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The Concept of *Democracy* in Lithuanian Lexicographic Sources and Its Reflection in the Worldview of Young People and Media Texts¹

Introduction

The idea of democracy is represented directly by the Greek word *demokratia* (δημοκρατία), the root meanings of which are *demos* ‘people’ and *kratos* ‘government’. The lexeme *demokratia* is known and used all over the world (from Norwegian and

¹ The article was prepared on the basis of materials from the project “Analysis of the Concepts DEMOCRACY, PATRIOTISM, TOLERANCE and Their Antonyms and Synonyms”, funded by the State Commission of the Lithuanian Language.

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Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences
[Wydawca: Instytut Slawistyki Polskiej Akademii Nauk]

Swedish *demokrati* to Indonesian *demokrasi*, Swahili *demokrasia* and even the international language Esperanto – *demokratio*) (Bartmiński, 2000). According to researchers, democracy has played a relatively marginal role in the history of humankind, with most past thinkers seeing more disadvantages than advantages in democracy. In his work *The State*, Plato, the greatest authority in Western philosophy, described democracy as one of the worst forms of government. Aristotle was also critical of democracy as a form of governance. Democracy is discussed not only in academic literature; politicians, journalists, and the public express their positions in various commentaries. The concept of democracy is frequently used in both internal and international politics, interpreted in various ways, and often adjusted to serve individual interests (Spurga, 2012). Classical and modern notions of democracy are so deeply intertwined that not only the history but also the basic concepts of democracy are subject to controversy. For example, what is meant by *political participation, representation*? To what extent are citizens free to choose among political alternatives; what is the essence of belonging to a democratic community? (Nefas et al., 2011). The frustration and dissatisfaction with this political regime have been reported to have increased recently. According to Ligita Šarkutė, the reasons for this are varied, that is, “ranging from global economic and financial crises to the failures of democratic governments in addressing immigration-related issues and other challenges posed by globalisation” (Šarkutė, 2023, p. 158).

Historically, Lithuania has been, and still is, the eastern edge of Western cultural sphere. Even during the period of domination by another civilisation, the ideas of democracy circulated in Lithuania. Andrius Vaišnys states that “all of journalism and political activity of Vincas Kudirka were directed towards creating national democracy” (Vaišnys, 2009, p. 126). The concept of democracy was written about and discussed by the signatories of the Act of Independence, political parties, and organisations, with the majority of theoretical discussions occurring during the interwar period. At that time, the term *integral democracy* emerged, taking its complete form in three texts of political thought: “Į organiškios valstybės kūrybą” [Towards the Creation of an Organic State], “Į reformuotą demokratiją” [Towards a Reformed Democracy], and “Į pilnutinę demokratiją” [Towards Integral Democracy]. These programmatic documents address the relationship of the state with various spheres of life, as indicated by the titles of the following sections: “State and Culture”, “State and Family”, and “State and Democracy”.² These were general principles and key guidelines for the further development of national life. One of the proponents of integral democracy was the philosopher Stasys Šalkauskis. For him, integral democracy was an inseparable part of his philosophy of integral life, which, unlike the philosophy of culture,

² These documents are available at <https://www.partizanai.org/failai/I-Laisve-web/I-Pilnutine-Demokratija.pdf> (*Į pilnutinę demokratiją*, 1958).

remained fragmented and only slightly developed. The idea of integral democracy was also raised by the partisans in their “Svarstymai apie valstybės pagrindus” [Considerations on the Foundations of the State] (see also Jankauskas, 2010).

According to Petras Ragauskas, what democracy means as a system of governance should no longer raise questions for the modern person, as a principled answer to this question has been provided at the highest official level, that is, in the Preamble of the Statute of the Council of Europe, adopted in 1949 (Ragauskas, 2016, p. 117). The Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania also answers this question, identifying democracy as one of the four fundamental constitutional values.

Although defining democracy as government by the people is the starting point for analysing its essence, it cannot be defined in an unambiguous manner. As the political analyst Mantas Macikas (2022) states, democracy may be a value for one state but not necessarily for another. Repeatedly used, the term *democracy* has become vague and has drifted away from the core principles of democracy. According to Zenonas Norkus (2006), we (Lithuanians) can take pride in the long-standing traditions of political democracy and parliamentarianism that took shape during the union with Poland. However, the people who then formed the Lithuanian citizen community did not speak, or no longer spoke, the Lithuanian language. As a result, Lithuanian political and legal terminology remained undeveloped (Norkus, 2006, p. 12). It can also be added that, over many years, the term has acquired nuances, which can only be fully understood through in-depth exploration rather than by introducing the public to the concept superficially (Norkus, 2008, p. 181).

What influence do the media and ongoing public discussions have on modern understanding of democracy? As Ragauskas (2016, p. 115) notes, when different aspects of democracy are combined into a more or less cohesive logical framework, differences inevitably arise. The understanding and choice of terms in a specific context depend on which aspects of a given complex idea are emphasised. This is influenced by individual experience, each person's hierarchy of values, as well as aesthetic and even pragmatic motivations.

The aim of this article is to linguistically examine the concept of *democracy* these days. To achieve this, the following objectives are set: to determine how the concept of *democracy* is understood in Lithuanian lexicographic sources, especially the latest ones; to explore what *democracy* means to young people; to analyse what meanings Lithuanians attribute to the lexeme *democracy* when it is used in different contexts; and, based on empirical material and research, to establish a cognitive definition of the concept of *democracy*. These objectives are pursued using the methodology of the Lublin ethnolinguistic school, which states that a linguistic worldview, encoded in language (in the grammatical and lexical system, and in various texts), serves as a consolidating factor that shapes the identity of specific communities (family, local, regional, national) (Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, 2020, p. 46). This methodology provides insight into how

people perceive concepts, along with socially established knowledge about the world expressed through language, the categorisation of its phenomena, their attributes, and evaluations (Bartmiński, 2004). Understanding of concepts is linked to collective identity, perceived as a shared aspect of self-identification and a mental construct abstracted from individual identities of community members, accessible through complementary and linguistically expressed images (Bartmiński & Chlebda, 2008, p. 12). Identity embraces the values and beliefs cherished by a community and the symbols that represent them.

