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Voting Advice Applications in Lithuania: Promoting Programmatic Competition or Breeding Populism?

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Abstract

This article analyses the effects of the voting assistance tool Manobalsas that was developed for the Lithuanian parliamentary elections of 2008 by three leading universities in Lithuania. Analytical voting assistance tools (or Voting Advice Applications—VAAs) assist voters by offering systematised information about candidates and parties, and by providing voting recommendation based on the congruence of political attitudes between a voter and a party. Voting assistance tools were mainly developed by academic institutions to inform voters about the policy positions of political parties, and to promote programmatic competition between parties.

The analysis of the use of the Manobalsas voting advice application in Lithuania suggests that parties might be able to manipulate the results of the tool by adopting non-ideological (ideologically unconstrained) populist policy positions. The remarkable success of a non-programmatic party in the Lithuanian Manobalsas system demonstrates that VAAs might be advantageous to non-ideological populist parties which are most flexible to adjust to the attitudes of an "average" voter.

Keywords: Voting Advice Applications, post-communist democracies, political parties, elections

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Introduction

In recent years many European countries have witnessed the burgeoning of online voting assistance tools (usually referred to as Voting Advice Applications—VAAs). These nonpartisan analytical devices assist voters by offering systematised information about the policy preferences of political parties, and providing voting recommendations based on the congruence of political positions between a voter and a party. Congruence is measured by comparing the answers of the user of the tool to an online questionnaire and the positions of the parties. VAAs have been widely used during electoral campaigns in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium and other countries. They are becoming increasingly popular among voters and in some countries they turned into one of the most important players in the electoral campaign (Walgrave et al., 2009). Therefore, there is a strong need to explore the impact of the VAAs on the outcomes of elections and their effects on the functioning of democracy.

Voting assistance tools were mainly developed by academic institutions to inform voters about the policy positions of political parties, to increase the transparency and accountability of politicians. They are supposed to help voters to make an informed decision during elections and to lower the transaction costs in the context of “information overload” Consequentially, they are expected to have a positive effect on voter turnout. (Thurman and Gaser, 2009; Fivaz and Schwarz, 2007). Voting advice applications, therefore, are most popular in countries with highly fragmented party systems and/or complex electoral systems (e.g., the Netherlands, Switzerland) where voting decision is indeed costly. In the age of partisan dealignment and decreasing partisan identification (Dalton, 1996), the demand for such cost saving devices has risen in other countries as well.

The second important aim of VAAs is to emphasise the programmatic differences of political parties. Against the backdrop of “mediatization” and personalisation of politics (Swanson and Mancini, 1996; Poguntke and Webb, 2005; McAllister, 2007) VAAs are commended as “they focus peoples’ attention to party programmes and to policy issues, thereby compelling parties to discuss substance instead of personalities, images, and campaign events” (Walgrave et al. 2006). The central idea of VAAs is to enable a voter to choose his representative on the basis of proximity of political beliefs and policy positions. It is argued that voting assistance tools, serving as a purely informative rather than persuasive form of advertising, lead to “better” voting decisions (Fivaz and Schwarz, 2007).

The facilities provided by VAAs to voters and the pressure they bring upon parties to disclose their policy positions are particularly attractive

in post-communist countries with unstable and fragmented party systems and floating identities of political parties (Lewis, 2000; Jungerstam-Mulders 2006; Enyedi, 2006). As deliberate avoidance of ideological identity and striving for maximum programmatic flexibility seems to be the dominant competitive strategy in post-communist Europe (Innes, 2002), voters are faced with an enormously difficult challenge to make an informed and rational voting decision. In this context, the voting assistance tool seems to be a particularly promising campaigning instrument.

While the first VAAs were launched in the 1990s, they have only recently started to draw scholarly attention. Although many political scientists have been involved themselves in the process of developing VAAs in their countries, the scientific debate on the theoretical assumptions underlying the design of VAAs, the reliability of their recommendations and their effects on electoral competition, is very limited. Most scholars focus on the demographic characteristics of the users of VAAs and the effects of voting advice on user's electoral behavior (Walgrave et al, 2006; Ladner et al., 2008; Wall et al., 2009; Ruusuvirta and Rosemaa, 2009). Some interesting research has been done on the accuracy of party locations in VAAs (Wagner and Ruusuvirta, 2009) and on the effects of statement selection for the output of VAAs (Walgrave et al., 2009). The research suggests that VAAs might produce invalid results due to some limitations of the underlying logic of their design and/or inappropriate selection of issues.

This article analyses the results of the Voting Advice Application in Lithuania. A voting assistance tool called Manobalsas ("Mano balsas" means "My vote" in Lithuanian) was developed for the Lithuanian parliamentary elections of 2008 by three leading universities in Lithuania.¹ The article identifies who are the winners and the losers of the application, and explores why the tool gave advantage to some parties over others. The article reveals some unexpected negative consequences of the application of the voting assistance tool on democracy. The article suggests that the output of supposedly impartial voting assistance tool might be strategically manipulated by political actors and that VAAs might be most advantageous to non-programmatic political parties.

The article begins with a short overview of voting advice applications developed in different European countries. Then the functioning of the Manobalsas tool is presented in detail and its effect on partisan choice is discussed using the data from an online survey of Manobalsas registered users. Next, the profiles of the main Lithuanian parties are presented and their actual performance in the Manobalsas system is analyzed. Finally, the

¹ See <http://www.manobalsas.lt>.

paradoxical success of a non-programmatic party in the Manobalsas system is explained exploring the policy positions of Lithuanian parties drawn from the answers of the candidates to the Lithuanian parliament to the Manobalsas questionnaire. The article concludes with a critical evaluation of the underlying logic of VAAs enabling the strategic manipulation of their results by opportunistic non-programmatic parties.

An Overview of Voting Advice Applications

The idea of a voting assistance tool based on issue-matching was first implemented in the Netherlands in 1998 (Fivaz and Schwarz, 2007). Since then, the number and popularity of these kinds of tools has grown steadily. The VoteMatch system, based on the original StemWijzer voting test in the Netherlands is applied in Germany (Wahl-O-Mat), Switzerland (Politarena) and Bulgaria (Glasovoditel). Kieskompas (Electoral Compass) based in VU University in Amsterdam developed an application for the 2006 elections in the Netherlands, the 2007 parliamentary elections in Belgium, the 2009 parliamentary elections in Israel, the 2009 elections in Portugal and for the US presidential elections of 2008.² Swiss Politools – Political Research Network has developed one of the most sophisticated voting assistance tools, Smartvote³. It was first offered to voters in 2003. The Smartvote method is also used for the Politikbaine system in Austria, Koimipasva in Bulgaria and Holyrood in Scotland. Some other online voting assistance tools have been developed in the USA, UK, Finland and other countries.

