on refugees in Lithuania: shaping the boundaries between host society and refugees," *OIKOS: lietuvių migracijos ir diasporos studijos* 1, 29 (2020): 24-25. https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12259/109730.

[15]Ieva Balsiūnaitė, "Neapykantos Kalbos Raiška Lietuvos Interneto Dienraščių Publikacijose Apie Pabėgėlius" [Expression of Hate Speech in Reporting on Refugees by Lithuanian Online Media], *Žurnalistikos Tyrimai* 11, no. 11 (2017): 97-98. https://doi.org/10.15388/ZT.JR.2016.11.10751.

[16]Balsiūnaitė, "Neapykantos Kalbos Raiška Lietuvos Interneto Dienraščių Publikacijose Apie Pabėgėlius," 97-98.

[17]Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, "Real or Created?: Representation of the "Refugee Crisis" in Lithuanian Press Discourse 2015-2017," 43.

[18]Matas, "The Image of Refugees and the Features of Its Development in Lithuanian Online Newspapers," 105.

[19]Balsiūnaitė, "Neapykantos Kalbos Raiška Lietuvos Interneto Dienraščių Publikacijose Apie Pabėgėlius," 109.

It is important to note that key events such as terrorist attacks or high-profile crimes tend to have an immediate increase in negative articles (and the number of published articles in general) focusing on the themes of threat or security.[20] As a result, the key themes found by the existing scholarship are impacted significantly by the time frames scholars have chosen to analyze. For example, Matas had analyzed 3 months which included a terrorist attack in France, sexual assaults—widely reported as having been carried out by refugees—in Germany, and the killing of a Lithuanian teenager by a Syrian classmate in Sweden. As a result, two of the most prominent themes (terrorism and crime) could be linked directly to the events in those periods. By contrast, Frejute-Rakauskiene's analyzed period took into account the lead-up to refugees arriving in Lithuania and their arrival, and hence the theme of integration took center stage.[21]

The existing scholarship has provided some insights into how Islam was depicted by the Lithuanian media during the refugee crisis. While Matas found mention of Muslims and Islam to be rare in his analysis, nevertheless the prevailing stereotypes were that refugees were culturally incompatible with the Western World, even when the reporting did not call out their religion as the reason for this specifically.[22] Blazyte et al. found that the press constructed a narrative of "Islamization" equating refugees to Islamic State fighters, however, their analysis does not state how prevalent this narrative was when compared to other themes.[23] This echoes Balsiunaite's analysis, which found predominantly negative narratives towards Muslims and Islam.[24]

The key themes featured in the news matter because the media's role goes beyond simply reporting of events and traditional media has historically played many roles: agenda-setter, gatekeeper, watchdog, and elites' lapdog. Its traditional role as an agenda-setter meant that, especially in the initial phases of policy response, it was responsible for directing politicians and the public towards issues that are salient at the time and influencing public opinion. At the same time, as it often relied on political elites for information, the media was often viewed as elites' lapdog, reflecting their views and version of events for the fear of losing access to their sources. However, once the general public considered a topic worthy of their attention, the media's role

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[20]Matas, "The Image of Refugees and the Features of Its Development in Lithuanian Online Newspapers," 105.
[21]Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, "Real or Created?: Representation of the 'Refugee Crisis' in Lithuanian Press Discourse 2015-2017," 43.
[22]Matas, "The Image of Refugees and the Features of Its Development in Lithuanian Online Newspapers," 88-97.
[23]Blazyte, Frėjutė-Rakauskienė and Pilinkaite-Sotirovic, "Policy and Media Discourses on Refugees in Lithuania: Shaping the Boundaries Between Host Society and Refugees," 11.
[24]Balsiūnaitė, "Neapykantos Kalbos Raiška Lietuvos Interneto Dienraščių Publikacijose Apie Pabėgėlius," 89-92.

switched to cater to the public in its role as the watchdog. Journalists historically have shown a preference for stories that were "novel, conflictual and balanced" as well as coming from authoritative sources. However, with the rise of online news sources and social media these roles and preferences appear to have evolved—as the journalists become less reliant on politicians for news sources, they are also becoming more mindful of engaging their audiences as news has become a form of quasi-entertainment. Furthermore, the evolution of the news media has an impact on the "elasticity of reality" (i.e., how quickly people can figure out the on-the-ground reality rather than the reality portrayed by elites). Baum found that new media in the age of the internet has deepened the gap between the knowledge held by political elites and knowledge held by the general public. Whereas in the past traditional media reporting converged to reflect the on-the-ground reality of a given conflict and the information advantage held by political elites decreased over time, media is now more siloed and fragmented than ever which makes it more difficult for ordinary citizens to catch up with the information and thus hold politicians accountable for their actions. Equally, the lack of neutral media or engagement with differing views creates polarized audiences which are more likely to instinctively back "their side" without a critical assessment of reality. Therefore, the narratives portrayed by the media can have an impact on how effective individuals are at holding politicians accountable for their actions and policies.[25]

I consider that my analysis fills three gaps not addressed by the current scholarship: 1) more detailed analysis of how prevalent the theme of Islam was in media reporting on refugees and how it interacted with other themes; 2) analysis of how the discourse changed over time from 2016 up until March 2019; and 3) analysis of whether there were any differences in the themes of reporting between the two media sources analyzed. I will therefore evaluate four key hypotheses:

H1: Islam was a key theme in the discourse on refugees in the Lithuanian media between January 1, 2016, and March 31, 2019.

The refugee crisis was a salient topic in the European and Lithuanian media, and I expect that the theme of Islam was prominent due to Islam's perceived otherness compared to Lithuania's predominantly Christian roots. Lithuania has historically been, and remains, a largely homogenous

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[25]Matthew A. Baum, and Philip B. K Potter, "Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy in the Age of Social Media," *The Journal of Politics* 81, 2 (2019): 747–56, https://doi.org/10.1086/702233; Matthew A. Baum, and Tim Groeling, "Reality Asserts Itself: Public Opinion on Iraq and the Elasticity of Reality," *International Organization* 64, 3 (2010): 443–79, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818310000172.

Christian country. The latest research by Pew shows that Lithuanians still overwhelmingly identify as Christian (93 percent), of which 75 percent are Roman Catholics. Only 6 percent identify as unaffiliated and 1 percent as belonging to religions other than Christianity. Despite Church attendance being low (10 percent attend church weekly)[26], Christianity has historically played a significant role in Lithuanian national identity—Lithuanians have long used religion as a differentiator between themselves and "others" (e.g., Orthodox Russians during the Soviet occupation period)[27] and, as such, Islam represented a clear "otherness" to what is seen as the traditional Christian fabric of the Lithuanian society. A public opinion survey carried out in 2016 also showed clearly that the Lithuanian public differentiated between Muslim and Christian refugees—22 percent of respondents stated Lithuania should accept Muslim refugees whereas the number rose to 55 percent for Christian refugees.[28] By 2019 the figure had risen to 34 percent for Muslim refugees and 63 percent for Christian refugees, showing increasingly less hostile attitudes over time, albeit a clear and continued differentiation between the two religious groups.[29] As a result, the possibility of large numbers of Muslim refugees entering Lithuania would have been a salient topic amongst the Lithuanian public and thus I expect that it would have been widely reported on.

