

Changes in Perceived Safety, Safety as a Value, and News Consumption in Lithuania before and during the War in Ukraine

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Abstract. Safety has become an increasingly relevant topic in Lithuania in the context of recent geopolitical events. This study examined changes in perceived safety, safety as a value, and political news consumption among Lithuanians by using repeated cross-sectional data from the European Social Survey collected in 2018 ($n = 1835$), 2020 ($n = 1659$), and 2023 ($n = 1365$). Between-wave comparisons and correlational analyses were conducted. The results showed that perceived safety was higher in 2020 and 2023 compared to 2018, while the importance of safety as a value remained stable across waves. Political news consumption decreased in 2020 and increased again in 2023 compared to 2018.

Keywords: perceived safety, safety as value, news consumption, European Social Survey (ESS).

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Saugumo pojūčio, saugumo kaip vertybės ir naujienų vartojimo pokyčiai Lietuvoje prieš karą Ukrainoje ir jo metu

Santrauka. Saugumas Lietuvoje, atsižvelgiant į pastarojo meto geopolitinius įvykius, tapo aktuali tema. Šiame tyrime buvo nagrinėjami lietuvių saugumo pojūčio, saugumo kaip vertybės ir naujienų vartojimo pokyčiai, naudojant Europos socialinės apklausos duomenis, surinktus 2018 m. (n = 1835), 2020 m. (n = 1659) ir 2023 m. (n = 1365). Buvo atlikti skirtingų tyrimo bangų palyginimai ir koreliacinė analizė. Rezultatai parodė, kad saugumo pojūtis 2020 m. ir 2023 m. buvo didesnis nei 2018 m., o saugumo kaip vertybės svarba visoms tyrimo bangoms išliko stabili. Naujienų vartojimas 2020 m. sumažėjo, o 2023 m. vėl padidėjo, palyginti su 2018 m.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: saugumo pojūtis, saugumas kaip vertybė, naujienų vartojimas, Europos socialinis tyrimas (EST).

Introduction

Throughout its history, Lithuania has gone through many long occupations by aggressive neighboring powers. One of these long-term occupations, suffered under the yoke of Russia, was especially difficult. First, annexation by the monarchist Russia through the years of 1795–1918, after a brief span of independence, was then followed by the forceful admission into the Soviet Union in the years of 1940–1941 and 1944–1990. Having undergone many repressions, such as the Lithuanian press ban (1864–1904), mass Soviet deportations to Siberia (1940–1953), and the suppression of freedom of thought by various means of political, ideological and religious censorship spanning throughout the whole period of Soviet occupation, it is unlikely that Lithuanian people do not feel threatened by Russia, after having had to witness the current invasion of Ukraine, which started in 2022. Recent studies show that 70% of Lithuanians surveyed see Russia as a real threat, with more women and younger people leaning to agree with the aforementioned statement (Platukytė, 2024). Similar statistics can be seen in past studies too. Research surrounding feelings of safety during the Crimean war of 2014 states that, before the war, 18% of surveyed Lithuanians perceived Russia as a threat. When the war started, that number increased up to 54.5%, and 2 years after the outbreak of the conflict, it is reported that the feelings of threat went down a little – as 39% of people felt threatened (Gečienė-Janulionė, 2018). Other studies add to this finding, by stating that 53% of surveyed people in Lithuania see Russia as unfriendly, and that 49% feel less safe because of the annexation of Crimea (Janušauskienė & Vileikienė, 2016). That being said, there is a distinct lack of research into how outer threats might influence the subjective feelings of safety.

Furthermore, war on its own can be a strong factor predicting low levels of personal safety. Although results can be different (e.g., Abd El Fatah et al., 2025), it is said, that psychological and physical proximity to war is associated with higher levels of physical arousal and stress, which, in turn, motivates people to seek personal safety more (Huțul et al., 2024; Malecki et al., 2023; Riad et al., 2022). If left unnoticed, such a state can lead to various psychological problems, including depression, anxiety disorders, lowered psychological resilience, and trauma symptoms (Abd El Fatah et al., 2025; Enav et al., 2024; Malecki et al., 2023; Riad et al., 2022). Among the many psychological consequences of war, anxiety stands out as a particularly common phenomenon (Hyland et al., 2023).