Several international initiatives were developed for the 2009 European Parliamentary elections. The Florence-based European University Institute (EUI) launched the EU Profiler in cooperation with the Amsterdam-based Kieskompas, and the Zurich-based NCCR Democracy/Politools network (Trechsel and Mair, 2009). The Profiler is available in all national languages of the EU and allows users to compare their policy preferences with the positions of national as well as European parties.⁴ The EU Profiler combines the methodology of Smartvote and Kieskompas. Another European-wide voting assistance tool was developed by VoteMatch.⁵

Even though different voting assistance tools use different methodologies, they all function in essentially the same way. After answering an online questionnaire on policy preferences or political beliefs

² See <http://www.kieskompas.nl>.

³ See <http://www.Smartvote.ch>.

⁴ See <http://euprofiler.eu/>.

⁵ See <http://www.votematch.net>.

users are provided with a party match, i.e. with a list of parties and/or candidates in decreasing order of congruence between the positions of the user and a political party or candidate. Some of those issue matching systems allow users to indicate which topics or statements in the questionnaire are more important for them and then use some kind of weighting procedure in the calculation of the congruence score.

The tools, however, differ in the way results are counted and presented, and in the way the information on the party positions is collected. There is a difference between voting assistance tools based on party programs and other party official electoral documents, and those based on the answers of individual candidates to the questionnaire. In the latter case, the voter can see the match between their political stance and the individual candidates of different parties. The position of a party is calculated from the scores of individual candidates of the party. This methodology is used in the Swiss Smartvote and the Lithuanian Manobalsas tools. In both systems, the user can choose to receive a voting recommendation for the list of parties or for individual candidates in their electoral district. For the party list score, both tools use the mean value of all candidates of the party.

Some of the most sophisticated voter assistance tools provide a visual analysis of the results. For example, Kieskompass (Electoral Compass) presents the results in a traditional two-dimensional map with an economic left-right scale and scale of social liberalism *versus* social conservatism. The user can see his own position on the map and the position of the parties/candidates based on the answers to all questions or on selected topics. In addition to the traditional two-dimensional political map, Smartvote uses a multidimensional “smartspider” with eight axes representing the most important political cleavages in the country. Therefore, using these tools the voter not only gets a comparison of his own and a particular party’s/candidate’s political stance (a congruence score), but can also identify his own ideological position and compare the positions of parties.

Some of these tools enjoy striking popularity among voters. In Switzerland the Smartvote tool was used 255,000 times in 2003 when the system was launched. This figure steadily increased and it reached almost one million in the 2007 Swiss parliamentary elections (Ladner et al., 2008). This comprises about 20 percent of the electorate and about 40 percent of voters participating in the elections. In Belgium voting assistance tools produced about one million voting recommendations which corresponded to 25 percent of the Belgian electorate, and in the Netherlands different voting assistance tools produced as many as 2,600,000 voting recommendations in 2002. In Germany the Wahl-O-Mat system gave 3,600,000 voting

recommendations in 2002 (Walgrave et al., 2006) and about five million in 2005 (Fivaz and Schwarz, 2007: 7).

Do voting assistance tools really make a difference on the voting decisions of the electorate? The research of voting assistance tool users in Switzerland and in Belgium came to different answers. After analysing the online panel surveys of internet users, Walgrave et al. (2006) found a modest effect of VAA on the Belgian voters' final decision. Ladner et al. (2008), on the contrary, claim that Smartvote has a substantive influence on voting decision in Switzerland, stimulating voters to change or to reconsider their political preferences or to split votes. Both studies, however, confirm that politicians and journalists perceive VAAs as important elements of electoral campaign that have an impact on voters' decision.

The "Smartvote" type of voting assistance applications might also have significant effects on parties. If the mass media is said to have enhanced the role of party leaders, and decreased the role of backbenchers, the Smartvote tool, in contrast, increases the visibility of other candidates in comparison with party leaders during the electoral campaign. Moreover, it reduces the capacity of party leaders to control the process of political marketing, even if parties might provide instructions to their candidates on how to answer questions. If the position of a party is derived from the positions of registered party candidates, as it is in Smartvote and Manobalsas, it has an impact on the image of a party and, potentially, might lead to internal changes of policy and/or leadership in a party.

In countries with a mixed electoral system or panachage voting, VAAs might also lead to increasing vote splitting. According to the results of the survey of the users of the voting assistance tool of the 2007 National Council elections in Switzerland, as many as 40 percent reported splitting their vote. And the majority claimed that Smartvote influenced their voting decision (Ladner et al., 2008). The researchers of the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR Democracy) claim that it could lead to a weakening of political parties. Moreover, by using Smartvote, the MPs could form ad-hoc coalitions, independent of party orders, or "candidates can even form new, virtual parties based on profile congruence with other candidates."⁶

In addition, Smartvote technology could be used to increase direct communication between parties and individual politicians and voters. If the profiles of Smartvote users were made accessible to candidates and parties,

⁶ See the description of the project on „Smart-voting as a tool for electronic campaigning“ available at: <http://www.nccr-democracy.uzh.ch/nccr/knowledge_transfer/ip16/Project%2016.pdf>.

they could be used to identify “sympathetic” citizens and to create personalised communication channels among voters and representatives.⁷

Voting Assistance Application in Lithuania

The Lithuanian voting assistance tool Manobalsas was developed using similar methodology to the Swiss Smartvote, adjusting it to the Lithuanian political context. Manobalsas was introduced before the 2008 parliamentary elections. Manobalsas invites voters to see which parties are closest to their own political attitudes rather than providing an explicit voting recommendation as the Smartvote tool does.⁸ Nevertheless, it was designed in accordance with the electoral system in Lithuania.

In Lithuanian parliamentary elections, a mixed electoral system is used: 70 MPs are elected by a proportional representation system in a multimember district and another 71 members are elected in single member districts by majority system. Moreover, preferential voting is allowed when voting for party lists. Therefore, voters have two votes: one for a party list and one for a candidate in a single-member district. In addition, they have five preferential votes they can cast for candidates on a party list of their choice.

After answering the Manobalsas questionnaire, the user is provided with a party list according to the congruence of the answers of the user and a party. Party scores are derived from the answers of the party candidates registered in the system. The user then can check the congruence scores of individual candidates of a selected party list or get a list of candidates in his electoral district. They may also see the answers to the questionnaires of individual candidates, the political profiles of the candidates including a picture, biography, links to their websites (if available) and a link to the online parliament monitoring tool (for current MPs only). Moreover, a detailed analysis of congruence between a candidate and the user is provided.