H2: While references to Islam and Muslims are found in negative, neutral, and positive articles on refugees, the underlying tone towards Islam/Muslims is predominantly negative, equating it to a different culture, terrorism, and violence. Where Islam is mentioned in articles positive towards refugees, it is often in the context of Christian refugees fleeing persecution by Muslims or calls for Christian/Catholic empathy towards people in need.

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[26] Jonathan Evans, "Pope Francis to Visit the Three Baltic Countries—Only One of Which is Majority Catholic," *Pew Research Center*, September 21, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/21/pope-francis-to-visit-the-three-baltic-countries-only-one-of-which-is-majority-catholic/#:~:text=Lithuania%20is%20overwhelmingly%20Christian%20(93,%25)%20or%20Lutherans%20(19%25.

[27] Miranda Zapor Cruz, "The Role of Catholicism in the Development of Lithuanian National Identity," *Church History and Religious Culture* 94, 4 (2014): 479-504, https://doi.org/10.1163/18712428-09404003.

[28] Lietuvos Socialiniu Tyrimu Centras, "Reikminių Tyrimų Projektas "Prieglobstį Gavusių Užsieniečių Integracijos Politikos Įgyvendinimo Vertinimas Ir Integracijos Procesų Stebėsena," 70-72.

[29] Lietuvos Socialiniu Tyrimu Centras, "Lietuvos Socialinių Tyrimų Centro Etninių Tyrimų Instituto Užsakymu Atliktos Visuomenės Nuostatų Apklausos 2019 M. Rezultatai," 5.

I consider that the media would be both reflecting the overall negative sentiment within the Lithuanian society and, at the same time, using its agenda-setting influence to construct further negative sentiments and stereotypes—a self-perpetuating cycle. The media's influence over public opinion in Lithuania would have been amplified if the media was relatively united in its negativity and, as such, more positive narratives were lacking. Public opinion surveys show that in 2015 58 percent and 50 percent of Lithuanian respondents would not want to live in the same neighborhoods as Muslims and refugees respectively. 73 percent and 72 percent of respondents stated that in the prior 5 years their opinion of Muslims and refugees had worsened.[30] The relocation of refugees to Lithuania did not commence until December 15, 2015, and, as such, personal experiences with refugees and Muslims could not have played a significant part in these negative views.

I expect that the negative reporting by the media would also have been driven by the predominantly negative views expressed by Lithuanian politicians. This is in line with the Media Indexing Hypothesis which states that the media reflects and follows the discussions by political elites.[31] While Lithuanian politicians can be separated into two distinct camps of loud critics and tentative supporters, the first group appeared to be both larger, more influential, and their discourse appeared more frequently in the press. The Lithuanian Labor Party, traditionally a social-liberal party, emerged as the key anti-refugee political player expressing particularly harsh views and shifting towards a more traditional populist stance seen elsewhere in Europe. The Labor Party politicians were already arguing how Lithuania needed a burqa ban in 2015, at a point in time when Lithuania had only anticipated accepting 325 refugees.[32] Assuming that half of them would be women who all wear burqas, debating a country-wide law that would affect around 160 people appears to be premature and not based on the actual on-the-ground situation in Lithuania. Politicians themselves admitted that the discussion for the burqa ban was based on Belgium and France's experiences, however, they reiterated that the item of clothing was a

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[30] Etniniu Tyrimu Institutas. "Lietuvos socialinių tyrimų centro Etninių tyrimų instituto užsakymu atliktos visuomenės nuostatų apklausos 2015 m. rezultatai" [Results of 2015 Survey on Societal Views], http://www.ces. lt/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Visuomenės-nuostatos-2015.pdf.

[31] Tim Groeling and Matthew A. Baum, "Crossing the Water's Edge: Elite Rhetoric, Media Coverage, and the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon," *The Journal of Politics* 70, 4 (2008): 1066, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608081061.

[32] BNS, "A. Paulauskas: pabėgėlių atvykimas iškels ir burkos dėvėjimo klausimą" [A. Paulauskas: The Arrival of Refugees will Raise the Question of the Burqa], *Delfi*, August 13, 2015, https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/a-paulauskas-pabegeliu-atvykimas-iskels-ir-burkos-devejimo-klausima.d?id=68724682.

security risk thus further perpetuating a stereotype of Islam equating to crime and terrorism. Politicians often expressed personal opinions and predictions as undisputed facts (e.g., refugees being economic migrants and the expectation that crime would increase in the areas refugees are relocated to).[33] Furthermore, they often exaggerated the numbers of refugees that would be coming to Lithuania thus feeding into the "uncontrollable migration" narrative.[34] For example, even as Lithuania had agreed to accept 1,105 refugees, the Labor Party repeated unfounded claims that the actual number of refugees coming to Lithuania would be in the tens of thousands.[35] Additionally, politicians often referred to refugees as "migrants" and "foreigners"— this language appeared to have been adopted by the press as questioning the status of refugees was one of the key themes in both analyzed outlets.[36] In a particularly divisive opinion piece, Vydas Gedvilas, a prominent member of the Labor Party wrote, in reference to refugee quotas, about "countries that want to protect themselves from potential criminals, rapists, and terrorists."[37] Not confining themselves to online news outlets, the Labor Party released a series of videos threatening that refugees will bring violence.[38]

Finally, I consider that another factor in the negative reporting by the press would be the lack of prominent figures within Lithuania's small Muslim community who could take on the role of advocating for Islam and Muslim refugees. While Lithuania does have a small Muslim minority (under 3,000 people according to the 2011 census; however, some scholars suggest the figure may be as high as 7,000)[39], their voices and opinions are not reflected in the media reports. There appears to be a missed opportunity for Muslim groups to join the conversation and educae

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[33] Vydas Gedvilas, "Apie pabėgėlius: kai bijo politikai - pradeda bijoti ir pareigūnai" [About Refugees: When Politicians Are Afraid—The Police Becomes Afraid Too], *Mano Krastas*. January 16, 2016, https://www. manokrastas.lt/straipsnis/apie-pabegelius-kai-bijo-politikai---pradeda-bijoti-ir-pareigunai.

[34] BNS, "A. Paulauskas: pabėgėlių atvykimas iškels ir burkos dėvėjimo klausimą."

[35] Vydas Gedvilas, "Pabėgėlių antplūdis – ne teorija, o netolima realybė" [Invasion of Refugees—Not a Theory but a Reality], *Karstas Komentaras*. May 26, 2016, https://komentaras.lt/v-gedvilas-pabegeliu-antpludis-ne-teorija-o-netolima-realybe/comment-page-1/?cat=3.

[36] Arturas Paulauskas, "Pabegeliu krize atskleide spragas. Kaip elgsimes" [The Refugee Crisis Has Revealed Holes in Our Policy. How Will We Act?], *Lietuvos Aidas,* September 23, 2015, http://www.aidas.lt/lt/politika/article/ 13326-09-23-pabegeliu-krize-atskleide-spragas-kaip-elgsimes.

[37] Vydas Gedvilas, "Vydas Gedvilas: ką rinksimės – pabėgėlius ar baudas?" [What Will We Choose—Refugees or Fines?], TV3, May 4, 2016, https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/lietuva/869819/vydas-gedvilas-ka-rinksimes-pabegelius-ar-baudas.