This form of anxiety has typically been defined in recent literature as ‘war anxiety’ (Zhang & Li, 2025). It refers to the psychological distress and intensified fear that individuals feel in response to actual or perceived war-related threats, including worries about safety, loss, displacement, and violence (Abd El Fatah et al., 2025). In the context of war and armed conflict, this reaction can be seen as a natural emotional response that can affect not only mental health, as mentioned above, but also physical health, causing psychosomatic problems and cardiovascular disorders; it may also affect health behavior – by causing insomnia and substance abuse; and damage social relationships (Ragowska & Pawlova, 2023; Zhang & Li, 2025).

Another factor that is related to personal safety is the consumption of war-related media. Such consumption is associated with higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression risk; it heightens feelings of being unsafe, promotes trauma, and reduces psychological resilience (Malecki et al., 2023; Enav et al., 2024; Riad et al., 2022). In addition to media exposure, age appears to play a role: in one study, individuals over 22 years old felt more anxious about the Russia-Ukraine war than younger students (Riad et al., 2022). Furthermore, gender may also be an important variable regarding war-related distress: female students experienced higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms compared to male students in response to the perceived war threat (Riad et al., 2022). Education is also linked to differences in perceived personal safety: research on crime-related fear indicates that lower educational attainment is associated with lower perceived safety (Macassa et al., 2023). Building on this, the amount of time individuals spend in full-time education may similarly influence perceived safety.

The aim of this paper is to explore the changes among Lithuanians in the perceptions of safety, news consumption and the importance of safety as a value. While perceived safety captures situational threat appraisals, safety as a value reflects more stable motivational orientations that may respond differently to outer threats.

Method

Samples and procedure

To conduct the analysis, data from 9th, 10th and 11th waves (corresponding the years of 2018, 2020 and 2023) of the European Social Survey were used. Although earlier ESS waves (e.g., 2014 and 2016) were also available, they were not included in the analysis because the present study emphasizes the geopolitical context shaped by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which had more far-reaching implications for European security than the 2014 annexation of Crimea (Kakhisvili & Felder, 2025), and may therefore be more closely associated with changes in Lithuanian citizens’ perceptions of safety. The *European Social Survey* is a cross-national survey that has been conducted in Europe every two years since 2001. It provides high-quality comparative data on Europeans’ attitudes, beliefs and behavior. The data were collected through computer-assisted personal (face-to-face) interviewing. Respondents were selected by using strict random probability methods. *SPSS v.26* was used to conduct the statistical analysis.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for each wave

| Variable | Wave 9 (<i>n</i> = 1835) | Wave 10 (<i>n</i> = 1659) | Wave 11 (<i>n</i> = 1365) |
|--|------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Male, <i>n</i> (%) | 574 (31.3) | 639 (38.5) | 526 (38.5) |
| Female, <i>n</i> (%) | 1261 (68.7) | 1020 (61.5) | 839 (61.5) |
| Mean age (<i>SD</i>) | 56.33 (17.69) | 51.22 (18.12) | 50.34 (17.79) |
| Mean time participants spent on full-education (<i>SD</i>) | 12.35 (3.13) | 13.59 (3.43) | 13.68 (3.02) |
| Daily news consumption (<i>SD</i>) | 79.21 (70.8) | 74.84 (82.72) | 116.42 (196.6) |

Perception of safety was measured by using a single variable asking participants their feeling of safety of walking alone in a local area after dark (ranging from ‘1’ – very safe, to ‘4’ – very unsafe). Additional information on frequencies between waves can be found in Supplementary data.

Safety as a value was measured by using a subscale ‘Security’ from the Human Values Scale (PVQ21) (Schwartz, 2021). The subscale consists of two items ranging from ‘1’ – very much like me to ‘6’ – not like me at all. The reliability of the subscale was measured for each wave with Cronbach alpha showing similar results (0.60–0.65). Additional information on reliability can be found in Supplementary data.