The questionnaire consists of 41 questions on different political issues in Lithuania. The questionnaire was designed to incorporate and depict the main political cleavages in the Lithuanian political arena. It includes questions that are actively discussed by political parties and/or in the public sphere. The arguments in favour and against every proposition in the questionnaire were summarised and provided as additional support for

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ When presenting the tool in the media, the providers were emphasizing that the tool is not supposed to give a commendation for a vote. It is rather an additional source of information for voters.

the users. The users could “manipulate” the questionnaire by omitting questions that were not relevant to them and by giving a weight to the questions according to the personal importance of the issue.

Manobalsas does not provide a visual interpretation of the results in a two-dimensional political map since there is ambiguity and disagreement between political scientists as to which dimensions are in fact most relevant in Lithuania. Even though Lithuanian parties could be placed on the traditional economic left-right scale and on the axis of social liberalism – social conservatism, those two dimensions do not seem to represent the political space in Lithuania very well (Ramonaite, 2009). In the first decade of post-communist Lithuania, the structure of the party system was mainly shaped by the dominant communist – anti-communist or East-West cleavage (see Jurkynas 2001, Ramonaitė, 2003, 2006). Later, however, the importance of communist – anticommunist cleavage began to wane and the socio-economic left-right dimension gained significance (Jurkynas and Ramonaitė, 2007). The liberal – conservative dimension differentiates the main Lithuanian parties, but it has less impact on the actual pattern of electoral competition of the parties. The left-right dimension in Lithuania appears to subsume all three dimensions, as right wing parties in Lithuania are mainly anti-communist and anti-Russian, pro-market and conservative, and left-wing parties stand for a pragmatic rather than a principled policy towards Russia, a socially-oriented economy and personal freedom on moral questions.

In order to reflect the complexity of the political space in Lithuania, Manobalsas adopted the Smartvote idea of using a radar or spider-web type of graph for depicting the results. The spider-web in Manobalsas deploys the political attitudes on eight axes: social welfare and equality, the free market, anti-communism, a soft policy towards Russia, personal freedom of choice, nationalism and tradition, self-government and decentralisation, and order and centralised governance. The axes may be subsumed into three dominant dimensions in Lithuania: ex-communist – anticommunist, economic left-right, and social liberalism - social conservatism. The fourth dimension of authoritarian rule versus self-governance was somewhat artificial and it appeared to be irrelevant as there were almost no differences between parties or candidates on self-governance and decentralisation axis.

The questionnaire was sent by email to all candidates of the 2008 parliamentary elections. Before the elections, 333 politicians from 20 parties were registered in the system (since there were some non-party candidates, they were treated as members of one party list, therefore, 21 lists were presented in the system). The participation rate of the candidates was much better among the winning parties and especially among the winning

candidates: 23 percent of all candidates, 30 percent of candidates of major parties and 48 percent of the elected candidates registered in Manobalsas and answered the questionnaire. This is somewhat surprising as the tool seems to be especially advantageous for small parties (see Ladner et al. 2008 for an analysis of the Swiss candidates' participation in Smartvote).

The participation rate among major parties is presented in Table 1. The Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats, the Liberals Movement and the Liberal and Centre Union were the most active. These three parties in general are the most active in using online political communication (e.g. see Appendix 1 for the numbers of party members having their own website or blog). Their attention to online communication tools might be related to the profile of their electorate. These parties appeal most to the educated urban electorate. According to the pre-election survey carried out in March 2008, 78.6 percent of the potential voters of the Liberal and Centre Union and 69.6 percent of voters of the Liberal Movement use the Internet while the average Internet usage rate in Lithuania is 48 percent. Internet use among voters of the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats is somewhat smaller (see Appendix 1), but the party put much effort into online electoral campaigning in the 2008 parliamentary elections in order to improve its image among young voters.

Table 1. The use of Manobalsas by candidates of major parties in the 2008 parliamentary elections

| Party | Number of candidates for the 2008 parliamentary elections | Number of party members registered in the Manobalsas.lt system | Percentage of candidates registered in the Manobalsas.lt system |
|--|---|--|---|
| Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats | 142 | 59 | 41.5 |
| Liberals Movement of the Republic of Lithuania | 101 | 31 | 32.7 |
| Liberal and Centre Union | 141 | 44 | 31.2 |
| National Resurrection Party | 74 | 22 | 29.7 |
| Lithuanian Social Democratic Party | 141 | 32 | 22.7 |
| “Order and Justice” Party (Liberal Democratic Party) | 141 | 30 | 21.3 |
| Labour Party | 68 | 12 | 17.6 |
| New Union (Social Liberals) | 138 | 24 | 17 |
| Union of Lithuanian Peasants and Peoples | 125 | 15 | 12 |

Source: author’s own calculation. Data on the numbers of candidates of the parties drawn from the website of the Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania <<http://www.vrk.lt>>.

The online Manobalsas tool attracted much attention in the media and among voters. During the August 2008 – October 2008 period, the website was visited about 140,000 times. The number of actual users of the system, however, was smaller: only about 60,000 voting recommendations were given during the campaign of the 2008 parliamentary elections. This corresponds to 4.6 percent of the voters in 2008 Lithuanian parliamentary elections. This seems to be a very modest result in comparison with other countries. Relatively low usage of the tool might be explained by the fact that Manobalsas is not sponsored by mass media as it is in many other countries (Walgrave et al., 2009), therefore it only enjoyed momentary attention rather than continuous support from media. Moreover, it was the first time a VAA was used in Lithuania and it was launched only several months before the election.

The online survey of Manobalsas registered users demonstrates that Manobalsas was most popular among the young, better educated urban population (see Appendix 2). The survey reveals Manobalsas had a modest but significant impact on the voting decisions of the users. About 25 percent of users affirm that Manobalsas made a considerable effect on their partisan preference and 19 percent claim that the Manobalsas test influenced their decision when choosing individual candidates (Table 2). Only 39 percent of users state that the results of Manobalsas had no effect on their partisan choice. The numbers for all Manobalsas users, however, would probably be smaller, as the survey was carried out only among the registered users, i.e. those who have registered on the Manobalsas system to be able to save their results and/or to receive updates.

