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Depiction of Childlessness in Lithuanian Mass Media from 2011–2016: A Catalyst of Modernization

Abstract

Demographic research shows the increase of childlessness rates among women born in 1970 in comparison to those born in 1953 in Lithuania, but cultural aspects influencing reproductive behavior are under-explored. To our knowledge, the representation of childlessness in the Lithuanian mass media has not been studied yet. The aim of this article is to analyze how childlessness is depicted in the most popular mass media from 2011–2016. Our research revealed that the discourse of childlessness is undeveloped, and the depiction of voluntary childlessness is dominating. It is portrayed favorably as a modern behavior, space for which consolidation is created challenging traditional social norms. Thus Lithuanian media appear as a part of global media that promotes imitative trends of social change.

Keywords: childlessness, voluntary childlessness, involuntary childlessness, media analysis

1. Introduction

Internationally, Lithuania is considered as a typical country of Central and Eastern Europe with a low level of childlessness due to prevailing pronatalist attitudes (Merz & Liefbroer, 2012; Miettinen, Rotkirch, Szalma, Donno & Tanturri, 2015). According to the European Value Study (2017), over half of the Lithuanian population agrees with the statement that a woman has to have a child in order to have a fulfilled life. However, the share of childless women in Lithuania is increasing: 5.6 % of women, born in 1953, had no children in comparison to 12.4% born in 1970 (Gedvilaite-Kordusiene, Tretjakova & Ubareviciene 2019). Western European countries report up to 20% of childlessness rate among women ending their reproductive age (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017). Reproductive behavior depends on the cultural context (Nauck, 2015), it is therefore important to study the cultural aspects of this phenomenon. However, this type of research in Lithuania is still limited (Leonaviciute, 2012; Maslauskaite, 2002), and as far as we know the representation of childlessness in the media has not been studied at all.

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The aim of this study is to analyze the discourse of childlessness in the most popular mass media in Lithuania from 2011-2016 and its social context. The objectives of the study are to examine, how the topic of childlessness is presented, what is its context, what meanings are attributed to it, and to consider whether the mass media presentation of childlessness is realistic, and whether it reflects a broader social change.

1.1. Mass media content as an object of analysis

What does media content analysis give? On the one hand, media, as a part of a wider culture, allow touching on “common meanings”, “known meanings and aspects” circulating in a particular society (Stevenson, 1995, p. 11-12). On the other hand, beside describing the world, media “provide basic categorical frameworks through which we apprehend it” (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 129). It means also implication of an ideological power to present society in a way that “seems the only ‘natural’ way to comprehend it” (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 129).

Social reality is constructed in communicative processes (Hepp, 2012), and interaction within and between institutions takes places via the media (Hjarvard, 2008). The choice of mediated content is influenced by various factors, such as: the entertainment function beside of information, as well as the pursuit of the profit of media companies, which limits the content unfavourable for advertising, the content that does not encourage purchase and is not interesting for potential buyers, as well as the global concentration of media ownership which allows to transmit news in a variety of media and in a variety of ways (Berry, Wharf-Higgins & Naylor, 2007; McManus, 2002; Gamson et al., 1992; Bagdikian, 1990). Understanding this specificity of media encourages researchers to critically evaluate the analyzed content, especially because the content that is being mediated does not yet provide knowledge on how it is perceived and accepted by audience, as the latter has limited possibilities to participate in creation of media content, particularly in respect to the largest news websites in Lithuania (Stonkiene, Supa, Janiuniene, 2018).

1.2. Forms of childlessness and some features of their prevalence

Childlessness is a complex phenomenon. As resulting from different factors, it is distinguished between involuntary childlessness (mainly infertility), intended childlessness (when people do not intend to have children), voluntary childlessness (the “childfree”, who consider zero as a personal ideal number of children), and temporary childlessness related to circumstantial or delayed childbearing (Miettinen et al., 2015; Graham, Hill, Shelly & Taket, 2013). In reality, these theoretical distinctions are not always evident. It is difficult to estimate the level of possible agency in such important circumstances as lack of a suitable partner, and voluntary postponement of pregnancy tend to become involuntary childlessness (Miettinen et al., 2015; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008; Rowland, 1998).

The research shows that most childlessness is unwished: intentional and especially voluntary childlessness is rare throughout Europe (Miettinen et al., 2015). Only a few individuals plan to never have children (Goldstein, Kreyenfeld, Jasilioniene & Orsal, 2013; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008), and even fewer realize such a plan (Moore, 2017), more people postpone childbearing until it does not happen (Berrington, 2004). Childlessness is often caused by a mix of circumstances or an adjustment to life events, such as infertility, poor health, lack of partner or partnership dissolution (Gray, Evans & Reimondos, 2013; Heaton, Jacobson &

Holland, 1999). Even among younger generations having children is strongly related to traditional fertility and marital indicators: proportions of ever married, the average mean age at marriage and delayed entry into motherhood (Miettinen et al., 2015). Thus, the research findings contradict the stereotypical image of a highly-educated and career-oriented childless woman, as childlessness is not associated with higher gender equity, nor the proportion of women participating in the labour market, but the unwanted childlessness may be concentrated among those lacking social economical resources (Miettinen et al., 2015; Maher & Dever, 2004). The uncertainty in employment was found to be related to cohabitation, delay of marriage and postponement of childbearing (Mills & Blossfeld, 2013; Vignoli, Tocchioni & Salvini, 2016; Barbieri, Bozzon, Scherer, Grotti & Lugo, 2015).