[38] Lauryna Vireliūnaitė, "LRTK: prieš pabėgėlius nukreiptos Darbo partijos reklamos kursto neapykantą" [Labor Party's Adverts Promoting Hate Towards Refugees], *LRT,* 29 September 2019, https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/ lietuvoje/2/149779/lrtk-pries-pabegelius-nukreiptos-darbo-partijos-reklamos-kursto-neapykanta.

[39]Vaida Norvilaitė and Egdūnas Račius, "Musulmonų Bendruomenių Reakcija į Sekuliarizacijos Procesą Lietuvoje" [Muslim Communities' Reaction to the Secularization Process in Lithuania], *Kultūra Ir Visuomenė* 2, 3 (2011): 52.

both the media, politicians, and the public about Islam thus countering some of the negative stereotypes. I consider that this is in large part due to the lack of influence and resources held by those groups. The small number of Muslims in Lithuania is split between recent immigrants, converts, and Tatars. The recent immigrants often tend to stay in Lithuania for a short period of time and thus will be unlikely to organize into groups or gain influence. Limited research also shows that the Tatar communities in Lithuania are largely secularized and, as such, may be unlikely advocates for the media to be more reflective of the reality of Islam. The converts to Islam appear to be less secularized but are small in numbers (likely under 1,000 people) and, as such, unlikely to have significant influence.[40] As a result, there do not appear to be prominent Lithuanian voices with access to the media who would act as educators and thought leaders when it comes to Islam.

H3: There was no significant difference in the discourse on Islam and refugees between the two analyzed online newspapers.

Delfi and LRytas were picked for this analysis as Delfi is the largest online news portal in Lithuania with a daily readership of approximately 531,500, while LRytas comes in third with a daily readership of around 306,300.[41] LRytas also has a well-established quality print newspaper and, as such, the initial expectation was that the reporting may be more balanced on LRytas. However, as the two online news portals compete for the same customers (i.e., readers), I expect that LRytas would have been as incentivized to produce sensationalized stories as Delfi to ensure that it remained competitive against other online news portals. As such, I expect that the reporting would be consistent across both of the news portals.

H4: I expect that, as time goes by, and fears of culture clash and Islamization in Lithuania prove to be unfounded, discourse on Islam should reduce compared to other types of discourse. By 2016, once refugees began relocation to Lithuania, 48 percent and 45 percent stated that they did not want to live near Muslims and refugees respectively.[42] This represents a decline from

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[40] Vaida Norvilaitė and Egdūnas Račius, "Musulmonų Bendruomenių Reakcija į Sekuliarizacijos Procesą Lietuvoje" [Muslim Communities' Reaction to the Secularization Process in Lithuania], 54 - 63.

[41] "DELFI kasdien skaito trečdaliu daugiau skaitytojų nei kitus naujienų portalus" [Delfi Readership Exceeds Other News Portals by a Third], *Delfi,* October 15, 2018, https://www.delfi.lt/m360/naujausi-straipsniai/delfi-kasdien-skaito-trecdaliu-daugiau-skaitytoju-nei-kitus-naujienu-portalus.d?id=79312983.

[42] Lietuvos Socialiniu Tyrimu Centras, "Reikminių Tyrimų Projektas „Prieglobstį Gavusių Užsieniečių Integracijos Politikos Įgyvendinimo Vertinimas Ir Integracijos Procesų Stebėsena" [Evaluation of Refugee Integration Processes]: 66-69, http://www.ces.lt/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Baigiamoji-ataskaita1.pdf.

2015 levels, suggesting that as the fears of Islamization and "uncontrollable migration" of refugees to Lithuania proved to be unfounded, society's views became slightly less negative. Similarly, only 64 percent of respondents stated that their views of Muslims and refugees had worsened in the prior 5 years—again showing an improvement compared to 2015. By 2017 the number of people who did not want to live near Muslims and refugees declined to 45 percent and 39 percent respectively—another year-on-year decline.[43] By 2019, 36 percent of respondents did not want to live near Muslims and 27 percent near refugees. Over half of the respondents in 2019 stated that they had no personal interactions with illegal immigrants or refugees, and thus I expect that the negative reporting in the press subsided by 2019 and was not as impactful in driving public opinion.[44] Additionally, *H4* is based on Baum's work on "elasticity of reality," which sets out that, at the beginning of a conflict, elites hold an information advantage and thus can influence public opinion relatively easily. As Lithuanian politicians were predominantly negative towards Muslim refugees raising concerns of crime, security, and terrorism, the reporting in the press reflected those views. However, over time, as the fears of refugee invasion and terrorist attacks proved to be unfounded, the press reports and public opinion should have become more balanced.

Methodology

As the goal of my research was to understand how Lithuanian online news media portrayed refugees, whether Islam was a key theme, and how the reporting changed over time, I reviewed two online news publications in Lithuania—Delfi and LRytas due to their high daily readerships of approx. 531,500 and 306,300 respectively.[45] Lithuania has 2.6 million internet users who represent 91 percent of the population. As a result, the daily readership of each news portal represents approximately 19 percent and 11 percent of the population.[46] LRytas is the

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[43] Lietuvos Socialiniu Tyrimu Centras, "Reikminių Tyrimų Projektas „Prieglobstį Gavusių Užsieniečių Integracijos Politikos Įgyvendinimo Vertinimas Ir Integracijos Procesų Stebėsena" [Evaluation of Refugee Integration Processes], 77-79.

[44] Lietuvos Socialiniu Tyrimu Centras, "Lietuvos Socialinių Tyrimų Centro Etninių Tyrimų Instituto Užsakymu Atliktos Visuomenės Nuostatų Apklausos 2019 M. Rezultatai" [Results of 2019 Societal Views Study]: 1-2. http://www.ces.lt/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Visuomenės-nuostatos-apklausos-rezultatai_20191.pdf

[45] "DELFI kasdien skaito trečdaliu daugiau skaitytojų nei kitus naujienų portalus" [Delfi Readership Exceeds Other News Portals by a Third], *Delfi,* October 15, 2018, https://www.delfi.lt/m360/naujausi-straipsniai/delfi-kasdien-skaito-trecdaliu-daugiau-skaitytoju-nei-kitus-naujienu-portalus.d?id=79312983.

[46] BBC News, "Lithuania Profile—Media," April 29, 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17536870.

online version of a long-established liberal-leaning newsletter, whereas Delfi started as an online publication with no print equivalent. Delfi is the most visited online news portal in Lithuania while LRytas ranks in third place. In August 2020, Delfi was visited by 1.357 million individuals while LRytas attracted an audience of 1.085 million.[47] This represents 47.5 percent and 38 percent of the population respectively, making the online news portals more popular than television. For example, the two most popular TV channels TV3 and LNK reached 38.2 percent and 34.7 percent of the population respectively in January 2020.[48] Print media lags behind internet news portals and television significantly: *Lietuvos Rytas* (the print newspaper version of the LRytas portal) is the most widely read print newspaper with an average readership of 112,000 per issue.[49] As a result, online news portals appear to be the main source of news for Lithuanians. Delfi was selected as it is the largest online portal while LRytas was chosen due to its history as a quality daily newspaper to understand whether there would be any significant differences in reporting between the two outlets.