Table 2. The impact of Manobalsas on the voting decision of users

| Impact strength | An impact of the Manobalsas.lt test results on: | |
|---------------------|---|------------------|
| | party choice | candidate choice |
| 1 (no impact) | 38.48% | 49.62% |
| 2 | 15.24% | 14.82% |
| 3 | 21.50% | 16.63% |
| 4 | 16.35% | 11.48% |
| 5 (very big impact) | 8.42% | 7.45% |

Source: online post-election survey of Manobalsas registered users, 2008 (N=1.710)

If the tool has an effect on the voting behaviour of the users, an important question to ask is who are the winners and the losers? Do some parties have an advantage over the others when voters take the results of voting assistance tools seriously? These questions are addressed in the next section of the article after a short overview of the development of the Lithuanian party system.

Ideological Profiles of Lithuanian Parties and Their Performance in Manobalsas

In the 2008 parliamentary elections in Lithuania, seven parties passed the 5 percent electoral threshold in a multimember district (see Table 3) and some additional small parties gained seats in single-member districts. Only three of the parliamentary parties – the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD), the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party (LSDP) and the Liberal Movement (LRLS) – have an explicit ideological commitment and are able to place themselves on the left-right axis. The Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats is a right-wing conservative anti-

communist party with its roots in the national movement of 1988 – 1991, Sąjūdis. The Lithuanian Social Democratic Party is a technocratic catch-all party with a shade of Western style social democratic ideology and ex-communist pragmatism. The Liberal Movement is a liberal and anti-communist party appealing mainly to the young people and the well-off.

Table 3. The results of 2008 parliamentary elections (percent of votes received in a multimember district)

| Party | Votes (%) |
|---|------------------|
| Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats | 19.7 |
| National Resurrection Party | 15.0 |
| “Order and Justice” Party | 12.7 |
| Lithuanian Social Democratic Party | 11.7 |
| Labor Party | 9.0 |
| Liberal Movement | 5.7 |
| Liberal and Center Union | 5.3 |

Source: The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania
<http://www.vrk.lt>.

The ideological profile of the other two parliamentary parties – the Liberal and Centre Union (LiCS) and the “Order and Justice” Party (TT) – is much more complicated. Neither of them decisively identifies their position on the left-right axis but they still might be defined as “programmatic” parties with somewhat distinctive ideological profiles. The Liberal and Centre Union balances between liberal ideology and romantic nationalism. The profile of the “Order and Justice” Party is an odd mixture of populist right – wing and pro-Russian orientations (Ramonaitė, forthcoming).

The last two parties – the Labour Party and the National Resurrection Party could be described as “instant-catch-all parties” (see Innes, 2002). Innes describes an “instant-catch-all” party as one that avoids programmatic competition and adopts the identity that permits them maximal programmatic flexibility.

The Labour Party (DP) was a winner of the 2004 parliamentary elections with almost 30 percent of the votes in a multimember district. The party was established by a well-known businessman in Lithuania. It is a

catch-all party without any specific ideological or programmatic profile. Its success in the 2004 elections was based on the popularity of its charismatic leader Viktor Uspaskich and on its anti-establishment rhetoric (Jurkynas, 2005, Ramonaitė, 2006). After participating in a ruling coalition with Social Democrats and getting entangled in some financial scandals it lost popularity and received only 9 percent of the votes in the 2008 elections.

The National Resurrection Party (TPP) is a newcomer in Lithuanian politics. While the party was established only several months before the 2008 parliamentary elections, it received 15 percent of the votes in a multimember district and became one of the winners of the elections. The party is led by a popular showman, the host of several television shows, Arūnas Valinskas. Most of the parliamentary candidates of the party have no experience in politics. They come mostly from the entertainment or business spheres.

The party ran an ingenious electoral campaign breaking the conventional rules of political rhetoric and using the popularity and image of its members and leader (Jurkynas, 2009, Kavaliauskaitė 2009). During the electoral campaign, the party did not present any electoral programme. The electoral manifesto of the party consisted of 10 “commandments”, explaining little about the goals of the party or its policy positions. Surprisingly, the party not only avoided any ideological self-identification, but also escaped traditional populist rhetoric. Instead, they focused their electoral campaign on making a parody of political advertising (ideological as well as populist) unmaking and subverting artificial political slogans and deconstructing the reality of political simulacra (Kavaliauskaitė, 2009).

How successful were the main Lithuanian parties in the Manobalsas system? Figure 1 presents the results of the first 13,400 users of the Manobalsas system. The figure shows how often a party was presented as the best match for the users of Manobalsas. The results are striking. The National Resurrection Party is far advanced from the other parliamentary parties. It sprang up as the first match in more than 20 percent of cases and it had the best result among all 20 parties. Its average congruence with the users score is 65 percent and this is also the best result among all parties.

The performance of other parliamentary parties was much worse. The Liberals Movement is the second among the parliamentary parties and the fifth among all parties according to the “best match” score but its result according to the average rank is much worse. The results of the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats are rather good bearing in mind the demography of the Manobalsas users and the conservative stance of the party on questions such as family relations, abortion, professional army, etc.

The performance of the Social Democrats was the poorest among all parliamentary parties.

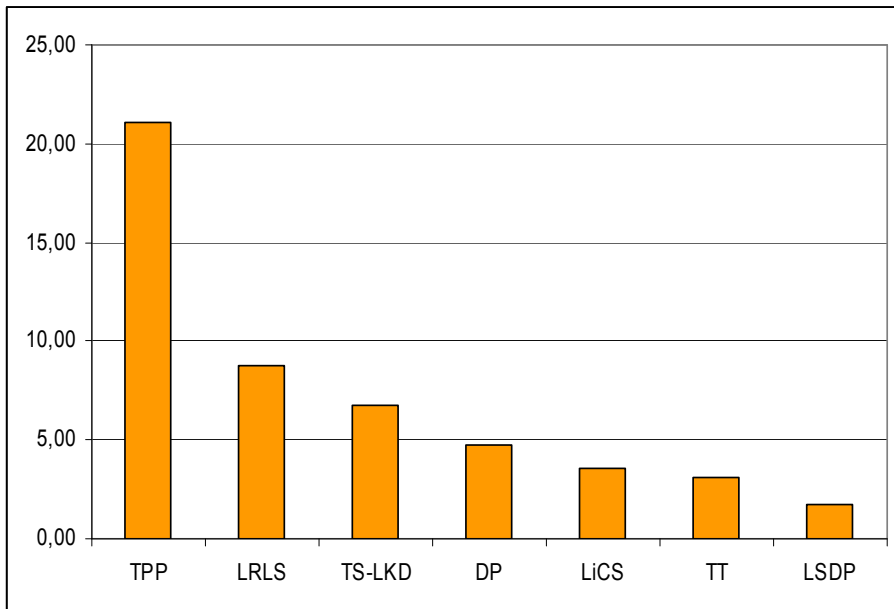


Figure 1. The frequency a party appeared as the best match in Manobalsas (in percentages)*

Source: the Manobalsas database, N=13,418

Note: *Only parliamentary parties are presented in the figure. For the acronyms of the parties see Appendix 3.