1.3. Features of social change in Lithuania

Speaking about the social processes that took place in Lithuania after the Restoration of Independence in 1990, the typology of orientations of post-communist change created by M. P. Saulauskas (2000) and applied to political-economic life is useful: continuity (in relation to the former communist regime), restitution (restoration), imitation, and innovation. The restorative orientation was particularly pronounced during the first years of independence when the earlier constitution was symbolically revived, as well as the attempt to restore old parties, and particular attention was paid to the redevelopment of national identity. Restitutive orientation was also evident in the revival of interwar family values, in strengthening patriarchal models of public and private domain division (Stankuniene & Maslauskaitė, 2008). As such direction would have been a way to nowhere, since Europe was no longer pre-war, the restorative orientation was soon replaced by an imitative one (Norkus, 2008, p. 336).

These orientations of social change are also seen in other contexts, for example: A. Maslauskaitė (2002), who analyzed women's magazines, found that from 1990-1994 the orientation of continuity prevailed reiterating the discourse of Soviet women's magazines, and between 1995-1998 imitative orientation emerged manifested in copying Western media. Our collected data on the depiction of childlessness show the influence of restorative orientation in women's magazines from 1991-1996, when the goal was restoring traditional interwar values, pronatalist attitudes towards family and fighting abortion as a family planning means that was prevalent in the Soviet era (more widely analyzed in a separate article). In the period between 2011–2016, the imitative orientation was especially significant due to the interception of Western attitudes, values and even direct reprinting of articles with little connection to life in Lithuania. In this article, we will focus on the most recent period and will analyze how childlessness was portrayed in the most popular media between 2011-2016 while applying both quantitative and qualitative content analysis to 431 and 110 mass media articles accordingly. The findings of current research surprisingly revealed that in quantitative terms, the discourse of childlessness is undeveloped, and contentwise, it is depicted predominantly as voluntary.

2. Content analysis of childlessness discourse in Lithuanian mass media

2.1. Research data and quantitative content analysis

For the semantic quantitative content analysis of mass media childlessness presentations, 431 articles on childlessness were selected from the most visited web portals (www.delfi.lt, www.lrytas.lt, www.15min.lt) and texts from all women's magazines ("Moteris", "Ji", "Laima", "Cosmopolitan") as well as from magazines "□mones", "Psichologija Tau" published on the Internet between 2011-2016. For the selection of articles, the following keywords were used: *childlessness, childless, without children, does not have children, not having children, unable to have children, unwilling to have children*. After discarding 7 repetitions, 424 articles were analyzed (10 articles from lrytas.lt, 89 articles from 15min.lt, 187 articles from delfi.lt, and 138 articles from women's magazines published on the Internet).

The semantic analysis of selected articles was carried out by the quantitative content analysis software HAMLET II 3.0 (Brier, Hopp, 2015). The program calculates frequencies of the relevant words and their binary combinations within semantic units across the material. Based on the analysis of words' frequencies it provides combinations of words (termed 'clusters') that were most often used in the articles. The cluster analysis showed that childlessness and words related to it are only marginal in the collected material. The level of inclusion of the keyword childless in the hierarchical cluster dendrogram is significantly less than 0.5, so its relationships with other keyword groups cannot be analyzed. In addition, when comparing the frequencies of the keywords used, it turns out that the theme of childlessness is overshadowed by the topics of: marriage, family, motherhood, infertility, women and many others. In the material, 1,410 words attributed to the keyword marriage were found, 2,008 words attributed to the keyword family, 732 – motherhood, 3,289 – woman or female, 1,134 – father, 430 – infertility, while words attributed to the keyword childless – only 267. Thus, the quantitative analysis of the collected texts revealed that the discourse of childlessness in the analyzed media is marginal, overwhelmed by family, maternity and other topics. The quantitative analysis was followed by qualitative content analysis of the collected material.

2.2. Qualitative content analysis

From the available samples, for further qualitative content analysis, articles were selected, where the main topic was childlessness; 110 such articles were found. According to the headlines and topics covered there, the texts were divided into preliminary sub-themes: the dominance of voluntary childlessness (54 articles) and peripheral of the inability to have children (16 articles), infertility (14 articles), laws (16 articles) and residual miscellaneous (10 articles). In general, these texts have a high degree of eclecticism, as is typical of the media, "the messages provide a many-voiced, open text that can and often is read oppositionally, at least in part" (Gamson et al., 1992, p. 373), they have quite a lot of tension and conflict – the questioning of implicit assumptions and contradictory reasoning. Although our position as researchers of childlessness discourse could be described as typical sociological, based on the assumption of dialectic between social structure and the actor (Girkontaite, 2018), the material analyzed astonishes at the lack of structures (perhaps due to emerging discourse?) and the abundance of actors – both active in their expression and invoked, whose views are rested upon, as well as latent ones that use the first two for their purposes (which can only be guessed by the reader).