Research on these elements yields the best results when linguistic structures and textual narratives are the focus (Chlebda, 2010). Certain keywords “manifest as distinct lexemes in the plane of expression, while in the plane of content, they possess particularly rich semantics, allowing an understanding of the specificity of a given national, ethnic, or regional community” (Rak, 2015, p. 13). According to Lublin ethnolinguists, the perception of concepts embedded in language needs to be extracted from various linguistic sources and then categorised into aspects. Describing these aspects makes it possible to provide a comprehensive view of the subject, employing three types of data: systemic, survey, and textual. This article presents a comprehensive linguistic study of the understanding of the concept of *democracy* in Lithuanian.

1. Lexicographic data on *democracy* in Lithuanian sources

It is appropriate to start the analysis of the lexicographic data with the *Tarptautinių žodžių žodynas* [Dictionary of International Words] (TŽŽ). As mentioned in the introduction, *democracy* is a term of Greek origin that has entered the Lithuanian language as an international lexeme. This dictionary also provides a second meaning of the term:

2. the principle of governance of social organisations, working collectives, based on members' self-determination, active participation in the organisation's activities and leadership; the electability, replaceability and accountability of governing bodies to the collective.

As can be seen, the first meaning is the most closely related to the Greek word, while the second covers the realities of modern life and refers to work collectives and organisations. A similar description of *democracy* is also found in Lithuanian dictionaries:

Lietuvių kalbos žodynas [Dictionary of the Lithuanian Language] (LKŽ):

1. a political system in which power belongs to elected representatives.
2. the election of an organisation's leadership and its dependence on the will of the majority of its members. *Internal democracy within the party.*

Dabartinės lietuvių kalbos žodynas [Dictionary of Modern Lithuanian] (DLKŽ):

1. political power that depends on the public will.
2. the electability of the organisation's leadership and its dependence on the will of its members: *Internal party democracy*.

The *Bendrinės lietuvių kalbos žodynas* [Dictionary of Standard Lithuanian] (BLKŽ) expands the meanings only slightly, including today's attitudes:

1. a government that is de facto or formally subject to the will of the majority of the public: *Parliamentary [representative] democracy. A threat [blow] to democracy. Loyalty to the ideals of democracy. A country moving towards democracy.*
2. the principle of governance of social organisations and societies, based on the active participation of members in the activities of these organisations: *To curb excessive democracy in the party. This is no longer democracy but anarchy!*

The limited data available for explaining the concept, mainly from the BLKŽ, gives the impression that *democracy* is primarily a system of governance dependent on the will of the majority in society (expressed through elections). This system can be transitioned from another, and there are several types of it (the BLKŽ mentions *representative democracy*, relevant to Lithuania). It may also face threats. In organisations such as political parties, democracy depends on the activity, will, principles, and ideals of their members. Its boundaries may be surpassed (this, by the way, is also true for the state), and a transition may occur to another system of governance (*anarchy*).

2. The meaning and significance of *democracy* in the eyes of young people in Lithuania

Researchers raise the question of whether young people today understand *democracy* in the same way as their grandparents, who were dissatisfied with the poor living conditions during the Soviet era. No less appealing to them were the freedoms associated with the concept of *democracy* – first, the freedom to read, watch, listen, speak and write what they like. Political analysts argue that the attitude towards democracy is deteriorating worldwide. Linas Kojala, reviewing the results of Freedom House research, states that intellectuals are puzzled as to why young people in various parts of the world are more pessimistic about democracy as a system of governance than older generations. “A study conducted in 75 countries shows that those born in the interwar period view democracy much more favourably than the so-called mil-

lennial generation (born between 1981 and 1996). And so far, there is no reason to believe that this trend will change” (LEM14).

However, studies in Lithuania show slightly different findings. In October 2020, the data of a survey conducted by Baltijos tyrimai [Baltic Surveys] for ELTA news agency showed that almost half of the respondents (48%) were dissatisfied with the quality of democracy in Lithuania (Baltijos tyrimai, 2022). The young people under 30 years of age were more satisfied in this regard (56%) (Jaruševičiūtė, 2020). A survey conducted in April 2021 again confirmed that young people (under 30) had the highest opinion of the functioning of democracy in the country: 49% of them said they were satisfied with the democracy in Lithuania, and 42% also thought that things in the country were moving in a positive direction (Marcinkevičius, 2021). Although, according to a survey conducted in April 2022, young people’s confidence in democracy dropped slightly, to 38% (Baltijos tyrimai, 2022), they are still more optimistic and perhaps have a slightly different perception of democracy than the older generation.

In order to investigate this matter, the authors of the present article conducted a survey of Vilnius University students in March–April 2023. The questionnaire was completed by 100 first-year students from the Faculties of Philology, Philosophy, History, Communication, Medicine, Mathematics, Physics, and Economics. The participants were asked: “What do you think is true *democracy*?” After processing the collected material, the following key descriptors emerged: **freedom** (36%), **form of government** (13%), **equality** (7%), **elections** (6.2%), **voting** (5.9%), **human rights** (5.1%), **will of the people, power** (4.7%). A threshold of 4% was not exceeded by such descriptors as truth, justice, duty, unity, tolerance, diversity, opportunity, majority, community, opinion, understanding, trust, help, hope, happiness, honesty, peace, independence, state, citizens, nation, parliament, divergent viewpoints, referendum, discussion, agreement, search for dialogue, revolution.