Appendix 1 sets out in more detail the coding scheme used when analyzing the articles. To sum up, I completed content analysis of every second article identified in the sample in the period between January 1, 2016, and March 31, 2019. The dates were chosen to cover the period when the refugees started relocating to Lithuania (with the first refugee family arriving on December 15, 2015) and when the refugee crisis was declared over by the EU. I reviewed 510 articles on LRytas and 288 articles on Delfi in total. The articles were firstly reviewed and coded as positive, negative, or neutral towards refugees. The articles were then analyzed for key themes appearing in the reports: Islam, terrorism, Christianity, integration, economy, uncontrollable migration, departure of refugees from Lithuania, the validity of the refugees' status, crime, and criticism of the EU. The two-level sample frame allowed me to complete a more detailed analysis than if I had simply looked for key themes or high-level positive/neutral/negative

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[47] Lrytas.lt, "Lrytas.lt reitinge stiprina pozicijas: skaitytojai praleidžia vis daugiau laiko" [LRytas.lt strengthens its position: readers spend increasingly more time], 7 September 2020, https://www.lrytas.lt/it/ismanyk/2020/ 09/07/news/lrytas-lt-reitinge-stiprina-pozicijas-skaitytojai-praleidzia-vis-daugiau-laiko-16247345.

[48] Kantar. "TV auditorijos tyrimo rezultatai 2020 m. sausis." [Results of TV audience survey January 2020]. http://www.kantar.lt/lt/news/tv-auditorijos-tyrimo-rezultatai-2020-m-sausis/.

[49] Lietuvos Rytas, "Skaitytojai žino, ką pasirinkti: 'Lietuvos rytas' išlieka populiariausias dienraštis Lietuvoje" [Readers Know What to Choose: 'Lietuvos Rytas' Remains the Most Popular Daily Newspaper in Lithuania], May 8, 2021, https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvosdiena/aktualijos/2021/05/08/news/skaitytojai-zino-ka-pasirinkti-lietuvos-rytas-islieka-populiariausias-dienrastis-lietuvoje-19287728.

sentiments. I also consider that the sample size analyzed is significant enough to draw conclusions on how Delfi and LRytas portrayed refugees in the analyzed time period.

Nevertheless, my analysis has a number of limitations. First, as the categorization of articles and key themes was done by me without cross-checking by another person and comparing their categorization, some of my results may be influenced by the subjective nature of the analysis. Furthermore, as the archiving system and the search capability on Delfi is not as straight-forward as on LRytas, it may be possible that I have missed some relevant articles because they were not tagged correctly by Delfi (i.e., as I found articles tagged as pertaining to refugees that were not relevant, the opposite may also be true). Nevertheless, I expect that the majority of the articles would have been tagged by the website correctly and the number of potential omissions should be low.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the high-level findings on both news websites showing that, overall, the representation of refugees was skewed towards negative.

Table 1: Summary of Positive/Negative/Neutral Articles

Sentiment towards refugees	LRytas		Delfi	
	No of articles	percent of total	No of articles	percent of total
Positive	52	10	45	16
Negative	257	50	130	45
Neutral	201	40	113	39
Total	*510*	*100*	*288*	*100*

Interestingly, both Delfi and LRytas had a similar proportion of neutral articles but the reporting on LRytas appeared to be more negative, with only 10 percent of articles on refugees being positive, compared to Delfi's 16 percent. This was an interesting result given LRytas' long-standing history as a quality daily newspaper. The difference in the volume of articles published is also telling—the number of analyzed articles on LRytas is almost twice as high compared to

Delfi. By way of reminder, every second article on refugees was analyzed and, as such, the difference in the volume of articles analyzed on each outlet is not due to the selection methods. It appears that the refugee theme overall was far more prominent on LRytas. The salience and negativity of reporting could be because LRytas is the third largest online news portal in the country and thus is competing more aggressively for additional readers by publishing more sensationalized stories on salient topics. Alternatively, Delfi may simply publish fewer articles overall, however, further research would be required to establish this.

Analyzing the number of articles published each year shows clearly that the importance of the refugee crisis to Lithuanian media peaked in 2016 while the topic became a lot less significant in the subsequent years (Table 2), despite the fact that refugees continued coming both to Europe and, specifically, Lithuania beyond 2016.
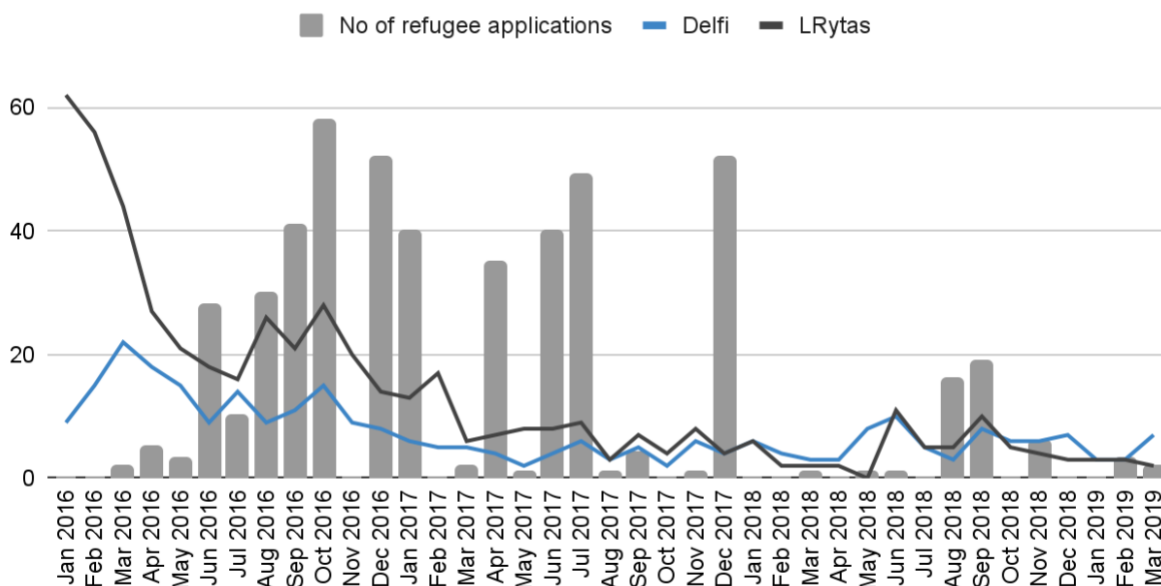
Table 2: Number of Articles Analyzed by Year

Year	LRytas	Delfi
2016	353	154
2017	94	52
2018	55	69
2019 January—March	8	13

Further confirming that the frequency of reporting was not necessarily linked to the number of refugees coming to Lithuania, Graph 1 below shows the number of new refugee applications by refugees coming from Syria and Iraq compared to the number of articles analyzed each month. It does not appear that the number of press reports was driven by the number of refugee applications, with the number of reports decreasing over time and the number of refugee applications being distributed more randomly. Additionally, the highest number of applications in one month totaled to under 60, with most months showing significantly fewer applications. This shows that the number of refugees coming to Lithuania was minimal yet the reporting on the refugee crisis was prevalent.