In the dominant group of articles on voluntary childlessness, an especially abundant subgroup emerged which we called Experts' (or Quasi-Experts', because their data was often presented without indicating their sources, when and where the data were collected, incorrectly commenting on the statistics, etc.). This category consisted of 21 articles, which referred to psychologists and their experience of clinical work and research (9 articles), sociologists and public opinion polls (6 articles), opinion leaders or famous people (4 articles), as well as a demographer and philosopher (one article each). A wide range of reasons for childlessness is discussed: psychological, health, social, economic, ecological, etc. Mainly American sources were cited – scientific research, survey results, speeches of famous people, etc. They are complemented by interviews with Lithuanian researchers and prominent women reflecting expansion of celebrities' communication culture (Siudikiene, 2018). The other 19 articles of the Voluntary Childlessness sub-group consisted of readers' opinions, arguments for childlessness, specific experiences of personages (sterilization, abortions, etc.). To this subgroup, we also attributed articles, where the wish to have children was considered (14 articles). During the second round of reading of each group of articles, simple manual coding of relevant topics took place. Closely related topics were joined into thematic groups, f.i., in the dominant group of articles about voluntary childlessness emerged following themes: challenging maternity as woman's mission and traditional concept of family, features and advantages of childlessness, modern concept of maternity/paternity, gender roles in child raising, etc., which are discussed below.

2.3. Questioning the traditional family image and maternity as a woman's mission

In the articles on voluntary childlessness, the social norms to want and to have children, and family as a source for feminine realization and happiness, are questioned. The readers became familiar with Leslie Lafayette, who experienced social exclusion due to infertility and popularized voluntary childlessness by establishing a peer organization that has developed into a child-free movement. She questioned the traditional social norm to have children by raising questions: *"Why do I need children? Why should I dedicate my life to children?"* and affirmed that *"Biology is not a destiny and rearing is a choice"* [39, the Italics citation is retrieved from the Corpus (Appendix 1)]. In the articles analysed, emphasis is placed on the relativity of the social norms to have children and reviewing the historical change of value attributed to them. From the voice of readers both the social norm to want children and the social pressure to have them are questioned. Actress Jennifer Aniston, who has no children, observes that *"our value is essentially related to marital status, to whether we have children"* [11].

In questioning the concept of maternity as a woman's mission, the articles introduce women who did not feel any maternal instinct, as if to deny the implicit contextual pronatalist assumptions – a myth about its existence (*"I did not want any, in any way! I don't have any maternal instincts,"* artistic director Galina Dauguvityte [28]). They contradict the implied argument of biological determinancy and they compare maternity with profession (*"Not every woman with a uterus must have children, as not every person with vocal chords must be a singer"*, Gloria Steinem [39]). It is opposed to the implicit, rarely named, but even more seldom represented (e.g. by a politician) traditional approach to family and women.

In the article "Mother's Confession: Better I'd Never Had Children" a single mother of four deplors that she has children. She claims she speaks for hundreds of other women, who *"thought they were doing the right thing"*, who *"did not finish their education, married young and gave birth to too many children"* [16]. She hoped that she would find herself and satis-

faction in marriage and children, as many people had promised, but it proved that “*motherhood is hard work*” [16]. Life demystifies the ideal of motherhood. It turns out that ideal motherhood is achievable only for some women, socially more privileged: “*I fight against what motherhood has become. It is a true meritocracy, most ‘ideally’ functioning for those who have been lucky to have money, time, family support and a dedicated partner.*” [16]. Probably the most difficult thing is to accept children as a consequence of a choice that you did not consciously make.

The media articles also question a widespread perception in society that a successful family life is impossible without children. On the contrary, they provide research findings that childless people avoid the decline of satisfaction with marriage, which occurs in couples with children until they grow up [27], and the coming of the firstborn reduces life satisfaction more than divorce, job loss or partner death [4]. In addition, childless people are happier because they can allocate all resources (time, money) only for themselves. It is said that adults without children especially value freedom, avoid self-restraint or commitment. Often there are deep psychological causes, such as a painful childhood, which you don’t want replicated for your own children (“*A man dreaming about the world without children symbolically shows the desire that there not be a childhood like his,*” said psychologist Katerina Cimbala [27]), or younger brothers and sisters were already grown, so they had experienced maternity/paternity in their lives.