It should be noted that in the spring of 2021, while preparing the article “DEMOKRACJA w litewskim dyskursie” [DEMOCRACY in Lithuanian Discourse] (Smetonienė, 2024), a survey was also carried out among first-year university students at that time. Then, 102 students answered the same question, and the following descriptors emerged from the answers: **voting** (20.19%), **opinion** (18.10%), **freedom** (10.05%), **equality** (9.4%), **form of government** (9.15%), **rights** (5.25%), **elections** (4.50%), **justice** (3.60%), **politics** (3.58%), and the **possibility of electing the government** (2.93%).

When comparing these two surveys, it becomes clear that the responses in the 2021 survey were influenced by the parliamentary elections that had been held half a year before, which explains the continued relevance of elections, voting, and the possibility of expressing one’s opinion. The survey of 2023 was conducted a year after Russia’s war against Ukraine had begun, which is why freedom and *democracy* as a form of government came to the forefront for the respondents. Many students also referred to specific countries when they mentioned that *democracy* is freedom

and a form of governance that had been attacked in Europe, e.g. “Ukraine is fighting for its own freedom, ours and the freedom of Europe as a whole, and for the fairest form of governance; Russia has attacked democratic Ukraine and wants to subjugate the free people of the country”. Such responses were not included in this study, as they could be the subject of another article. This time, the focus was limited to Lithuanian realities.

As can be seen, **freedom** is the most prominent descriptor of *democracy*, and it is not merely an abstraction. Young people specifically identify **freedom of speech** (23 responses), **freedom of choice** (11), **freedom of thought** (11), **freedom of creativity** (3), **freedom of expression** (3), **personal freedom** (2), **freedom of decision** (2), **freedom to live** (2), **freedom to die** (2), and **freedom to think without fear** (1). In a democratic country, young people feel “safe and calm, able to express their opinions without being attacked”; they can “think, act, and live freely”. Democracy ensures “freedom to be oneself”. Freedom of speech is especially emphasised, though any freedom “must remain within the bounds of reason, not infringing freedom of another individual”. Thus, to one student, freedom of speech “is both a blessing and a challenge, as one must know how to use it responsibly”. Freedom is inseparable from duty, regulations, and order. It must guarantee the freedom of choice because each person should have the opportunity to make choices. Freedom is also related to respect, tolerance, and acceptance of others’ opinions and thoughts, and “everyone has the right to freely express their views”.

The second major descriptor is **the form of governance**. The responses indicate that young people are aware of the perspectives of ancient thinkers on democracy, its origins, and they have their own opinions on it: “Both Plato in *The Republic* and Aristotle in *Politics* viewed democracy negatively, describing it as a flawed system, as it could devolve into demagoguery”. Opinions among young people vary when evaluating democracy as a form of governance. Some believe it is “the best form”; it may not be perfect, but no one has thought of a better alternative. Others see its shortcomings: “It is the best system, yet far from ideal. It is no secret that in 1933, Germany democratically elected Hitler”. One respondent thinks that democracy is “the best system for people to live in, but the worst for a state”. Another admits that her understanding of the concept is distorted, associating it with control. In the responses of several young people, there is a sense of disappointment in democracy: “It is seen as universal inaction, bureaucracy, censorship, inevitable liberalism, a self-righteous leftist discourse of the privileged, and marginalisation; a democratic state has much corruption, is governed by personal interests, and fails to take responsibility”. One respondent even mentions a preference for authoritarianism, seeing it as potentially superior: “Democracy tends towards passivity and inaction. An authoritarian regime may be positive or negative, but it will certainly not be passive”.

For 7% of the respondents, *democracy* is associated with **equality**. This includes **gender equality** (1 response) and **same-sex marriage** (1 response). According to students, *democracy* means “equality before the law and among people”. The respondents stressed that “only unity, mutual respect, and fraternity among people can create democracy. If a society is passive or divided, democracy will never exist there”. Alongside equality, **human rights** are frequently mentioned (5.1% of responses), though it is emphasised that rights are inseparable from responsibilities (“Sometimes we get caught up in freedoms and rights, forgetting duties – to the state, to the nation. This is very problematic”). In the responses, rights and freedoms are closely linked to **elections** (6.2%), **voting** (5.9%), and **the will of the people, power** (4.7%), since democracy is “a form of governance based on the voices of citizens”. When going to the polls, students expect that citizens elect a government that “will represent them, enact laws, support the country’s economy, and cooperate with other countries on security issues”. They hope that not even a single vote will be wasted because democracy is “the right of every individual to cast a vote, which serves as the basis for making decisions on important issues for a group or even for society as a whole”. Some respondents already have voting experience, understand what it means and its significance, and therefore do not doubt the importance of voting and elections. Young people understand that “democracy is a state governed by the majority”, which means that not everyone will be satisfied. The most important thing, according to the youth, is “that elections are fair, that only voters who meet the age requirement participate, that voters understand the significance of this act”, and “that they approach it seriously rather than treating it as a joke”. However, there are different perspectives on elections and voting. In one answer sheet, a respondent regrets that “voting and elections hold no significance for an individual”, while another respondent states that, for her, “*democracy* is associated solely with elections and candidate debates, where each candidate tries to prove why they should be elected”.