Political news consumption was measured by using a single variable asking the participants their average daily time (in minutes) spent watching, reading or listening to news about politics and current affairs.

Results

Pearson’s correlations were used to examine linear associations between continuous and quasi-continuous variables. For clarity and brevity, correlations for the three primary variables are presented in Table 2; correlations involving the additional variables are summarized descriptively in the text below.

Further analysis involving age and time spent on full-time education showed stronger associations with the three primary variables. Age was positively correlated with psychological safety across all three waves ($r = 0.13$ to 0.15 , $p < 0.01$) and news consumption ($r = 0.16$ to 0.26 , $p < 0.01$). However, age was negatively correlated with safety as a value ($r = -0.08$ to -0.15 , $p < 0.01$). Time spent on full-time education showed a small negative correlation with psychological safety ($r = -0.07$ to -0.11 , $p < 0.01$) but showed no relationship with safety as a value or news consumption. Additional information on how non-primary variables interact with each other can be found in supplementary material.

Table 2*Pearson correlation analysis of the main variables*

| Variables | Wave 9 (<i>n</i> = 1835) | Wave 10 (<i>n</i> = 1659) | Wave 11 (<i>n</i> = 1365) |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Perception of safety – Safety as a value | -0.017 | -0.070** | -0.015 |
| 2. Perception of safety – News consumption | 0.009 | 0.030 | 0.020 |
| 3. Safety as a value – News consumption | -0.027 | 0.059* | -0.075** |

Note. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

In comparing the changes in perception of safety across waves, a non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test revealed a significant difference in feelings of safety when walking alone in a local area after dark across the three waves, $H(2) = 22.59, p < .001$.

Post-hoc Mann–Whitney U tests showed that the participants in Wave 10 reported greater feelings of safety than in Wave 9. Furthermore, the participants in Wave 11 also reported greater feelings of safety than in Wave 9. The difference in feelings of safety was not statistically significant between Wave 10 and Wave 11. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3*Pairwise Mann–Whitney U tests for perception of safety*

| Comparison | Mean rank 1 | Mean rank 2 | U | Z | <i>p</i> | η^2 |
|---------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------|--------|----------|----------|
| Wave 9 vs 10 | 1764.89 _{Wave 9} | 1675.33 _{Wave 10} | 1401518 | -3.035 | .002 | .002 |
| Wave 9 vs 11 | 1633.79 _{Wave 9} | 1501.30 _{Wave 11} | 1113266 | -4.662 | .000 | .006 |
| Wave 10 vs 11 | 1506.34 _{Wave 10} | 1460.15 _{Wave 11} | 1058137 | -1.671 | .095 | .001 |

Note. Effect size was calculated as $\eta^2 = Z^2 / (N - 1)$

In comparing the changes for safety as a value, descriptive statistics showed very similar mean scores on the Safety values subscale across the three waves. A one-way ANOVA indicated that these differences were not statistically significant, $F(2, 4636) = 0.41, p = 0.665$. This suggests that the importance of Safety values did not vary across the three waves.

In comparing the changes in daily news consumption, a Kruskal–Wallis test, used due to non-normal data distribution, revealed a significant difference in consumption of news about politics and current affairs across the three waves, $H(2) = 21.57, p < .001$. A pairwise comparison was performed (see Table 4).