Family, including children, is seen first and foremost as the space of a pure relationship – physical, psychological, intellectual and moral. The articles discuss who are bigger egoists – those willing or unwilling to have children. An argument for childlessness becomes the lack of love (“*My parents never loved me*” [2]) as well as its excess shared with the children of others (“*I really like to be with children – otherwise I wouldn’t go to schools,*” Ilze Butkute [28]). Based on scientific research, in the articles it is affirmed that “*most unexpected children are not sufficiently loved by their parents,*” scholar Jennifer Barber [34] and at the same time assured that “*all childless people love children very much*” [5], but do not dare to give birth, because “*they are afraid to raise an unhappy child, they feel too much responsibility*” [5] etc. There are extreme cases of abortions and sterilization in order not to undermine existing partner relationships or marriages. It is noted, however, that the gap between the happiness of parents and childless people revealed by research is the greatest in countries with weak family policies and inadequate support for parents, i.e., in the US and UK [4; 24].

To sum up, the mass media provides rational arguments which challenge traditional pronatalist social norms protecting family and reproduction, which demystify motherhood revealing such less socially accepted feelings as regretting it (Donath, 2015a; 2015b; 2017). The significance of maternity is reduced to that of possible experiences, a wide range of which is offered by today’s world (entertainment, travel, self-education, etc.). In such a way, mass media makes space for introducing and legitimating voluntary childlessness as equally valuable *Otherness*.

2.4. Voluntary childlessness as a modern concept

Voluntary destitution from children in the articles is presented as an equivalent alternative to the traditional family model, discussing its advantages (free disposal of own time, financial resources, opportunities to foster interests, hobbies, more rest, privacy, etc.). It is emphasized that life without children can be meaningful, and a woman can be of full value.

In this way, the aim is to legitimize and consolidate childlessness as an equal form of life (*“It is normal not to want children because man is not animal indeed, he must be free”* [31]). In order to strengthen the weight of these views, the articles use global stars – Hollywood actors and politicians who say they never wanted to have children and are happy (*“I will not be less of a personality because I have no children,”* Dita Von Teese [10]).

Today’s childlessness is portrayed as a part of a modern, consciously created life project (Giddens, 2000), the result of considerations, reflections and choices (*“Every woman can model her life without putting it in a well-established diagram”* [13]). To remain childless is a conscious decision of educated people. Realizing their limited potential that to do everything of high quality is impossible, especially keeping in mind increasing professional specialization, growing professional requirements and a widening range of possible activities. So, educated people choose other priorities – to devote their lives to interesting work, science or creativity, travel, care of self and/or partner. In the modern abundance of priorities there is simply no place remaining for children (*“There are more interesting activities in life than children,”* Eva Mendes [12]). That such a choice is possible and legitimate, is confirmed by prominent American actresses, who resolved the children and work dilemma for the benefit of their careers: *“I decided not to have children, because my goal was to pursue a career and I could not combine these two things,”* Betty White [10], as well as Chelsea Handler, Lily Tomlin, or according to Oprah Winfrey, in this work and raising children dilemma, *“Something would suffer, and most likely that would be my kids”* [10]. At the same time, childlessness is a new life plan, a deliberate response to demographic change, longer life expectancy and the global labor market: *“In two days, I might not be in London anymore, but in Dubai or Australia, where work would wait for me. ... Children would greatly restrict this freedom. ... Nowadays, traveling, meeting new people and communicating with them is not a vacation plan, but a lifestyle. You start to realize that 50 or 60 is not the end, and you won’t have to wait for grandchildren on Sundays, because you will be busy on weekends,”* reflects an anonymous friend (aged 37) [36].

Interestingly, in the mosaic of motives, the argumentation for voluntary childlessness is based both on a successful and unsuccessful career of women. In case of success, the creation of family and upbringing of children are postponed until after the establishment of well-being, or they are completely abandoned, and in the case of professional failure, the aim is to create at least a minimum basis before thinking about children:

They are career-minded, accomplished and financially independent. They go on holiday several times a year, wear great clothes, have fun with their friends, and change their loved ones. So, they don’t want the good life for themselves to be burdened with the worries and responsibilities of motherhood. [34];

...motherhood is often refused not by those who are successful in their careers. When climbing the ladder does not succeed, a woman thinks: a little more and it will be good, and then I can think about children. [28].

Another sign of the modernity of the concept is that having children in some cases is not compatible with the reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 2000): *“Giving birth to a child means ignoring what I am”* [2]. Again, global celebrities are invoked: *“Deep in my heart, I am convinced – motherhood is not for me. In a sense, I am glad, because it is very important to understand not only who you are, but also what you do not want to be. I really don’t want to be a mom,”* stated Elisabeth Gilbert [10]. Typically, the body in this reflexive project of the self plays an important role: *“A woman’s body belongs only to her”* [36]. Well, in re-

sponse to business interests, the right of adolescents to have “*freedom of choice when planning and giving birth to children*” [22] is smoothly combined with advertising of a new contraceptive – a hormonal mini-IUD.