Figure 2 shows the differences in the distribution of the order of priority among the “ideological” parties. It reveals that the Liberal Movement has a secure ideological niche among internet users even if its political attitudes do not correspond well to the beliefs of an average user. The Social Democrats, in contrast, appeared most often in the middle of the Manobalsas recommendation list. It implies that the set of political orientations of the party is not competitive among Manobalsas users. The results of the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats are the most evenly distributed.

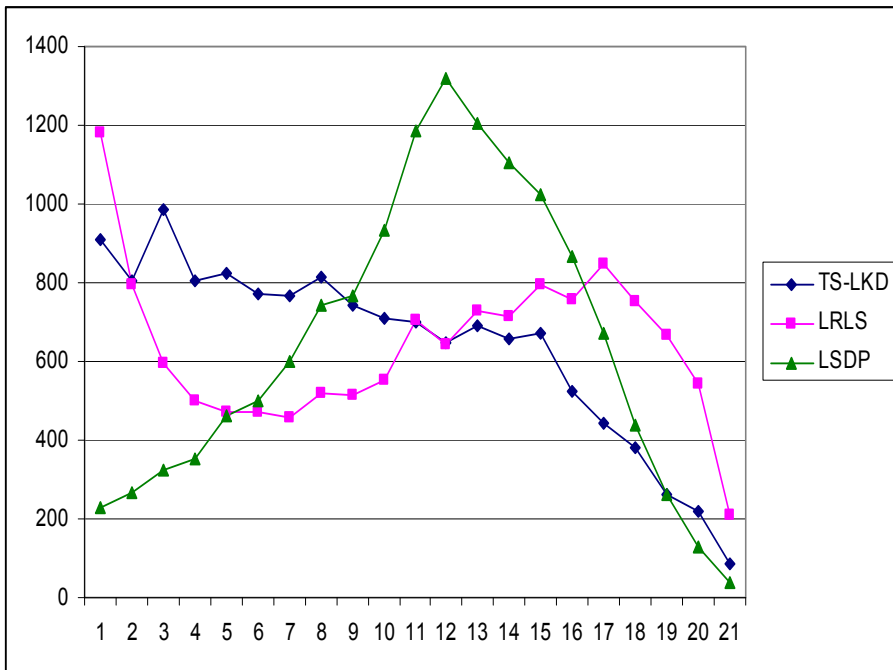


Figure 2. The distribution of the order of priority (from 1 to 21) in the Manobalsas voting recommendation list among the “ideological” parties (in absolute numbers, N=13,418)

Source: the Manobalsas database of N=13,418

The performance of the non-ideological Labor Party differs surprisingly from the results of the National Resurrection Party (see Figure 3). It appeared on the top of the party match list only 636 times out of 13,418, while the National Resurrection Party was on the top 2,822 times. What accounts for these differences? Why was the National Resurrection Party much more successful than the “ideological” parties and why did other non-ideological parties perform much worse?

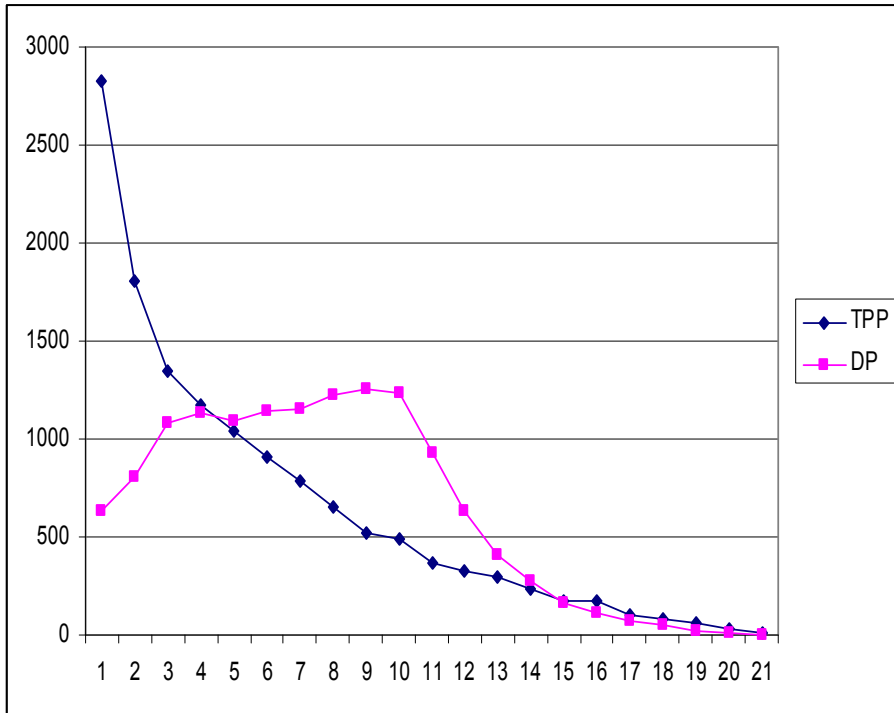


Figure 3. The distribution of the order of priority (from 1 to 21*) in the Manobalsas voting recommendation list among the “non-ideological” parties (in absolute numbers, N=13,418)

Source: the Manobalsas database, N=13,418

The Structure of Political Attitudes of Lithuanian Parties

The National Resurrection Party seems to have had an advantage over the other parties since it had no constraints with regard to choosing the best strategy as it is a new party without a history and without any ideological or programmatic profile. Moreover, the leaders of the party could have had more influence on the answers of its members as they have no political experience or political reputation. As can be seen from Table 4, the standard deviation of the answers of the party is much lower than that of other parties. Since the party had no electoral programme at all, this suggests that the party candidates might have received guidance by the party on how to answer the questions.

Table 4. Mean standard deviation of the answers of party members to the Manobalsas questionnaire

| Party | Mean StD |
|--|-----------------|
| Labour Party | 1.05 |
| Liberal and Center Union | 1.12 |
| Liberals Movement of the Republic of Lithuania | 1.16 |
| Lithuanian Social Democratic Party | 1.18 |
| Party “Order and Justice” (Liberal Democratic Party) | 1.13 |
| Party of National Resurrection | 0.61 |
| Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats | 0.98 |

But what is the best strategy a party could use to manipulate the results of the Voting Advice Application? In what respect do the answers of the National Resurrection Party differ from the answers of other parties? Exploratory factor analysis suggests that the specific feature of the beliefs of this party is an absence of ideological consistency.