Graph 1: New Applications for Refugee Status by Individuals Coming from Syria and Iraq vs Number of Articles Analyzed

Applications for Refugee Status vs Number of Articles in the Sample

Source: Migration Department within the Ministry for Internal Affairs
https://migracija.lrv.lt/lt/statistika/prieglobscio-skyriaus-statistika/statistika-1

Reporting on both outlets became marginally less negative and more neutral/positive as time went by. Analysis of LRytas articles shows that 53 percent of the articles published in 2016 were coded as negative, with the proportion holding almost constant in 2017 at 52 percent. However, by 2018, the negative articles declined to 32 percent of the total articles, decreasing again to 25 percent in 2019. The positive depictions of refugees on LRytas followed the opposite pattern—only 9 percent of the articles depicted refugees positively in 2016 and around 8 percent in 2017 with the proportion increasing to 25 percent by 2018. A similar pattern was repeated by Delfi—negative articles constituted 50 percent of the 2016 sample, slowly reducing to 40 percent in 2017 and 38 percent in 2018 and 2019. The proportion of positive articles increased from 18 percent to 23 percent in 2017 (compared to 2016) and reduced to 10 percent in 2018 with neutral factual articles increasing as a proportion of total reporting. However, it is important to note that, as significantly more articles were published in 2016 than in other years, the decrease in negative articles as a proportion each year still meant that, in real terms, the number of positive articles

was relatively low compared to the number of negative articles when considering the full analysis period.

Key Themes

Tables 3 and 4 summarize the key themes appearing in both news outlets and whether they appeared in positive, negative, or neutral contexts with regards to refugees.

Table 3: Summary of Key Themes on LRytas

Theme	Number of times mentioned	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Crime/security	*128*	*2*	*120*	*6*
Islam/Muslims	*85*	*15*	*53*	*17*
Integration	*79*	*27*	*37*	*15*
Economy	*61*	*9*	*40*	*12*
Questioning the refugee status	*55*	*1*	*50*	*4*
Terrorism	*52*	*0*	*47*	*5*
Uncontrollable migration	*45*	*0*	*36*	*9*
Christianity	*40*	*12*	*17*	*11*
Criticism of the EU/other countries	*25*	*0*	*7*	*18*
Refugees leaving Lithuania/other less well-off EU countries	*14*	*0*	*14*	*0*

for Sweden or Germany				

Table 4: Key Themes Appearing in Delfi Articles

Theme	Number of times mentioned	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Islam	*49*	*10*	*13*	*26*
Uncontrollable migration	*41*	*0*	*6*	*35*
Integration	*40*	*18*	*4*	*18*
Crime/security	*39*	*1*	*1*	*37*
Terrorism	*37*	*3*	*2*	*32*
Economy	*35*	*5*	*5*	*25*
Questioning the refugee status	*32*	*3*	*3*	*26*
Criticism of the EU/other countries	*28*	*1*	*19*	*8*
Christianity	*21*	*9*	*6*	*6*
Refugees leaving Lithuania/other less well-off EU countries for Sweden or Germany	*13*	*1*	*1*	*11*

The key themes on both news outlets appeared to vary in their significance and prominence. For example, the theme of uncontrollable migration featured heavily in reports by both LRytas and Delfi but, compared to other themes, was more prominent on Delfi. Overall, however, the narratives portrayed by both outlets were similar.

Crime and security were a prominent theme on both news outlets, albeit appearing to be more prevalent on LRytas than Delfi. Articles which mentioned crime and security were unsurprisingly mostly negative and portrayed refugees as prone to committing crimes, crossing EU borders illegally, and attacking European women. Reports spoke of "increased aggression and violence" as well as the need for self-defense classes for women to be "included in school and university programs."[50] Some of the narratives were driven by specific events, for example, reports of sexual assaults in various German towns on New Year's Eve in 2016 or the murder of a Lithuanian teenager in January 2016 by a Syrian refugee in Sweden. However, some other reporting with headlines such as "Lithuanians in Germany are Scared of Migrants"[51] relied on personal feelings and opinions rather than underlying facts. The theme of crime and security often went hand-in-hand with the theme of terrorism with articles stating that some of the refugees were in fact working for the Islamic State.[52] Interestingly, when instances of crime involving refugees were reported (and the crime was overwhelmingly perpetrated by Lithuanian locals against refugees), the views expressed by politicians, especially the mayor of the town where the refugee center was located, were often in defense of the perpetrators, rather than victims. For example, when two Syrian women were attacked by Lithuanian locals (the specific incident concerned the pulling down of hijab), the media reports quoted politicians stating that the women should have respected Lithuanian laws and kept their religion private. Unfounded claims were repeated in this instance again as facts, with the mayor of Rukla stating that in an

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[50] Raimundas Markauskas, "R. Markauskas. Pabėgėliai – žalieji žmogeliukai Europai?" [Refugees: Aliens in Europe?], Delfi, March 7, 2016, https://www.delfi.lt/news/ringas/politics/r-markauskas-pabegeliai-zalieji-zmogeliukai-europai.d?id=70604362.

[51] LRytas.TV, "Lietuviai Vokietijoje įbauginti migrantų" [Lithuanians in Germany Are Scared of Migrants], 20 January 2016, https://tv.lrytas.lt/zinios/pasaulis/2016/01/20/news/lietuviai-vokietijoje-ibauginti-migrantu-305068/.

[52] "Vokiečių kontržvalgyba įspėja: terorizmo pavojus yra milžiniškas, tai gali įvykti bet kada" [German Security Services Warn: The Threat of Terrorism is Significant, Attack Imminent], Delfi, June 29, 2016, https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/world/vokieciu-kontrzvalgyba-ispeja-terorizmo-pavojus-yra-milziniskas-tai-gali-ivykti-bet-kada.d?id=71686620.

opposite scenario where a Western woman not covering her hair in a Muslim country would be attacked for not respecting the country's laws.[53]

Integration was an important theme in both online newspapers with a mix of success stories of refugees learning Lithuanian or articles covering individual refugees who had integrated fully into their host countries contrasted against articles explaining how refugees do not want to work or integrate or that they simply want to go to countries like Germany or Sweden, which offered higher social welfare payments. Interestingly, articles reporting on refugees' success and eagerness to learn the Lithuanian language were overwhelmingly positive towards refugees suggesting that the Lithuanian language was seen as a significant indicator of integration. This is supported by recent research which shows that the Lithuanian national identity incorporates loyalty and commitment to the country,[54] which explains the positive sentiment in the news reports about refugees learning Lithuanian language—this was likely seen as a signal of long-term commitment to integration. Furthermore, refugees' embrace of Lithuanian customs was also reported positively (e.g., "Muslim Refugees in Rukla Learn How to Decorate Easter Eggs"[55]). The negative articles focused on refugees' supposed reluctance to integrate ("Refugees Lack the Motivation to Learn Even Basic Lithuanian"[56]) or reluctance by other countries or individual towns to accept refugees as they would disturb the cultural fabric of those places. Interestingly, the positive articles were often based on real experiences, people and actions whereas the negative articles often leaned into the theoretical arguments or generalizations about refugees.