Table 4

Pairwise Mann–Whitney U tests for news about politics consumption

| Comparison | Mean rank 1 | Mean rank 2 | U | Z | <i>p</i> | η^2 |
|---------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------|--------|----------|----------|
| Wave 9 vs 10 | 1785.13 _{Wave 9} | 1628.83 _{Wave 10} | 1325717 | -4.689 | .000 | .006 |
| Wave 9 vs 11 | 1590.08 _{Wave 9} | 1541.09 _{Wave 11} | 1168552 | -1.520 | .128 | .001 |
| Wave 10 vs 11 | 1454.70 _{Wave 10} | 1537.12 _{Wave 11} | 1041365 | -2.629 | .009 | .002 |

Note. Effect size was calculated as $\eta^2 = Z^2 / (N - 1)$

Post-hoc Mann–Whitney U tests showed that participants in Wave 10 reported spending less time watching, reading or listening to news about politics and current affairs than Wave 9. However, the participants in Wave 11 reported spending more time when consuming news about politics and current affairs than Wave 10. The difference of news about politics consumption was not statistically significant between Wave 9 and Wave 11.

Discussion

This study investigated changes in perceived safety, safety as a value, and political news consumption among Lithuanians across the *European Social Survey* waves (2018, 2020, and 2023). In addition, correlations with political news consumption, age, and years spent in education were investigated to provide contextual insight into these changes.

The most notable change across waves emerged in perceived safety. Contrary to expectations, perceived safety was higher in both 2020 and 2023 compared to 2018, while no significant difference was found between 2020 and 2023. These findings differ from previous research linking war-related threat to an increased anxiety and reduced feelings of safety (Huțul et al., 2024; Malecki et al., 2023; Riad et al., 2022), although mixed results have also been reported (Abd El Fatah et al., 2025). Researchers investigating subjective safety report that people tend to become accustomed to insecure situations (Melkonyan et al., 2022; Willis-Herrera et al., 2009). Subjective perceptions of safety contain not only the perception of an external threat but also the ability and capacity that an individual has to confront it, and the coping strategies they use to psychologically defend against external threats (Wills-Herrera et al., 2009). Moreover, the absence of correlations between news consumption and perceived safety may reflect that everyday feelings of safety may not be strongly shaped by exposure to political news. Taken together, these findings may reflect processes of psychological adaptation and coping in the face of a prolonged external threat. However, further research is needed to clarify the mechanisms underlying the changes in perceived safety.

In contrast to perceived safety, the importance of safety as a value did not change across the three *European Social Survey* waves. Such consistency likely reflects the stability of personal values, which tend to change slowly over time (Smallenbroek et al., 2023). Given

the relatively high mean age of the participants across the waves, large shifts in value priorities may be unlikely, even in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Political news consumption varied across the three ESS waves, showing a decline in 2020 relative to 2018 and increasing again in 2023. These changes may reflect differences in the broader context of each survey year. During 2020, public attention was largely focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have reduced interest in political news. On the other hand, some researchers argue that during the pandemic, interest in news, and not merely political news, had decreased overall as a result of COVID-19-related fatigue (Buneviciene et al., 2021). As the pandemic became less prominent in everyday life, attention to political issues may have gradually returned. The increase observed in 2023 may reflect a return of public attention to political news after the pandemic period.

Several limitations should be noted. First, both perceived safety and political news consumption were measured by using a single question, which may limit the depth and precision of these constructs. Second, the reliability of the safety value subscale was relatively low. Third, the perceived safety was measured by using a single item – feeling safe when walking alone in a local area after dark, which captures only a narrow aspect of personal safety and does not directly reflect the feelings of personal safety related to the broader geopolitical context. Results should be taken with caution. Fourth, the data used in this analysis, though being representative of the population, are not panel data, which means that the analysis did not observe individual-level changes over time. Fifth, the description of news consumption variable also includes consumption of ‘current affairs’ media, which might imply other things than just politics alone. In turn, this makes the variable less valid. Lastly, the analyses compared different cross-sectional samples across survey waves rather than tracking changes within the same individuals.

Supplementary data

The supplementary data can be found in the *Open Science Framework* website: https://osf.io/j3vef/overview?view_only=2d867c70e59443818e85b7d0c3d0d543

Author contributions

Deividas Vepštas: conceptualization, project administration, supervision, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

Žygmantas Krivickas: conceptualization, project administration, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing.

Augustas Aleksejevas: data curation, formal analysis, methodology, writing – review and editing.

Tadas Vadvilavičius: writing – review and editing.

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