Political ideology is usually defined as an internally consistent belief system (Converse, 1964, Merelman, 1969; Feldman, 1988; Jost 2006). The main and the most important attribute of “ideology” is consistency or “constraint” (Gerring, 1997). In other words, ideology is a coherent and relatively stable system of ideas and values that are bound together rather than a random collection of values and policy positions.

In general, the positions of the Lithuanian parties appeared to be ideologically consistent as the socio-economic variables loaded together in a single left-right factor; and most variables of morality and tolerance loaded into the liberalism – conservatism factor. In addition, questions on the country’s communist past and relations with Russia loaded into a specifically Lithuanian “soviet – anti-Soviet” index. The National Resurrection Party, however, does not fit into this pattern.

In contrast to the Labour Party, which adopted a moderate position on most of the questions, the National Resurrection Party took a radical stance on almost all issues. On most socio-economic questions the National Resurrection Party took a radical left-wing stance, except on the questions of social solidarity, i.e. it claims to stand for an extended welfare state and

marker regulation, but it opposes the introduction of a progressive tax rate and tax on real estate. Figure 3 illustrates the positions of the parties on the questions of social welfare and the questions of wealth redistribution. While the other parties have chosen a reasonable combination of those two interrelated dimensions, the National Resurrection Party ignored the trade-off between more expansive social welfare and increased taxes, and occupied a populist position.

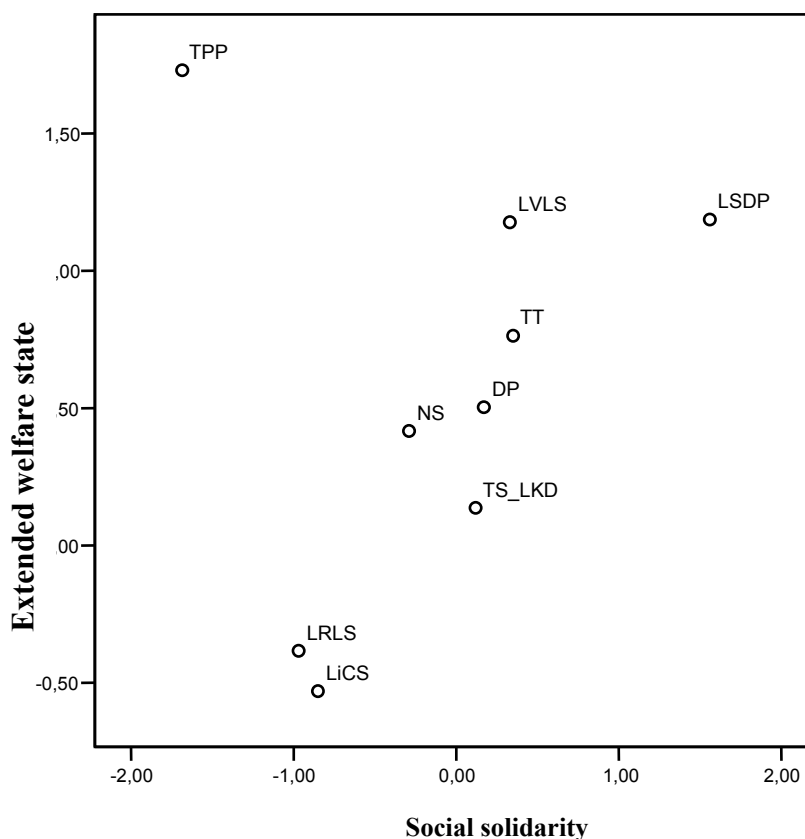


Figure 4. Party positions on the dimensions of an extended welfare state and social solidarity

Source: Manobalsas.lt

Note: for the components of the indexes see Appendix 4.

On the questions of morality and personal freedom, it took a radical right-wing position as it opposed same-sex marriages and the use of non-Lithuanian place-names in the districts dominated by ethnic minorities. The

party does not support the Christian Democrats or nationalist parties, however, when it comes to the issues of abortion and military service, i.e. the questions about traditional moral constraints and moral commitment to the nation state. Such a populist position, however, is typical of some other parties as well (see Figure 5).

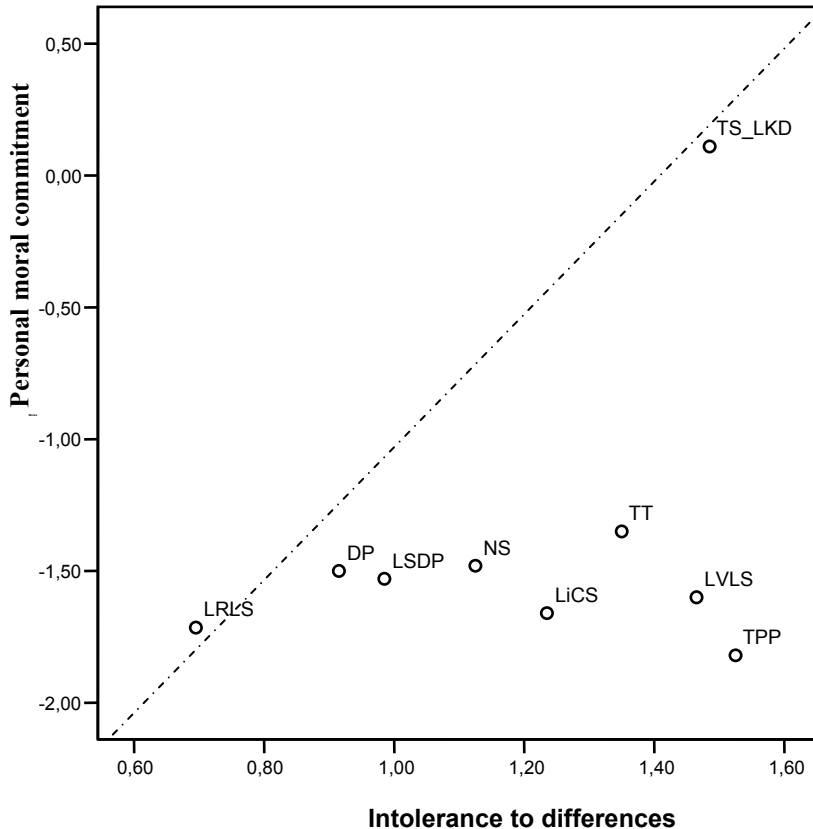


Figure 5. Party positions on the dimensions of personal moral commitment and intolerance to differences

Source: Manobalsas.lt

Note: for the components of the indexes see Appendix 4.