The economy was also a key theme, albeit far more prominent on LRytas than on Delfi, with two opposing narratives emerging: refugees could help revive the aging European and Lithuanian workforce and contribute taxes and economic output or refugees are only coming to

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[53] Birute Davidonyte, "Ruklos seniūnas apie pabėgėlius: tegul savo tradicijų laikosi uždarai ir nebruka jų mums" [The Mayor of Rukla on Refugees: They Should Practice Their Traditions Privately], *Delfi*. October 28, 2016, https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/ruklos-seniunas-apie-pabegelius-tegul-savo-tradiciju-laikosi-uzdarai-ir-nebruka-ju-mums.d?id=72698318.

[54] Marharyta Fabrykant, "National Identity in the Contemporary Baltics: Comparative Quantitative Analysis," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 49, 3 (2018): 305-31, https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2018.1442360.

[55] LRytas.TV, "Rukloje pabėgėliai musulmonai mokėsi marginti kiaušinius" [Muslim Refugees in Rukla Learned to Decorate Easter Eggs], April 14, 2017, https://tv.lrytas.lt/zinios/lietuvos-diena/2017/04/14/news/rukloje-pabegeliai-musulmonai-mokesi-marginti-kiausinius-731132/.

[56] BNS, "Pabėgėliai sunkiai randa būstą, darbą, lietuviai bijo terorizmo grėsmių" [Refugees Struggle to Find Housing, Jobs, Lithuanians Worried About Terrorism], *Lietuvos Rytas*, November 29, 2016, https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvosdiena/aktualijos/2016/11/29/news/pabegeliai-sunkiai-randa-busta-darba-lietuviai-bijo-terorizmo-gresmiu-750351/.

Europe to collect social welfare payments. The news portals reported stories about how refugees were lazy and work-shy, and complained about poor conditions in Lithuania as well as other European countries (e.g., Germany). A number of articles focused on how refugees received higher welfare payments than locals or that they were poorly educated and thus would be unable to work in Europe. The second, negative, narrative was overwhelmingly more prominent than the first in both outlets. The more positive discourse by politicians called for compassion and expressed that Lithuania could benefit economically from refugees. However, the number of politicians advocating for refugees appeared to be lower than the ones portraying negative views. Secondly, as the majority of the refugees were leaving Lithuania soon after their arrival, the ability to continue with the economic argument became weaker. Instead, anti-refugee politicians spoke about how this proved that refugees were in fact economic migrants seeking higher social welfare payments and ignoring the fact that a key factor in the decision making to leave Lithuania appeared to be refugees' inability to find work due to a mix of both the difficulty of learning the language and discriminatory practices by employers.[57] Anti-refugee politicians also discussed the cost of social payments to refugees and their integration, as well as how they were treated better than Lithuanians, entirely excluding the fact that the vast majority of these costs were funded by the European Union, rather than Lithuania. In turn, the media often failed to fact-check the majority of these claims and simply reported them without refuting the false narrative.[58]

From 2016 onwards two key additional themes emerged on both news outlets—criticism of the European Union and other countries and criticism of refugees leaving Lithuania for Sweden or Germany. Interestingly, while some articles acknowledged that the underlying reasons for the departure from Lithuania may include the fact that other European countries have higher Muslim populations and, as such, may be more hospitable culturally, or that they may offer refugees better employment prospects, the main consensus was that the migration was mostly due to Sweden and Germany's far more generous social security programs. Despite the reporting on refugees themselves being overwhelmingly negative, the reports on refugees leaving

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[57] Justina Maciunaite, "Pabėgėlių integracija Lietuvoje: ką jie veikia ir kokias išmokas gauna? [Refugee Integration in Lithuania: What Are They Doing and What Payments Do They Receive], *Delfi*, October 27, 2016, https://www. delfi.lt/projektai/archive/pabegeliu-integracija-lietuvoje-ka-jie-veikia-ir-kokias-ismokas-gauna.d?id=72673780.

[58] Virginija Spuryte, "Pabėgėliams eurų negailės: bus skiriamos pavydėtinos išmokos" [Refugees to Receive Envy-Inducing Payments], *Delfi*. September 16, 2015, https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/pabegeliams-euru-negailes-bus-skiriamos-pavydetinos-ismokos.d?id=69010270.

Lithuania also were negative, almost taking offense that refugees did not stay in Lithuania despite the hostility towards them. The press was also very critical of other countries and the EU approach in general; countries like Greece or Italy were criticized for slow processing of refugee applications and inappropriate conditions in refugee camps. Some articles expressed an element of pride for Lithuania being one of the most productive countries when it came to meeting its refugee quota obligations (despite the overall consensus that the quotas were unfair and threatened national sovereignty).

Both Delfi and LRytas often reported the refugee crisis using alarmist terms such as "uncontrollable migration" and "invasion of refugees" that did not really represent the situation in Lithuania at the time. The theme was especially prominent on Delfi, coming second only to Islam. Such framing, therefore, made it seem that the number of refugees coming to Lithuania would be significantly higher than it was in reality and the theme continued even once it became apparent that Lithuania had committed to accepting just over 1,000 refugees.

Finally, the questioning of refugee status was a significant key theme. A number of articles questioned how many of the refugees were genuinely fleeing war and persecution and how many were in fact using this as an opportunity to come to Europe to further their economic prospects. The theme of refugee status went hand in hand with the theme of economy, echoing similar sentiments. A number of articles stated how much refugees had paid smugglers to come to Europe—amounts ranging from EUR800 up to thousands, with one article even reporting on how refugees were arriving on private yachts.[59] The reporting perpetuated a stereotype that refugees were in fact wealthy migrants who were coming to Europe to exploit economic opportunities rather than genuine refugees fleeing danger. Even when the refugee status was not explicitly questioned, articles often referred to refugees interchangeably as migrants or foreigners thus potentially confusing the narrative for an average reader who may not be clear what the distinction between the two groups is.

The Portrayal of Islam and Muslims

Islam was a key theme on both news outlets, and was reported in a predominantly negative context (albeit reporting on Delfi being more balanced than on LRytas). Reports often portrayed

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[59] "Prakutę migrantai į Europą plaukia ir prabangiomis jachtomis" [Wealthy migrants arriving in Europe in Yachts"] *Lietuvos Rytas,* September 19, 2017, https://www.lrytas.lt/pasaulis/ivykiai/2020/12/08/news/estijoje-285-nauji-covid-19-atvejai-trys-pacientai-mire-17434262/.