The argumentation for childlessness goes even further – namely having children as a way to flee their own lives, not to live them completely: “*Children are releasing some people from their efforts to find out what a person’s life is worth in itself,*” philosopher Nida Vasiliauskaite [20]. Fullness of individual life, personal self-expression and identity are raised above the traditional moral and social interests of reproduction: “*To have children or not is a personal matter for each of us*” [17]; “*An individual lives because of children, and the children are something that justifies their existence, giving them value. If we extend that chain – children for children, children for children, and so on, it is a completely absurd angle on thinking,*” Nida Vasiliauskaite [20].

To conclude, the voluntary childlessness is presented by mass media as a result of post-modern identity reflections, as a good (or even best) respond to current social, demographic global challenges and possibilities. Only the ambiguity in respect to women’s careers – which one: the successful or not leads to the childlessness? – may raise doubts that perhaps there are other reasons covered by the shiny facade. One of possible causes left in shade – extremely demanding modern norms of maternity/paternity.

2.5. Childlessness as a respond to change in maternity/paternity concepts

For contemporary motherhood/fatherhood, an analogous consciousness requirement is raised. According to the heroes in the articles, the decision to have children should be conscious, they should be welcomed and loved: “*I congratulate all the people who have deliberately come to motherhood and fatherhood – not because the relatives questioned it, not because it was already time, not because all their friends had children, and not because they needed to save their job during the recession. But because they had matured for that. Because the child just knocked,*” publicist Ilze Butkute [28]. Increased demands on the quality of childcare – time, concern, money and especially the love needed for them – play a significant role in the choice of childlessness (“*I never wanted my kids to know their mother just from photos. One has to allocate a lot of time to them, all your love and energy,*” artistic director Dalia Ibelhauptaite [28]).

In other words, the discourse of childlessness manifests itself as a response of the younger generation to social pressure to have children – the too obtrusive questions about planned “*expansion*“, the threat of loneliness and abandonment at an old age, accusations of selfishness, and the ever increasing pressure to raise children almost perfectly, considering increased requirements to the quality of motherhood/fatherhood – not just being parents, but being good ones or at least better than their own parents were. In the articles, there is a noticeable shift from the traditional, implicitly unreflected paternity/maternity model towards a more conscious one, which starts with self-determination, a more specialized and professionalized model of child raising (“*Child-rearing is a lifelong job*” [1]). Speaking in the terms of M. Weber ([1922] 1976), this is transition from a traditional to a value-rational and instrumentally rational action, where taking celebrities as role models, is aimed to ensure a fully fledged and fully provided life for the children which for many is impossible to achieve.

Perhaps the change in the maternity/paternity norms can be attributed to the generational change? Such striving towards sacrificing as parents, when children are provided with every-

thing that is best, relatively can be attributed to Generation X (b. 1964-1983). However, it does not fascinate Generation Y (b. 1984-2003), whose priority is to take care of themselves, their freedom, their privacy, image, comfort – and raising children should not prevent it. The argumentation in question seems like a manifesto of exclusivity for Generation Y, an assertion of self different from everyone before. So, for example: lacking historical knowledge about having children in previous generations, historical development of the meaning of children, the experience in the parents' family (or generation) of the reader representing Generation Y is too broadly generalized, even more, connotations of moral primacy that may refer to moral conflict between generations emerge: *“Life without children in the long run becomes completely vacuous: work–home, and the same boring husband whom you can't divorce because 'who needs you', and without a child after 10 years, there's not even anything to quarrel about. [...] Let's admit that for many years humanity was expecting children only for such reasons – and then they try to teach someone like me. And even in such a situation, we do not judge them”* [7].

Or the new norms of maternity/paternity criticized by the childlessness concept are transferred from abroad? Their imitative character is particularly pronounced in the details that conflict with the experiences of Lithuanian people who are raising children. As freedom restrictions of people with children, elements of the modern maternity/paternity model taken from foreign (mostly American) films, but not largely prevalent in Lithuania, are criticized. For example: the article “19 benefits for those without children” mentions that traveling without children is much more comfortable, *“You can fly on an airplane and rest without worrying that someone will be sneering at you because you took a crying child with you,”* [1], however, flights with small children are not typical lifestyle in Lithuania, and are far from accessible to all social classes. For previous generations, travel by airplane was exotic, let alone trips with small children. Children were hardly taken to public places. Movies routinely portray situations which imply parental duties to include: watching children's sports, plays, dance performances, etc. Childless people are deprived of such a burden: *“You don't have to spend four hours at a dance rehearsal or a play”* [1]. However, the question is, how much this kind of monitoring of children's performances is widespread in Lithuania and what percentage of parents have the necessary resources (time and money), i.e. can pay for children's activities, but do not have a paid job? Or those women who do not have a teenage daughter should be relieved that they will *“never have to be 'Forever 21'. Unless you decide that you really want that dress for 15 litas that accentuates the figure”* [1]. However, before publishing the translated text, no attention was drawn to the fact that the store chain ‘Forever 21’ has not come to Lithuania yet. Another advantage is that without children, you can save a lot of money, as is common to estimate expenses in the US: *“The cost of raising a child is about 610,000 litas”* [1]. Unfortunately, when relaying such information, the relevant standard of living was not defined clearly, and whether such a sum was needed for raising each child in Lithuania is very doubtful.