Finally, the National Resurrection Party together with the “Order and Justice” Party subverted the logic of the ex-communist – anti-communist political cleavage that had long been structuring the Lithuanian party system. The party supports harsh lustration (i.e. vetting of individuals for links with communist security services and exclusion of collaborators from certain

public offices, see Letki, 2002, David, 2003), but, in contrast to other right-wing anti-communist parties, it is much more pragmatic on the question of relations with Russia (see Figure 6).

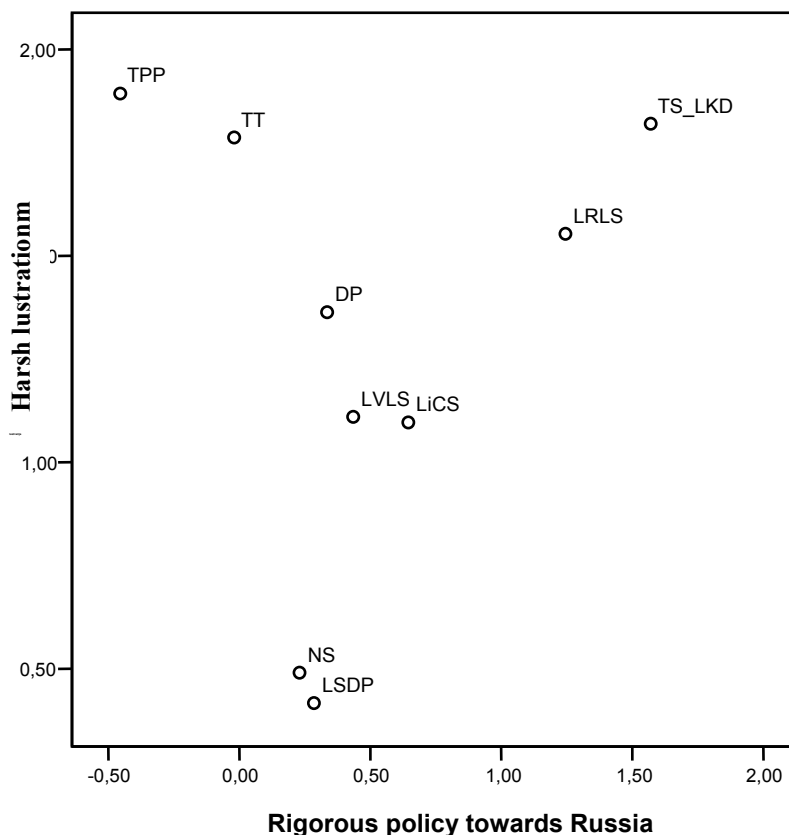


Figure 6. Party positions on the dimensions of harsh lustration and rigorous policy towards Russia

Source: Manobalsas.lt

Note: for the components of the indexes see Appendix 4.

Why was the ideologically unconstrained orientation of the National Resurrection Party so advantageous? To answer this question, we should go back to the long-standing discussion on the capacity of the mass electorate, the stability and consistency of mass political beliefs (see Converse, 1964, 2000, Axelrod, 1967, Feldman, 1988, Jost, 2006 among others) and the relations between partisan preference and political attitudes (Campbell et al., 1960).

Partisan Preference and Political Attitudes: Reversing the Relationship

Voting assistance tools are developed under an implicit assumption that voters (as well as parties) have stable and coherent attitudes on political issues. Empirical investigation on the capacity of voters, however, does not support this assumption. It has long been argued by political scientists that voters are usually badly informed on political issues and their opinions are not stable. As Philip E. Converse claims, “all data show that a small minority of population is very well informed and attentive to events” (Converse, 2000: 350).

Moreover, exhaustive empirical research⁹ suggests that the majority of voters exhibit a low level of ideological consistency in their attitudes. Usually people tend to view each policy issue independently of the other and only a small percentage of people are able to think ideologically (Axelrod, 1967). The ability of “ideological thinking” has been proven to be related to an individual’s level of education and political involvement. Therefore, the attitudes of political activists and elected politicians are usually much more stable and intercorrelated in comparison with ordinary citizens (for an overview of this discussion, see Merelman, 1969, Jost et al., 2009).

Even though there is some evidence that the underlying structure of mass political attitudes might be related to some personality characteristics and existential needs (Jost et al. 2009) or might be based on core beliefs and values, the dominant trend in political science claims that “political attitudes and beliefs are organized into coherent structures by political elites for consumption by the public” (Feldman, 1988: 417). Moreover, the parties are claimed to be principal “opinion - forming agencies” supplying cues on specific policy issues for poorly informed individuals (Campbell et al, 1960, Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000).

It implies a completely different logic of democratic process in comparison with the implicit logic of voting assistance tools. Traditionally ideological packages were socially constructed by political elites and offered to voters as political alternatives. Using a “Smartvote” tool, a voter, in contrast, assembles a (most often incoherent) package of attitudes and beliefs *himself* and then compares it with the help of modern information technologies to the package offered by a party. As a consequence, if voters are non-ideological, “Smartvote” voting assistance tools seem to be most advantageous to non-ideological populist or opportunistic parties.¹⁰

⁹ Most research, however, is focused on American voters.

¹⁰ When analysing the structure of beliefs of American voters, Axelrod (1967) has found that the only relatively coherent dimension of public beliefs is a “populist” dimension consisting of supportive attitudes towards government aid to education, medical care and

This might not be a particular problem in democracies with high party identification among voters and a relatively closed “electoral market.” However, “in conditions of persistent instant-catch-all competition,” which is an attribute of post-communist countries (Innes, 2002), the use of ‘Smartvote’ type voting assistance tools might contribute to further destabilisation of the party system. Moreover, if parties use the tool for short term strategic electoral purposes, the application of the tool might reduce rather than increase accountability of parties to the voters as they are not likely to bother about or aim to keep their (inconsistent) promises.

Conclusions

In recent years, representative democracy has faced numerous challenges such as a decrease in voter turnout, an increase in electoral volatility and the erosion of party identification (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000, Norris 2002). As parties are less and less able to “encapsulate” and to tie together their supporters, voters are faced with the more and more complex task of making a voting decision. Moreover, as electoral campaigns are becoming more and more intense, voters are increasingly overloaded with information. If casting a ballot becomes more complicated and time-consuming, however, the motivation of the citizens to participate in elections tends to decrease.

Voting assistance tools seem to provide a smart and convenient solution to the problem. They diminish electoral costs for voters as they save time required for the collection of relevant information. Moreover, as they are a purely informative and scientifically based form of electoral advertising, VAAs appear to lead to more reasoned and responsible voting decision by citizens. Focusing attention on the policy positions of parties, voting assistance tools might reduce the importance of images and personality traits in electoral campaigns. In addition, VAAs are expected to increase the accountability of representatives.