Islam and Muslims as incompatible with Lithuania's Christian society and juxtaposed the two religions, especially in the context of Christians in the Middle East fleeing Muslim persecution. As refugees started being relocated to Lithuania, articles announcing their arrival often mentioned the religion of refugees alongside their marital status and occupation ("Young Muslim Family … Arrived from Frankfurt."[60]). Overall, there appeared to be little effort by the press to portray Islam or Muslim refugees in a balanced and factual manner. The most common other themes in articles that mentioned Islam were those of crime and security, integration, terrorism, and Christianity. Articles often spoke about Muslims' innate inability to integrate into the Western society, accept its liberal laws, or the threat that Muslim men posed to European women. Statements about Islam being an aggressive religion with Muslims unable to integrate into the European society ("You Don't Understand Islam or What Dangers It Poses"[61]) were not backed up by references to factual information or drawn from reliable sources. The theme of sexual assaults against European women featured heavily, with LRytas even reporting on a controversial cover of a Polish magazine showing a blonde woman being pulled by her hair with the headline "Islam Raping Europe."[62] The reporting on both LRytas and Delfi was also often exaggerated: for example, one article called people to imagine thousands of white men attacking migrant women and how it would not be tolerated.[63] Another article referred to an interview with Gintas Jasiulionis, the mayor of Rukla where the refugee center is located, where he stated that if Western women were found in the Middle East without covering their hair, they would be attacked by the locals for not respecting the local laws.[64] Again, these reports were based on

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[60] *Lietuvos Rytas*, "Trys žvilgsniai į 2015 metus: ryškiausi Lietuvos įvykiai (III)" [Three Glances at 2015: Lithuania's Key Events], January 2, 2016, https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvosdiena/aktualijos/2016/01/02/news/trys-zvilgsniai-i-2015-metus-ryskiausi-lietuvos-ivykiai-iii--506557/.

[61] Egle Gatelyte, "Rimtas perspėjimas Europos gyventojams: jūsų naivumas – labai pavojingas" [A Serious Warning to Europeans: Your Naivety is Very Dangerous], *Delfi,* January 20, 2018, https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/world/rimtas-perspejimas-europos-gyventojams-jusu-naivumas-labai-pavojingas.d?id=76898483.

[62] "Migrantais gąsdinantis Lenkijos žurnalo viršelis sukėlė pyktį" [Polish Magazine Cover Causes International Outrage], Lietuvos Rytas, February 18, 2016, https://www.lrytas.lt/pasaulis/rytai-vakarai/2016/02/18/news/migrantais-gasdinantis-lenkijos-zurnalo-virselis-sukele-pykti-810092/.

[63] Leonas Grybauskas, "Prancūzija negedėtų, jei valdžia negintų agresyvių atsibastėlių" [France Would Not Be in Mourning If the Government Did Not Protect Aggressive Newcomers], *Lietuvos Rytas*, July 19, 2016, https://www.lrytas.lt/pasaulis/ivykiai/2020/12/08/news/estijoje-285-nauji-covid-19-atvejai-trys-pacientai-mire-17434262/.

[64] Birute Davidonyte, "Ruklos seniūnas apie pabėgėlius: tegul savo tradicijų laikosi uždarai ir nebruka jų mums" [Rukla Mayor: Refugees Should Follow Their Traditions Behind Closed Doors], *Delfi*, October 28, 2016. https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/ruklos-seniunas-apie-pabegelius-tegul-savo-tradiciju-laikosi-uzdarai-ir-nebruka-ju-mums.d?id=72698318.

personal opinions or exaggerations as opposed to reporting actual events. There appeared to be only limited attempts by journalists to fact-check or counter extreme narratives.

Rather concerningly, LRytas appeared to provide a space for more right-wing discourse without challenging it or providing an alternative point of view. For example, they reported on a Polish priest, Roman Kneblewski, who stated that the refugees were coming to "murder, rape, and convert Christians to Muslims."[65] Although in this specific case the article did allude to the fact that the views expressed by the priest were extreme, it nevertheless reported on them, furthering their reach. Delfi, by contrast to LRytas, appeared to be more welcoming to publishing a diversity of views, for example opinion pieces stating that Muslim refugees were able to integrate successfully or at times refuting exaggerated claims.

The small number of positive reports that mentioned Islam can be broken down into a few key subthemes: 1) the story of Afghan refugee Abdullah Basir Yousousi; 2) reports of successful refugee integration (e.g., learning Lithuanian or participating in Easter festivities as outlined earlier); and 3) calls by Christian leaders, including Pope Francis, to show compassion towards Muslim refugees.

In January 2016, a video of an Afghan refugee Abdullah Basir Yousousi asking Lithuania to accept him reached the Lithuanian media. The video was recorded in Lithuanian, as he had learned the language while working with Lithuanian soldiers as part of NATO operations in Afghanistan. He stated that he had to flee from the Taliban as he had received a letter stating he was a Christian and hence in danger. His plight received a lot of positive attention from the media and politicians, and he was relocated to Lithuania in a matter of weeks, with his family joining him a few months later.[66] What was especially interesting, however, is that although he initially implied he was a Christian, once he had landed in Lithuania and his visa process was significantly underway, he revealed himself to be a practicing Muslim and wrote off the confusion about his religion to a misunderstanding due to a language barrier. Subsequently, articles referred to how Lithuanians were tricked by Basir ("Refugee Basir Tricked

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[65] Eldoradas Budrimas, "Lenkijoje – kunigo sukeltas skandalas: puolė nesantuokines poras' [A Priest Creates a Scandal in Poland - Attacked Unmarried Couples], *Lietuvos Rytas*, January 1, 2017, https://www.lrytas.lt/pasaulis/ivykiai/2017/01/01/news/lenkijoje-kunigo-sukeltas-skandalas-puole-nesantuokines-poras-708162/.

[66] BNS, "Į Lietuvą iš pabėgėlių stovyklos atvyksta lietuvių kariams talkinęs afganistanietis" [Arriving to Lithuania a Refugee from Afghanistan who Previously Worked with the Lithuanian Military], *Delfi*, April 6, 2016, https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/i-lietuva-is-pabegeliu-stovyklos-atvyksta-lietuviu-kariams-talkines-afganistanietis.d?id=70904708.

Lithuania?"[67]) and how he was allegedly no longer employed ("He Currently Lives in the Refugee Center with His Family, Receiving EUR600 Per Month from Lithuania"[68]), thus reverting to a narrative of refugees (and Basir specifically) being more interested in social welfare payments than being part of the workforce.

Pope Francis and leaders of the Catholic Church in Poland and Lithuania were reported as calling for compassion and acceptance towards Muslim refugees, often quoting Christian values. However, even Pope Francis was not immune to criticism by LRytas for only taking Muslim refugees to the Vatican and not helping Christian refugees.[69]

The neutral depictions of refugees and Islam mostly came from short articles stating that new refugees were coming to Lithuania and mentioning their religion. These articles often covered the most basic information about refugees being relocated to Lithuania; for example, noting the number of refugees, as well as their family status, profession, and religion. As such, they were simply informative rather than depicting any undertone.

The proportion of articles mentioning Islam (compared to the total number of articles published in any given year) does not appear to follow a clear downward trend. While on Delfi it steadily decreased from 20 percent to 12 percent between 2016 and 2018, the theme was more prominent in 2019 (30 percent of total articles, albeit the total number of articles published in 2019 January—March was low). On LRytas it fluctuated between 12 percent and 14 percent in the analyzed years, with the exception of 2017 when it featured in 28 percent of the articles.