As a counterweight, there are also manifestations of authentic experiences, a conflict between choices of parenthood/motherhood and childlessness. The choice of paternity is defended by a father's message republished from social media (*“So, if you ever want to tell me how unlucky I was and how much I lost because of children, thank you, because I lost only those who will say it.”* [37]). From this message, one can assume that in reality there is a conflict of views between those having and not having children. It is complemented by admission of another known person that *“through his own stupidity”* [15] he still does not have children.

And the hostess of the “Mommy’s Club” program expresses the view regarding questions about raising children, *“the most categorical are people without children”* [29] and that *“indeed, Lithuania is not very tolerant – children with their mothers should be closed in a certain space dedicated only for them and not disturb others. Or, what are Lithuanian attitudes towards women breastfeeding in a public space worth...”* [29], thus changes in social space are obviously not as big as virtual ones.

There is also some criticism of voluntary childlessness in the material in question – very little, actually. For example: it is affirmed that childlessness is actively promoted by immature people who have not solved their psychological problems. It is mentioned that having children elevates parents and they learn unconditional love. Children give meaning to life, and their absence leaves an unfilled emptiness. Social changes and the emergence of contraception are emphasized as circumstances that caused the spread of childlessness, therefore, the voluntary nature of childlessness is doubted. The bells of demographers also indicate that, in Lithuania, there is already a wish to have fewer children than needed to ensure demographic balance. The reasons for this, as affirmed, are: the entrenchment of individualism, striving for women’s self-expression, the difficulty of reconciling careers and families which leads to postponing childbirth until after establishment in the labor market, or a reduction in the number of children.

In conclusion, the raised standards of childbearing as presented in mass media can reflect attitudes’ change among generations and a partial influence from abroad: rather traditional behavior of grandparents has inspired the striving of parents to be better, including idealization of their role and self-sacrificing, which further evoked response of the third generation – their children (grown up with internet) – to be smarter in another way, i.e. become childless. Just a few voices are contradicting the main stream ideas: those young people who experience paternity/maternity as rewarding, and those who suspect psychological problems, existential emptiness or broader social change being covered by positive affirmation of childlessness.

2.6. Gender and voluntary childlessness

How the topic of voluntary childlessness is addressed in terms of gender? In the articles, we can find manifestations of questioning a woman’s role and reformulation of moral norms: *“And the most important truth—a woman must be loved and happy; she is not obliged to anyone or anything else”* [14]. However, there is a bit of an undertone of traditional gender roles when seeking to increase the importance of arguments it comes to retelling support from a male perspective: *“I’m talking only about women, but there are men who don’t want children. Consciously. They see a woman as a personality, not a child-carrying vessel, an extension of his family.”* [5].

However, the role of men in this discourse is peripheral – rarely emerging and not very important. One of the examples is from a study of voluntary childlessness carried out in Lithuania: *“All [female] participants in the study decided by themselves not to have children – their other half had no influence on the decision. Meanwhile, men’s responses to their decisions are different. Some also do not want to have children, others wanted or still want them, but some women are even ready to divorce if the man delivers an ultimatum,”* Ţivile Leonaviciute [35]. Men play a more pronounced role in the psychological articles (four articles on men’s reluctance to have children and two on women’s fear of giving birth / having a child), where a psychologist advises how to behave when a man does not want to have chil-

dren and a woman wants to, and what possibly causes this reluctance. It is suggested that most men are worried whether they will be good, responsible parents, whether they will be able to provide for the family. Sometimes a man feels that he does not want to have children with a particular woman, or thinks she will not be a good mother. The psychologist's advice is consistent with the overall trend encouraging individual consciousness: "*One has to act wisely when you are confident that your wish to get pregnant is based on your inner readiness, maternal instincts, true desire and not generally accepted beliefs about children. And, also understanding the cause of the man's reluctance.*" [23].

A man's opinion was expressed that the low birth rate in Lithuania is caused by the weak expression of masculinity, consequently, women feel unprotected. It is also an attempt by Vėdas practitioner Vaidas Arvasevičius to insert traditional gender roles based on Indian philosophy into the Lithuanian context, since the traditional male role in Lithuania did not include the function of spiritual family leader:

Women no longer manage their own wishes, they have no guidelines for a higher being, and men do not understand their true function – leading the family towards spirituality. [26].

According to him, in order for women to want having children, men should "*finally assume execution of their duties*" [26].