3. Reflections of the concept of *democracy* in Lithuanian electronic media

Considering that the selection of texts that discuss democracy is not extensive, the material presented in the article “DEMOKRACJA w litewskim dyskursie” [DEMOCRACY in Lithuanian Discourse] (Smetonienė, 2024) was also used for the present study. Naturally, this concept is absent from folklore, and nor does it appear in the broader literary corpus. The most realistic way to analyse it is to choose media texts where politicians, political analysts, journalists, and academics in various fields express their opinions to the public, and those where public opinion could be seen. It should be

noted that the texts are also dominated by the notion that democracy is linked to state governance. Even the political parties, in their manifestos, emphasise the promotion of democracy as a value, without defining it as a given. A corpus of 350 instances was compiled for this study, with the most prominent examples selected for analysis, as the thoughts expressed are generally consistent: democracy in Lithuania is considered very important, yet people tend to focus more on its drawbacks than its advantages. The reasons for this are varied and they will emerge from the examples provided.

3.1 A perspective on policy discourse

Higher-ranking politicians, though viewed negatively by parts of society, greatly influence public opinion. Their statements are either echoed or criticised but seldom leave anyone indifferent. It should be noted that all politicians discuss democracy, yet their narratives are the same: we are democratic, our governing majority is democratic, while the opposition and those who disagree with us are undemocratic. On the other side, the narrative is identical, only with the roles reversed. Therefore, examples from members of the Seimas, the government, or party officials were intentionally excluded from analysis, opting instead to use statements from the highest-ranking politicians as illustrations of political discourse, given their significant impact on society. For instance, Professor Vytautas Landsbergis, Chairman of the reconstituted Seimas, and Gabrielius Landsbergis, Minister of Foreign Affairs, tend to speak about national democracy from a theoretical perspective, emphasising its positive aspects as a primary goal of the Sąjūdis movement:

- (1) Respect ourselves and the world of **democracies**, the world of law we continue to fight for.³ (LEM1;⁴ 28 July 2021)
- (2) **Democracy** evolved as societies and communities developed the principles and rules that formed the moral basis for biological survival and growth, rejecting egotism and self-destruction. (LEM2; 11 December 2013)
- (3) Solidarity between **democracies** is the strongest weapon against totalitarian regimes. (LEM3; 16 July 2021)

Thus, Vytautas and Gabrielius Landsbergis argue that *democracy* is a world of law (1), where principles and rules are created, where the moral foundation of the state is formed (2), and where the democratic state is the opposite of the totalitarian one (3).

President Dalia Grybauskaitė describes *democracy* in similar terms:

³ Due to space limitations, the analysed examples appear only in English. This and all subsequent examples were translated from Lithuanian into English by the authors of this article.

⁴ LEM – an example from Lithuanian electronic media.

- (4) The best way to mark this anniversary is our commitment to safeguarding **democracy** under any circumstances so that Lithuania will always remain a **democratic** republic, as it was declared by the Founding Seimas one hundred years ago. (LEM4; 15 May 2020)
- (5) **Democracy** is not possible without tolerance and respect for the rights and freedoms of everyone. Fears and prohibitions will not consolidate **democratic** values. They must be developed. (LEM5; 25 November 2009)

The words of President Grybauskaitė underline that tolerance, respect for human rights and freedoms (5) are essential in a democracy, that this is the form of government chosen by the Lithuanian enlightened people a hundred years ago, and that we must preserve it under all circumstances (4).

The speeches of President Valdas Adamkus raise the idea that democracy still needs to be learnt, that our democracy is not yet the same as in the West (6), that his goal during his presidency was to consolidate democracy in the country (7):

- (6) I have the courage to say that perhaps we still lack the Western culture, the **democracy** that we often talk about but do not yet live by. (LEM6; 23 June 2017)
- (7) I believed that I could help my nation on the path of integration into the Western community, develop **democracy**, and promote the welfare of society. (LEM7; 1 July 2014)

President Gitanas Nausėda echoes the thoughts of other presidents, supporting them with theoretical insights from political analysts:

- (8) **Democracy** is constantly in crisis – that is its nature. **Democracy** is based on the idea of competition, and competition creates conflict. **Democracy**, however, has the virtue of being able to neutralise these conflicts before they reach dangerous levels. (LEM8; 10 December 2021)
- (9) To accomplish this while respecting fundamental citizen rights and freedoms, strong **democratic** institutions are essential. (LEM8; 10 December 2021)
- (10) In striving to establish **democratic** governance and a state based on the rule of law, we placed great trust in our profound passion for freedom. (LEM8; 10 December 2021)
- (11) Of course, no **democracy** is perfect – not even ours. Yet **democracy** provides us with the best tools to confront these challenges. (LEM8; 10 December 2021)
- (12) A **democratic** society based on pluralism, strong representative institutions and a free media is capable of continuously reinventing itself, while remaining true to the fundamental principles of freedom and the rule of law. (LEM8; 10 December 2021)
- (13) When independent media is silenced, and critics are threatened with repression, the time has come to defend **democracy**. (LEM8; 10 December 2021)

- (14) However, **democracy** is not anarchy. Freedom of speech does not mean the freedom to insult, and the freedom to protest does not equate to the freedom to use violence. (LEM9; 10 August 2021)

President Nausėda's speeches show that the highest authority in the country declares that democracy as a form of governance is not perfect because it is based on competition, which programs conflicts but is also able to extinguish them (8, 11), and that democracy provides the best tools for overcoming any misunderstandings (11). It is true that we have had a different idea of democracy, believing that it will come naturally, along with freedom (10), and that for this form of government to succeed and flourish, it is necessary to build strong institutions (9), pluralism, free media, and the rule of law (12). Although our own democracy is young and fragile, we must defend democracy when it is threatened in another country (13). President Nausėda also notes another problem in the country: some citizens see freedom of speech as a right to insult, and freedom of protest as a right to violence (14); he stresses that democracy is not anarchy, which means, as President Adamkus said, that we still have to learn about democracy.