As a result, I conclude that my analysis finds in support of my *H1* and *H2*—Islam was a key theme in articles on refugees and it was mentioned predominantly in a negative context. With regards to *H2*, I did find that when Islam was mentioned in positive articles on refugees it was in part when calling for Catholic values and compassion towards refugees. Individual examples of refugees' integration and Basir's story also resulted in more positive reporting. In partial support of my *H3*, I found that both news outlets portrayed a predominantly negative view

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[67] Lina Bartkute, "Yla išlindo iš maišo: pabėgėlis Basiras apgavo Lietuvą?" [Refugee Basir Tricked Lithuania?] *Lietuvos Rytas*, July 18, 2016, https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvosdiena/aktualijos/2016/07/18/news/yla-islindo-is-maiso-pabegelis-basiras-apgavo-lietuva--1241556/.

[68] Ruta Pukene, "Garsusis pabėgėlis Basiras pas A. Guogą nebedirba" [The Famous Basir No Longer Working For A. Guoga], *Delfi*, September 21, 2016, https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/garsusis-pabegelis-basiras-pas-a-guoga-nebedirba.d?id=72355238.

[69] "Dužęs pažadas: popiežius neišgelbėjo pabėgėlių krikščionių" [Broken Promise: The Pope Did Not Save Christian Refugees], *Lietuvos Rytas*, April 27, 2016, https://pasaulis.lrytas.lt/rytai-vakarai/2016/04/27/news/duzes-pazadas-popiezius-neisgelbejo-pabegeliu-krikscioniu-1348966/.

of refugees; however, Islam and Muslims appeared to be a more significant theme on LRytas than Delfi. Furthermore, Delfi was marginally more accepting of reporting a variety of views. Finally, my analysis does not show in favor of *H4*—despite the number of overall articles published on refugees decreased as time went by and the reporting became more balanced, there did not appear a clear downward trend in the salience of Islam when compared to other themes. The finding relating to *H4* is the most interesting and concerning—in the past traditional media was expected to diverge towards reporting true events as time went by and elites lost their information advantage. This does not appear to have fully taken place in the reports about Muslim refugees. By March 2019, the reality in Lithuania was that Islamization did not take place and the number of refugees who had stayed in Lithuania was insignificant. As such, news reporting (and public opinion) would have been expected to reflect just that, yet it did not. Public opinion towards refugees improved over time, yet a significant minority of the population retained their negative sentiments. It appears that the news portals failed to adjust their reports to reflect the reality of the situation and fact-check politicians promoting anti-refugee and anti-Muslim messages, which in turn meant that the public did not have the full information to hold these politicians accountable for their disinformation. As news portals competed for readers, negative sensationalized narratives were preferred in favor of neutral and factual reporting.

Discussion and Conclusion

To conclude, the negative reporting by the press acted both as a reflection of people's views and also a perpetuator of negative stereotypes. Due to negative views expressed by a significant number of prominent politicians and the lack of prominent Muslim voices in Lithuania, there was no clear counterargument to the negative views portrayed by the media or any significant attempts by the press to educate the public in an unbiased way on the topics of refugees and Islam. Anti-refugee politicians often made negative statements unsupported by factual information, which in turn were often not fact-checked by the media. Public opinion polls show that the Lithuanian public became less hostile towards Muslims and refugees as time went by—likely because the narratives of Islamization of Lithuania, crime, and terrorism simply did not play out in reality. However, a significant minority of the population retained their negative sentiments. As time went by, the press reporting became somewhat more balanced overall, yet the topic of Islam remained salient. As a result, I consider that the press did not adjust their

reporting to reflect the true reality of the refugee crisis, and especially how it impacted Lithuania specifically, and instead continued to promote negative stereotypes and alarmist headlines. The press has significant influence in setting public views and influencing opinions and, as such, must consider how to use this influence responsibly. While the topic of Syrian refugees no longer dominates the news, as I outlined in the introduction of this paper, the recent terrorist attacks in France and Austria have brought the topic of Muslims in Europe back to the forefront of politics. With continued Islamophobia across Europe, the press should ensure that their reporting of events is factual and provide a platform for a variety of views, not just ones that are more likely to generate more scandalous headlines and thus draw in more readers. The press should fact-check politicians who perpetuate negative stereotypes and make unfounded claims about Islam as well as give space for Muslim communities to speak for themselves. Without doing so, we risk that the prevailing negative stereotypes will continue to shape the public opinion of Europeans in general and the reality of Muslim minorities in Europe. More generally, the shift away from the roles and responsibilities of fact-checking and gatekeeping in favor of sensationalized narratives designed to draw in readers is concerning as it means that the public may not be able to rely on the media to understand the true reality of any given political situation. In the case of Lithuania, anti-refugee politicians were able to spread inaccurate and harmful messages without the press (and therefore the public) holding them accountable. As information flows increase and more and more people are consuming their news from the internet, rather than traditional news mediums, it becomes more difficult to ensure that correct unbiased information reaches people.

Appendix

Detailed Methodology

The two outlets use different article archiving procedures and, as such, on LRytas, I reviewed articles by searching the word "pabegeliai" ("refugees") in the search box. On Delfi I reviewed all articles archived under the following themes: pabegeliai, pabegelis ("male refugee"), pabegele ("female refugee"), pabegeliu antpludis ("flock of refugees"), pabegeliu centras ("refugee center"), pabegeliu ekonomika ("refugee economics"), pabegeliu krize ("refugee crisis"), pabegeliu kvotos ("refugee quotas"), pabėgėlių priėmimo centras ("refugee processing center"), and pabegeliu stovykla ("refugee camp"). I also specifically excluded articles which appeared in my search as per the above criteria but did not in fact speak about Syrian or, more broadly, Middle Eastern refugees (e.g., due to an apparent mis-labelling of the article or when the article spoke about Ukrainian refugees).

Each article was first reviewed to understand whether the underlying sentiment expressed by the article towards refugees was positive, negative, or neutral. Overall, an article was classified as positive when the underlying tone and language used to describe refugees was also positive, neutral when the article was either neutral or relayed factual information using language that did not appear to show any bias and negative when the underlying tone and language used in the article was negative. Subsequently, each article was analyzed and coded for key themes appearing within the article to understand whether the themes differed between positive, neutral, and negative articles.[70]

The following sample coding frame was created by reviewing a sample of 90 articles in 2014 and 2015 on both Delfi and LRytas (45 articles each), with two exceptions explained below:

1. Positive articles sample frame key themes: Islam, terrorism, Christianity, economy, integration;
2. Neutral articles sample frame key themes: Islam, Christianity, integration, criticisms of EU/other countries, refugees leaving Lithuania;

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[70] When designing the research method, I relied heavily on Margrit Schreier's *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

3. Negative articles sample frame key themes: Islam, terrorism, uncontrollable migration, questioning refugee status, integration, economy, crime, criticism of EU/other countries, refugees leaving Lithuania;

The sample frame themes referring to criticism towards EU and other countries as well as refugees leaving Lithuania were added after analyzing the articles published in 2016—2019 as these two themes did not feature as significantly in the 2014—2015 sample. This is because prior to December 2015 no refugees had been actually relocated to Lithuania and, hence, did not leave Lithuania. Furthermore, the refugee crisis intensified in 2016 and the controversial EU-Turkey migration agreement was signed in 2016 which meant that the EU would exchange economic migrants coming to Greece for refugees in Turkey. Both of these contributed to the increasing prominence of the theme of criticism towards the EU and other European countries.

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