In other articles, women's fear of giving birth is explained by the lack of confidence in men, as well as the high probability of divorce, analogous avoided responsibility for the consequences of a decision that will change their lives and... appearance. The importance of appearance, body shape in the context of wider social, economic, ecological or even global reasons sounds a bit strange, but at the same time, it is a clear reference again to the reflexive self-identity project of late modernity (Giddens, 2000).

In sum, despite legitimization of voluntary childlessness as rational social behavior and modern identity, the topic as presented by the mass media rather remains in the traditional gender framework, concerning mainly women. Most pronounced are the voices claiming that men are not masculine (not supportive, not protective) enough to create such comfort for women that they would like to have children. But obviously there might be other reasons as infertility discussed below.

2.7. Involuntary childlessness: infertility and related laws

The articles on involuntary childlessness including sub-themes of inability to have children, infertility and laws provide a completely different picture. They talk about other issues which remain when the decision to have children cannot be realized. Nevertheless, expert knowledge also dominates in the Inability to have children sub-theme. Sociologists discuss the reasons that people indicate as to why they do not have children or adopt, and public health specialists warn that the inability to have children "*increases the likelihood of premature death*" [18]. Psychological research shows that childless men experience depression more often than women and they experience social pressure more often than their personal wish to have children [19]. Psychologists advise readers, or on the basis of their work experience, discuss the experiences of people unable to have children – miscarriages, conscious and unconscious psychological barriers to conceiving, and readiness to adopt. Physicians emphasize the importance of a healthy lifestyle, the harm of smoking to fertility. An astrologer legitimizes childlessness in a cosmic context ("*According to a cosmic plan, the death of a*

child is not exaggerated in the same way as an earthly one," Violeta Liaugminiene [38]) and contemporary norms of paternity inserts into the religious philosophical system of ancient India (*"Is there good karma for couples who have many children, but are unable to fully provide for them?"*, Violeta Liaugminiene [38]).

Such diversity of opinion-formers leads to a conflict of views. A psychotherapist says, for example: *"Often, various 'spiritual' new wave knowledge is read: if your karma is bad or you have sinned – here is your punishment. Although I think that those are not sins, but psychological or physiological causes"*, Genovaite Bonckute [30]. One paid for article insists that *"infertility is a medical problem, not God's will"* [21]. Readers' letters and published comments also echo the expert knowledge (*"Maybe I am being punished for something?"* [8]). Instructions on how to (not) communicate with couples who do not have children are provided. Even an article promoting belly dancing includes a message that this activity is recommended by doctors in Germany for women unable to conceive, and the state covers the costs. It was also suggested to join an invented "tradition" by celebrating World Remembrance Day for Pregnancy and Infant Bereavement.

In the articles under the Infertility sub-theme dominated expert knowledge, especially that of medical representatives. Medical diagnoses and treatments were discussed, the impact of lifestyle on fertility, the genetic investigation and food supplements were promoted, as well as advised on how and when to make love in order to get pregnant. Both physicians and psychologists talk about the stigmatization of infertility, that it is considered a shame, taboo, and the subject is avoided: *"The feeling dominates, 'I am a broken mechanism'"*, psychologist Anna Vinkovskiene [33]. Psychologists discuss psychological causes of infertility, a historian talks about the approach to infertility in the 16th-18th centuries as a special disability and a major disaster, as well as treatment methods applied at that time.

To the sub-topic of Laws, we attributed articles which engage in a discussion on consideration of conservative and liberal versions of the Law on Assisted Reproduction at the Seimas. They grant a lot of attention to the painful experiences of infertility treatment for couples and the high cost of it, which not everyone can afford to cover. Two articles present a unique story of a couple who couldn't have children for 14 years, whose medical causes of infertility had not been diagnosed, and the man developed cancer, so for them adoption is not a possibility anymore. The couple denies the widespread belief that infertility is caused by long-term use of contraception, because they wanted children right away. They support the statement of psychologists that, *"The emotional condition of a woman who can not have children is equal to constantly recurrent mourning"* [25]. Contrary to the articles on voluntary childlessness, the traditional social norm to have children is attributed to natural things and is invoked as an argument for compensation of infertility treatment: (people around you) *"can't understand that you just can't fully enjoy life. Nothing can fill the void that is meant for very natural things. ... To have your own offspring – is a strong, natural, vital part of human nature"* [25]. It is said that families without children feel isolated. The articles note that in the EU, only Lithuania and Latvia do not compensate for infertility treatment costs. An opposing opinion was expressed by artiste Eglia Vaitkevici: *"That desperate cry 'Help, we can't get pregnant' is already intrusive for me. If you want to be engineers of nature, so be. But with your own funds"* [9].

The articles describe the process of consideration of the draft law in the Seimas, and there is outrage toward an assistant of a Seimas member who advised an infertile couple to look for causes of infertility related to their worldview and spiritual issues, and "to cope with them-

selves”. A couple of articles are devoted to surrogate motherhood, which is forbidden in Lithuania, and the fight related to it for the legalization of parenthood abroad. The topic of adoption, differences in custody and adoption, experiences, and bureaucratic difficulties of adoption are addressed. Meanwhile, Birute Obeleniene, Professor of VMU Center for Marriage and Family Studies pointed out that lawmakers operate with unjustified numbers on the prevalence of infertility in Lithuania, because infertility studies in Lithuania have not been performed [32]. Also, the same numbers are constantly repeated in the analyzed media.