3.2 The perspective of political analysts' discourse

In the present article, political discourse will be examined alongside philosophical discourse. One of the most active commentators of contemporary societal phenomena is Alvydas Jokūbaitis, who is presented both as a philosopher and a political analyst. Political analysts generally analyse democracy in a broader context, delving into its history, comparing the experiences and paths of different countries, contrasting them with regimes opposite to democracy, and seeking the most important aspects of contemporary democracy:

- (15) Temperance is essential for **democracy**, when politicians do not see each other as enemies (or rather rivals) and do not abuse institutions to pursue their ambitions and vendettas. (LEM10; 8 January 2020)
- (16) The concept of direct **democracy** describes a governance model in which citizens directly participate in the decision-making process by expressing their will through referendums, plebiscites, or surveys. (LEM11; 18 May 2021)
- (17) **Democracy** is defined by institutions and procedures which ensure that political decisions, laws, and state matters depend on the will of the *demos* (all citizens with equal voting rights). (LEM12; 28 July 2016)

The examples provided show that political analysts aim to highlight the essence of *democracy*: democracy is a governance model where the will of the citizens is of

paramount importance. This is expressed through voting rights, referendums, plebiscites, and surveys (16, 17). Mažvydas Jastramskis draws the attention of politicians to the fact that, having gained the trust of the citizens, they must not forget the core principles of democracy and must not misuse the power granted to them for personal goals, revenge, or internal conflicts (15).

Political analysts and philosophers are increasingly speaking about the decline of democracy, its erosion, or even its defeat by autocracy. Efforts are being made to identify the causes of this and model the future:

- (18) The number of **democracies** in the world has been declining over the past decade. At the same time, freedoms have also shrunk. (LEM13; 23 December 2021)
- (19) **Democracies** that have not yet become democracies of quality are prone to decline. And while the end of **democracy** is not to be panicked about, it is to be taken seriously. (LEM13; 23 December 2021)
- (20) However, even if we consider **democracy** to be a political regime, it cannot expect much support from the population if it operates in a context of severe economic inequality. (LEM13; 23 December 2021)
- (21) **Democracy** cries when serious journalistic investigations, exposing festering issues, inequality, and bullying in one of the country's main arteries – the healthcare system – receive attention from only a few parliamentarians. (LEM13; 23 December 2021)
- (22) The annual political and civil liberties index published by Freedom House shows that the state of **democracy** worldwide has been deteriorating for fifteen consecutive years. (LEM14; 30 December 2021)
- (23) Thus, **democracy** finds itself in a paradoxical situation. On one hand, Western **democratic** states are seeking ways to address internal structural issues that objectively weaken the foundations of **democracy**. This is compounded by a tendency towards self-criticism, which at times is objective, and at other times exaggerated. (LEM14; 30 December 2021)
- (24) The gloomy assessment is reinforced by the self-critical nature inherent in **democracies**. (LEM14; 30 December 2021)

Thus, political analysts state that the number of democratic countries has decreased (18), largely due to some countries not reaching a sufficient quality of democracy (19). The condition of democracy has steadily declined for fifteen years, with a clear trend favouring autocracy (22). Alongside this decline, the world has seen a reduction in freedom (18), the key pillar of democracy, which young people emphasised in surveys. Analysts cite factors such as weak political institutions (19), economic inequality (20), and politicians' failure to respond to journalist-exposed injustices (21) as primary drivers of democratic erosion. Excessive self-criticism also contributes to the decline and negative perceptions of democracy (23, 24).

Jokūbaitis is one of the most influential representatives of the Christian worldview today. His speeches are more critical of Lithuania, so for the disaffected part of society, his ideas are even more important than those of the political analysts discussed above, and deserve separate attention:

- (25) It seems that the world has lost its seriousness, drowned in online chatter, and has become free to the point of madness. This goes beyond the limits of **democracy**. (LEM15; 8 September 2021)
- (26) **Democracy** is simply a procedure for legitimising power, not a system. (LEM16; 27 June 2018)
- (27) **Democracy** in the face of a pandemic has shifted to a dictatorship created by an invisible virus. (LEM17; 29 April 2020)
- (28) Lithuanian **democracy**, in its thirty post-communist years, has not transformed people's relationships with themselves and others. Our **democracy** not only fails to grow but is gradually withering due to the repeated failures of representative **democracy**. (LEM18; 18 May 2017)
- (29) For thirty years in Lithuania, we have not thought seriously about **democracy** and have only repeated the words we have learnt. (LEM19; 4 February 2022)
- (30) In a **democratic** society, science takes the place of the Church, viewing people as objects without regard for their individuality and personal development. (LEM19; 4 February 2022)
- (31) The idea of **democratic** equality has lately taken on the form of mathematical equality, and this is already turning into the destruction not only of spiritual hierarchies, but also of all differences in structures. (LEM19; 4 February 2022)
- (32) If we implemented **democracy**, politics would die. We would be living in an ideal order. In fact, the current state of global politics is one where democrats are constantly in conflict with each other. This struggle is what comprises democratic politics. (LEM20; 3 February 2019)

The philosopher observes manifestations of distorted democracy in contemporary life (31). Democracy ensures human rights and freedoms, but unrestricted freedom undermines democratic principles (25), as it becomes uncontrollable. It seems that democracy is becoming less a system of governance and more a procedure for legitimising power, with the balance tipping distinctly in favour of authority (26), resulting in a drift towards dictatorship (27). According to Jokūbaitis, democracy in Lithuania does not advance due to repeated failures, mass culture, and an inability to escape Soviet-era thinking (28). Here, one group of democrats fights another, creating a form of democratic politics that has little in common with genuine democracy (32). In this struggle, we have forgotten the individual, reducing them to an object rather than recognising them as a person (31). The views of Jokūbaitis further underscore the necessity of this study, as we have never truly contemplated what *democracy* means to us; we have merely repeated phrases learnt long ago (29).