This article, however, suggests that voting assistance tools do not necessarily lead to a “better” voting decision or to better governance. The VAAs are based on an implicit assumption that voters have consistent and stable political attitudes, which has been empirically proven to be highly disputable if not false. If, however, voters are not well-informed and do not have articulate and coherent attitudes on many political issues, the results of VAA testing may be misleading. Moreover, the use of voting assistance

government guarantees of jobs and demands for cutting taxes, firing suspect Communists and avoiding foreign involvement. This dimension is surprisingly reminiscent of the policy positions of the National Resurrection Party in Lithuania.

tools might foster populism as it generates incentives among the parties to follow the public instead of trying to convince them (see also Walgrave et al. 2006; Wagner and Ruusivirta, 2009).

The analysis of the use of the Manobalsas voting advice application in Lithuania suggests that parties might be able to manipulate the results of the tool by adopting non-ideological (i.e. ideologically unconstrained) populist policy positions. The remarkable success of the National Resurrection Party in the Lithuanian Manobalsas system demonstrates that VAAs might be advantageous to non-ideological and non-programmatic parties which are most able to adjust to the attitudes of an “average” voter. If working out the best strategy of using VAAs is possible and potentially applied by political parties, the tool appears to lose its “purely informative” nature and thus, it could hardly lead to more responsive government.

The purpose of this article was not to refute the positive potential of voting assistance tools. Rather, it aims to point out the possible negative consequences of VAAs, in particular in post-communist democracies with unstable party systems dominated by non-programmatic parties. These potential consequences should be carefully considered when thinking about future development of the tool. Special improvements of VAAs might be suggested to prevent the manipulation of the results by populist parties, e.g. the introduction of automatic warnings for users when they choose inconsistent policy positions, etc. The combination of the Voting Advice Applications with online deliberative tools should also be considered.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Lithuanian politicians online during the 2008 parliamentary election campaign

| Party | Number of party members with their own website or blog* | Percentage of potential parties' electorate who use the internet** |
|--|---|--|
| Liberal and Centre Union | 11 | 78.6 |
| Liberals Movement of the Republic of Lithuania | 13 | 69.6 |
| Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats | 12 | 49.2 |
| “Order and Justice” Party (Liberal Democratic Party) | 1 | 35.1 |
| Lithuanian Social Democratic Party | 2 | 46.5 |
| National Resurrection Party | 0 | - |
| Labour Party | 3 | 35.4 |
| Union of Lithuanian Peasants and Peoples | 5 | 36.4 |
| New Union (Social Liberals) | 5(14)* | 58.6 |

Source: * author's own calculations, **pre-election survey carried out in March 2008.

Appendix 2. Users of Manobalsas according to age (in percentages)

| Age group | percentages |
|--------------|-------------|
| Less than 18 | 2.34% |
| 18-24 | 39.01% |
| 25-30 | 21.40% |
| 31-40 | 17.49% |
| 41-50 | 11.17% |
| 51-60 | 6.84% |
| More than 60 | 1.75% |

Users of Manobalsas according to place of settlement (in percentages)

| Settlement | |
|-------------------|--------|
| Vilnius | 50.29% |
| Kaunas | 16.37% |
| Klaipėda | 3.92% |
| Šiauliai | 3.22% |
| Panevėžys | 2.87% |
| Alytus | 1.93% |
| Other town | 9.42% |
| Village | 5.91% |
| Foreign Country | 3.74% |
| Other | 2.34% |

Users of Manobalsas according to education (in percentages)

| Education | |
|----------------------|--------|
| Higher | 77.02% |
| Secondary | 16.14% |
| Secondary vocational | 6.84% |

Appendix 3. Acronyms and names of Lithuanian parties

| | |
|---|---------|
| Homeland Union - Lithuanian Christian Democrats Tėvynės sąjunga - Lietuvos krikščionys demokratai | TS- LKD |
| Labour Party Darbo partija | DP |
| Liberal and Centre Union Liberalų ir centro sąjunga | LiCS |
| Liberals Movement of the Republic of Lithuania Lietuvos Respublikso liberalų sąjūdis | LRLS |
| Lithuanian Social Democratic Party Lietuvos socialdemokratų partija | LSDP |
| New Union (Social Liberals) Naujoji sąjunga (socialliberalai) | NS |
| “Order and Justice” Party (Liberal Democratic Party) Partija “Tvarka ir teisingumas” (liberalai demokratai) | TT |
| National Resurrection Party Tautos prisikėlimo partija | TPP |
| Union of Lithuanian Peasants and Peoples Lietuvos valstiečių liaudininkų sąjunga | LVLS |

Appendix 4. The components and reliability of the indexes

Table 1. The components of the index of an extended welfare state

| |
|---|
| Do you agree that people should pay for most health care services? (reversed) |
| Do you agree that the majority of students should pay for higher education? (reversed) |
| Do you agree that the government should reduce social transfers and devote this money for training people, promoting entrepreneurship and investments? (reversed) |
| Cronbach's alpha – 0.86 |

Table 2. The components of the index of social solidarity

| |
|--|
| Should Lithuania use a progressive tax system? |
| Should Lithuania introduce real estate tax? |
| Cronbach's alpha – 0.76 |

Table 3. The components of the index of personal moral commitment

| |
|--|
| Do you support banning abortions? |
| Do you support substituting obligatory military service with a professional military service? (reversed) |
| Cronbach's alpha – 0.97 |

Table 4. The components of the index of intolerance to differences

| |
|---|
| Do you support the legalisation of same-sex marriages? |
| Do you agree that in Lithuanian regions with a majority Polish population the names of geographic location should be written in both the Lithuanian and Polish languages? |
| Cronbach's alpha – 0.69 |

Table 5. The components of the index of harsh lustration

| |
|--|
| Do you agree that there should be restrictions for people who cooperated with Soviet secret services to work in governmental and educational institutions? |
| Do you agree that people who were in the KGB reserves should not be allowed to get important positions in the government? |
| Do you agree that Soviet archives should be accessible without restrictions? |
| Cronbach's alpha – 0.87 |

Table 6. The components of the index of a rigorous policy towards Russia

| |
|--|
| Do you agree that Lithuania should demand Russia to provide compensation for the harmful actions of the Soviet regime even if this would have a negative impact on Lithuanian Russian relationships? |
| Do you agree that Lithuania should strongly support Georgia's and Ukraine's membership in NATO? |
| Cronbach's alpha – 0.74 |

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