To sum up, articles on involuntary childlessness touch several related topics like: medical, psychological and legal issues. They integrate some aspects of pronatalist discourse like the social norm to have children, but in general, their subtopics are dispersed, they do not form one or several main tendencies.

3. Discussion and conclusions

Although childlessness discourse in Lithuanian media from 2011-2016 is rather unformed, especially in quantitative terms, as we could see from the content review of the articles from this period, the topic of childlessness is absolutely dominated by the sub-topic of voluntary childlessness – other forms of childlessness, which are more frequent in reality, remain marginal (involuntary due to infertility) or non-existent (involuntary caused by circumstances, temporary). Voluntary childlessness in Lithuanian media is portrayed very favorably. Childless people are intelligent; they consciously create their modern selves and their lives, choosing other than traditional priorities. Children do not fall into their life projects. However, the image of rational, educated voluntary childless people created by media does not correspond to the reality discovered by research – even in the countries with a higher level of childlessness: research denies the stereotype that childless people are educated careerists, and especially the proportion of highly educated childless men is lower than men with lower education (Graham et al., 2013; Miettinen et al., 2015; Maher & Dever, 2004). Contemporary childlessness is undesirable more often and caused by unfavorable socioeconomic conditions, which the media remain silent about.

The discussed articles supposedly aim to promote tolerance, to recognize childlessness as an equivalent form of existence, and therefore there is a need to vacate space by questioning the traditional maternity/paternity model, its supportive social norms, the meaning given to children so far, as well as the meaning of human life, etc. Challenging dominant social and moral norms by childless people in a pronatalist society is universal – it has been previously mentioned in the literature (Carey, Graham & Shelley, 2009; Grill, 2019; Gibb, 2019). On the one hand, the experts’ approaches, information and research from other countries dominating the discourse of voluntary childlessness give the impression that this topic is rather invasive to our everyday living world. The imitative tendency in mass media concerning family related topics revealed by A.Maslauskaite (2002) is strengthened. Lithuanian media seem to act as a part of global media, taking over their content. These articles might target individuals with higher purchasing power in order to interest them, to give recognition to their lifestyles and at the same time to promote consumption, increase the efficiency of advertising provided in the portals. On the other hand, as we have seen, this is a field of competition between different local experts. Their efforts to expand the professional market and entrench power

are visible, for example: Often psychologists' advice is mentioned, with a reminder that it is "*suggested (or mandatory) to consult a psychologist*".

Our findings are somewhat similar to the research results of voluntary childlessness representation in foreign media. The dominance of expert discourse, the questioning of the family model, and motherhood as a (professional) vocation are also found in newspapers from 1990-2008 in the United Kingdom (Giles, Shaw & Morgan, 2009). The wish to have children as a manifestation of parental egoism from the perspective of childless people has been discovered not only by this British study, but also by a Swedish study on the representation of voluntary childlessness in the newspapers (Peterson, 2014). However, different aspects have been found in these studies as well. The British study mentions conflicts in the labor market between parents and childless people, as the latter complain about having to work for colleagues who care for their sick children; the children are mentioned as a stage of the couple's relationship that was never reached, because of poorly chosen partners or physical disgust of babies (smell and bodily functions) as an argument that fatherhood/motherhood would be an unnatural role for particular individuals (Giles et al., 2009). The Swedish study also analyzes childless couples and their way of life (Peterson, 2014). Thus, information about the difficulties of life and choices is presented in more detail there, more openly and personalized than in Lithuanian media. When studying the representation of childless women in the Australian press, an accusation of feminism for childlessness was discovered – that women were encouraged to "reach for the sky" – to make a career, to remain alone if they wanted to, but were not warned of the cost of such a choice and the biological clock (Graham & Rich, 2014). The differences seem small, especially considering the eclectic nature of the media, but they strengthen the impression of authenticity and true experience, which is greatly lacking in the depiction of voluntary childlessness in Lithuania. In this way, the representation of childlessness in Lithuania is not only an example of imitative orientation of social change that conflicts with a restitutionary pronatalistic context, but also an illustration of how power and interests of global media empires reach readers in the form of homogenized naturalized images, supposedly normal and acceptable as a part of natural order (Hjarvard, 2008). Then the question arises, how much such imitated or directly taken discourses (or their fragments) are also a "real social practice" (Keller, 2011, p. 49)? Perhaps we are observing a situation in which the discourse taken over is not yet common practice in the target social space, but has the potential to shape the object it speaks of (Foucault, 2002)? Thus, positive representation of voluntary childlessness might contribute to an increase in childlessness among younger generations in Lithuania.

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Notes

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