The scholar supports his ideas with quotes from authoritative figures, one of whom is Alexis de Tocqueville. As Jokūbaitis states, there is no need to read books about democracy written in the twentieth century. The best books were written in the nineteenth century, by aristocrats, people who witnessed the changes, who saw how they arrived (Jokūbaitis, 2022).

In essence, the moments in life raised by de Tocqueville are what nations struggle with when attempting to free themselves from autocracy and create democracy. However, it seems that there is a certain limit in human consciousness that cannot be surpassed; the dragon that was slain is merely replaced by another dragon.

Moreover, even pure philosophers, regardless of their ideological leanings, view democracy with pessimism. Vytautas Radžvilas also observes that people begin to lose trust in the most important institutions and political parties in the country, which they expect to guarantee democracy. As a result, they start to equate power with regime and question the very essence of democracy:

- (33) The direct expression of frustration with the country's political life was the growing distrust of the main state institutions, political parties, and the entire **democratic** political system. (LEM21; 29 November 2011)

The left-wing philosopher Andrius Bielskis sees the same problem – people's distrust. This issue leads to the undermining of the foundations of democracy: people begin to vote for those who promise things that are impossible to deliver, creating a vicious cycle: citizens elect the wrong candidates, the elected cannot fulfil their promises, people become disillusioned with the government, and in the next elections, they choose new “saviours”:

- (34) People do not trust politicians and traditional parties, they do not believe in the key **democratic** institutions, and they choose to vote for those who promise to do things they will not actually do. (LEM22; 6 March 2020)

As a counterbalance to these pessimistic thoughts, Linas Kojala offers answers as to why democracy is struggling: citizens have entrusted decision-making to actors who think very differently, democracy itself is not suited to quick steps, it is self-doubting, it has many weaknesses, it is still a young form of government, it is difficult to find a middle ground between rights, freedoms, and competitive elections:

- (35) **Democracy** has many weaknesses. [...] The **democratic** system is not naturally suited for rapid steps. Finally, **democracy** constantly doubts itself. After all, **democracy** is a governance form that was described centuries ago but has only recently prevailed among states. (LEM23; 9 August 2021)

Jastramskis echoes this statement, emphasising that the decline of democracy is natural (36) because people have not been able to fully understand what true freedom is, where its boundaries lie. Nevertheless, the current situation is better; shortcomings should be taken seriously (38), but it is too soon to declare the end of democracy (37). Lithuania is a democratic country, but our democracy certainly has many flaws, so we need to strive for true democracy (36). The most important thing is that we ourselves believe in democracy, respect it, and defend it (39):

- (36) However, this **democracy** (naturally) has serious shortcomings, and much effort will still be needed to present us abroad as a model to aspire to. (LEM13; 23 December 2021)
- (37) [...] the current decline is natural, as the world has seen an increase in freedom since the third wave of **democratisation** but also more to fall back on. Compared to 1900, when there were no real **democracies** at all, the situation is still much better: it is too early to declare the end of democracy. (LEM13; 23 December 2021)
- (38) And even though the end of **democracy** is not to be panicked about, it must be taken seriously. (LEM13; 23 December 2021)
- (39) We will not defend **democracy** in the world and in Lithuania if we do not respect it ourselves. (LEM13; 23 December 2021)

Society follows the thoughts of political analysts with great interest. This discourse always attracts many comments, and politicians often repeat the ideas of political analysts, using them as a basis for discussions.

3.3 Perspective of the discourse of intellectuals, journalists and society

Researchers, journalists, and public representatives frequently address democracy-related issues in the media. Darius Kuolys emphasises in his statements that the core of democracy is the inherent right to freedom; in a democratic society, criticism is possible. However, this is not self-flagellation or self-deprecation (40), but rather a sign of a mature civil society. Government institutions often interpret *democracy* in their own terms, viewing it as unrestricted power, belittling their citizens and removing their right to express their opinions through an essential democratic tool, the referendum (41):

- (40) European **democracy** always allows room for criticism. This is a right of inner freedom and the foundation of **democracy**. It is not a matter of self-flagellation or a symptom of self-deprecation – it is a sign of a mature civil society. (LEM24; 12 July 2019)
- (41) Tragically, the phrases about “developing and strengthening **democracy**” in the parties’ agreement sound as cynical as Vladimir Putin’s speeches. This cynicism is even more pronounced by the decision of the parties in the Seimas to resort to

arbitrariness – to trample on the Constitution and the law and to frustrate a referendum initiated by 320,000 citizens. (LEM25; 9 April 2014)

In active discussions, the voices of journalists can also be heard. Only experienced journalists tend to participate, with the aim of responding to the perspectives shared by various groups and to shape public opinion on this issue, clarifying the essential aspects of democracy. For example, Rimvydas Valatka emphasises that *democracy* is neither chaos nor anarchy; it is a system of rules that must be respected:

(42) **Democracy** is about rules and adherence to them. (LEM26; 5 September 2021)

Vladimiras Laučius is looking for the reasons why democracy is declining. In his opinion, neoliberalism began to replace this model of governance in the last century, and it is in its essence that the reasons for the decline must be sought:

(43) The model of modern **democracy** that emerged after the Second World War, which essentially served the goals of the welfare state, was replaced in the last quarter of the last century by neoliberalism. (LEM27; 16 October 2018)

Society is more inclined to seek the advantages of democracy rather than its disadvantages:

(44) As difficult as it may be today, we are a **democracy**, and **democracy** is a value, so we should not lose our heads. (LEM28; 3 March 2022)

(45) What can you do, it is what it is – our Western **democracy**. Errant, flawed, contradictory. No matter what it is like, Putinism and all other dictatorships fear it like the devil fears the cross. (LEM29; 26 February 2022)

Democracy, whatever it may be (“errant, flawed, contradictory”), is a value. The main thing is that dictatorships are afraid of it.

4. Conclusions

In summary, the study presents the following conclusions:

1. In Lithuanian lexicographic sources (notably in the Dictionary of Standard Lithuanian (BLKŽ)), the meanings of the concept of *democracy* are more closely aligned with real life, referencing political governance, voting rights, representation, and participation in organisational governance, with political parties appearing alongside organisations.

2. The latest survey showed that for young people, *democracy* is closely related to freedom – freedom of choice, expression, thought, creativity, speech, personal identity, decision-making, and even the freedom to live and die. If young people feel safe in a democratic country, able to live freely and think without fear, then *democracy* is perceived as a *beneficial form of governance*. Opinions among youth vary: some view it as *the best form of governance*, though imperfect and unmatched by any other; others believe the effectiveness and fairness of *democracy* depend on individuals, their perspectives, actions, and attitudes; a small segment is disappointed with democracy. Young people understand *democracy* as *the rule of the majority*, acknowledging that not everyone will be satisfied. They emphasise that *elections* must be fair and that voters should understand the significance of their choices. For some, *democracy* also implies *equality*, including *gender equality* and *same-sex marriage*. Alongside equality, *human rights* emerge as a key value. In youth responses, human rights are closely associated with freedom, elections, and voting.
3. Discourse analysis reveals that democracy ensures *the freedom to be oneself, freedom of choice, pluralism*, and a *free press*. However, absolute freedom does not exist; therefore, freedom is inherently tied to respect, tolerance, and acceptance of differing opinions and ideas. The top political leaders emphasise that this is the governance model chosen by Lithuania's intellectuals a century ago and that it must be protected under any circumstances. Democracy is a *governance model* where the primary focus is on the will of the people, expressed through citizens' votes. It provides the best tools to resolve misunderstandings, as shown through the right to vote, referendums, plebiscites, and surveys. Importantly, politicians entrusted with the duties by citizens should remember the foundational principles and avoid using their power for personal goals, revenge, or conflicts with others. However, critics argue that democracy in our country is shifting from a governance model to a mere procedure for legitimising authority. When the balance tilts heavily towards those in power, people begin to lose trust in key national institutions and political parties, which they expect to guarantee democracy, leading them to equate governance with the regime and question democracy itself. The analysis also shows that *democracy* is a *realm of law*, where principles and rules are developed to establish the moral foundation of the state. Democracy, like other values, must be cultivated and instilled anew in each generation, embodying the supremacy of law and respect for human rights. No matter its form, democracy is a core value often underscored as a *European ideal*.

5. A cognitive definition of the concept of *democracy*

The analysis of systemic, survey, and textual data suggests that when Lithuanians think, speak, or write about the concept of democracy, they include certain shades of meaning that form its cognitive definition:

Democracy for Lithuanians is first of all the *freedom* to express their own beliefs and opinions, to create and think freely; although flawed, it has been the best *form of government* so far, where people feel safe and free, where the will of the citizens is expressed through free elections or other forms of decision-making; democracy is *equality*, including *gender equality* and *same-sex marriage*, and *tolerance*; it is the *world of law*, where principles and rules are created, and where the moral foundation of the state is formed.

List of dictionary abbreviations

- BLKŽ – *Bendrinės lietuvių kalbos žodynas* (Lietuvių kalbos institutas, n.d.-a).
 DLKŽ – *Dabartinės lietuvių kalbos žodynas* (Lietuvių kalbos institutas, n.d.-b).
 LKŽ – *Lietuvių kalbos žodynas* (Lietuvių kalbos institutas, n.d.-c).
 TŽŽ – *Tarptautinių žodžių žodynas* (Kaulakienė et al., 2013).

LEM – Lithuanian electronic media

- LEM1 – *Esame dalis sunkiai kuriamo demokratijos pasaulio* (Landsbergis, 2021).
 LEM2 – *Demokratija pasaulyje* (2013).
 LEM3 – *G. Landsbergis: Demokratinės valstybės turi vieną ginklą prieš totalitarinių režimų veiksmus* (2021).
 LEM4 – *Steigiamojo Seimo 100-metis įpareigoja saugoti demokratiją* (2020).
 LEM5 – *Demokratija neįmanoma be tolerancijos ir pagarbos kiekvieno žmogaus teisėms ir laisvėms* (Grybauskaitė, 2009).
 LEM6 – *V. Adamkus: Pagal vakarietišką demokratiją negyvename* (2017).
 LEM7 – *Prezidento Valdo Adamkaus istorijos samprata (II)* (Lopata, 2014).
 LEM8 – *Lietuvos Prezidento Gitano Nausėdos įžanginė kalba “Demokratijos stiprinimas ir pasipriešinimas autoritarizmui”, pasakyta Demokratijos viršūnių susitikime* (2021).
 LEM9 – *Gitano Nausėda: Demokratija nėra anarchija* (2021).
 LEM10 – *Kodėl svaidomės Kremliaus agentais, idiotais ir antivalstybinėmis partijomis?* (Jastramskis, 2020).
 LEM11 – *Apie demokratiją Lietuvoje* (Beržiūnas, 2021).
 LEM12 – *Kas blogai su demokratija, arba Kaip mes mąstome apie politiką? (I)* (Merkinaitė, 2016).

- LEM13 – *Demokratijos pasaulyje neapginsime, jeigu patys jos negerbsime* (Jastramskis, 2021).
- LEM14 – *Demokratija nuvilia savus, bet gąsdina autoritarus* (Kojala, 2021a).
- LEM15 – *Profesorius Jokubaitis: Jei katalikai reikalautų to paties, kaip homoseksualai, kiltų skandalas* (2021).
- LEM16 – *Politikos filosofas A. Jokubaitis: “Ar neatėjo laikas demokratiją pastatyti į savo vietą?”* (Gritėnas, 2018).
- LEM17 – *Prof. A. Jokubaitis: Reikalinga nuo intelektualų iliuzijų nepriklausanti Europos Sąjunga* (Petronis, 2020).
- LEM18 – *Alvydas Jokubaitis: Nyksta ištikimybė Lietuvai* (2017).
- LEM19 – *Prof. dr. Alvydas Jokubaitis: Demokratijos laikais sunku ugdyti žmonių dvasinį gyvenimą* (2022).
- LEM20 – *Filosofas A. Jokubaitis: “Panaikindami Europos Parlamentą, nes tai pasityčiojimas iš demokratijos”* (Gritėnas, 2019).
- LEM21 – *Liberali demokratija, globalizacija ir demokratijos perspektyvos Lietuvoje* (Radžvilas, 2011).
- LEM22 – *Apie demokratijos krizę* (Bielskis, 2020).
- LEM23 – *Pasitikėjime demokratija* (Kojala, 2021b).
- LEM24 – *D. Kuolys: Demokratija turi palikti ir kritikos galimybę* (2019).
- LEM25 – *Lietuvos resovietizacija pateikiama kaip europinis projektas* (Kuolys, 2014).
- LEM26 – *Su fuckais ir matais – į šlovę* (Valatka, 2021).
- LEM27 – *Demokratinio kapitalizmo saulėlydis. Tamsieji amžiai* (Laučius, 2018).
- LEM28 – *Psichologas: Priešiškus karą sukėlusiems žmones yra normalus, tačiau nereikėtų pamesti galvos* (Macijauskaitė, 2022).
- LEM29 – *Kam skamba “na...” prie Gyvačių salos?* (Jurkevičius, 2022).

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The Concept of *Democracy* in Lithuanian Lexicographic Sources and Its Reflection in the Worldview of Young People and Media Texts

Abstract

This article analyses how the concept of *democracy* is understood in Lithuanian lexicographic sources, what democracy means to young people, and how Lithuanians use and interpret the term in various contexts. Using the methodology of the Lublin ethnolinguistic school, the study aims to outline a cognitive definition of this concept. The results of the research revealed that Lithuanian lexicographic sources emphasise the political system, the right to vote, representation, and participation in the management of an organisation. For young people, democracy is a form of government that is primarily about freedom of choice, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of creativity, freedom of expression, personal freedom, freedom of self-

determination, even freedom to live and die. Young people also associate democracy with fair elections, equality, and human rights. The various discourses also emphasise the form of governance and freedom, but at the same time note that there is no such thing as absolute freedom, so freedom goes hand in hand with tolerance and respect for other people's opinions and thoughts. Critics argue that democracy in our society risks becoming not a form of governance but a procedure for legitimising authority, where the scales heavily tilt towards those in power. Democracy, like other values, requires nurturing and must be instilled anew in each generation.

Keywords: democracy; freedom; rights; young people

Pojęcie demokracji w litewskich źródłach leksykograficznych i jego odbicie w światopoglądzie młodzieży i tekstach medialnych

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano, jak pojęcie *demokracji* jest rozumiane w litewskich źródłach leksykograficznych, co młodzi ludzie rozumieją przez demokrację oraz jak Litwini interpretują termin *demokracja*, gdy używają go w różnych kontekstach. Artykuł ma na celu zarysowanie kognitywnej definicji analizowanego pojęcia przy użyciu metodologii Lubelskiej Szkoły Etnolingwistycznej. Wyniki badania wykazały, że litewskie źródła leksykograficzne akcentują system polityczny, prawo do głosowania, reprezentację i udział w zarządzaniu organizacją. Dla młodzieży demokracja jest formą rządów, która wiąże się przede wszystkim z wolnością wyboru, słowa, myśli, twórczości, opinii, jednostki, samostanowienia, a nawet wolnością dotyczącą życia i śmierci. Demokracja młodym ludziom kojarzy się także z uczciwymi wyborami, równością oraz prawami człowieka. W różnych dyskursach podkreślana jest również forma rządów i wolność, zauważa się jednak, że nie ma czegoś takiego jak wolność absolutna, zatem wolność jest nierozzerwalnie związana z tolerancją oraz poszanowaniem opinii i myśli innych. Zdaniem krytyków istnieje ryzyko, że w naszym społeczeństwie demokracja stanie się nie tyle formą rządów, ile procedurą legitymizacji władzy, w której szala wyraźnie przechyla się na korzyść rządzących. Demokracja, podobnie jak inne wartości, wymaga pielęgnowania i musi być wpajana na nowo w każdym pokoleniu.

Słowa kluczowe: demokracja; wolność; prawa; młodzież

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Support of the work: The article was prepared on the basis of materials from the project “Analysis of the Concepts DEMOCRACY, PATRIOTISM, TOLERANCE and Their Antonyms and Synonyms”, funded by the State Commission of the Lithuanian Language.

Authors’ contribution: IS prepared sections on lexicographic data and texts; MS prepared the introduction, conducted the student survey, and systematised survey data.

Competing interests: The authors state that there is no conflict of interest to disclose.

Publication history: Received: 2024-11-28; Accepted: 2025-10-14; Published: 2025-12-31