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## THE ROLE OF PUBLIC OPINIONS ON SOCIETY SECURITY: A SOCIO-CULTURAL APPROACH

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**Annotation.** *Public opinion is a very important phenomenon of expression of democracy, which is relevant in times of crisis and extreme situations. Emerging challenges in times of crisis and extreme situations have an unavoidable impact on national and society security. Currently, the Lithuanian state and society are struggling with the spread of COVID-19 disease as a global pandemics. This struggle is reflected in various sections of public opinion. Public opinion can both strengthen and weaken the subjective security of society members.*

*The article analyzes the social role of public opinion on society security from a socio-cultural point of view. Therefore, the definition of society security from a socio-cultural point of view is detailed, and the content of the psychological and informational-communicative aspects of the impact of public opinion on public consciousness and behaviour is revealed. These methodological tools are designed to examine the dissemination of the content of public opinion during of the fight against COVID-19 disease.*

*A socio-cultural approach is an interpretation of human relations, their interaction and expression of activity on the basis of respect for natural rights. It is the respect for natural rights – the life, health, freedom and property of the individual - that is the fundamental basis of being independent people. Based on the data of the study conducted, it can be stated, that politicised and polarised public opinion not only influences a deceleration of vaccination rates, but also can be seen as an additional source of subjective insecurity among society members and as a starting point for the formation of a new system of values.*

**Keywords.** *Public opinion, society security, socio-cultural point of view, social order, extreme situation.*

### Introduction

Public opinion is a very important phenomenon of democracy, which has become entrenched in Lithuanian society thanks to the opportunities provided by the electronic space. Now public opinion can be formed by various subjects. The emergence of social networks is gradually evolving into a social power that can equate the power of the state and municipal institutions as well as businesses and NGOs in terms of social psychology and communication. Public opinion at different levels of formalisation can have very different social powers, which are particularly relevant in times of crisis and extreme situations.

**Relevance of the study.** Emerging challenges in times of crisis and extreme situations have an unavoidable impact on national and public security. Currently, the Lithuanian state and society are struggling with the spread of COVID-19 disease as a global pandemics. This struggle is reflected in various sections of public opinion. Public opinion can both strengthen and weaken the subjective security of society members and their decision to vaccinate against the coronavirus disease. Studies of the content of public opinion on the course, prospects of the fight against COVID-19 disease and the attitudes of society members towards vaccination are therefore very important to strengthen the society's subjective security.

**The research subject** is the dissemination of public opinion during the extreme situation regarding the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences.

**The objective** is to reveal the role of public opinion on society security from a socio-cultural point of view. Public opinion inevitably affects the consciousness and behaviour of society members, their subjective assessment of their own safety. Therefore, we also aim to

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reveal methodological perspectives of the socio-cultural point of view as a study of the content of public opinion.

### **Definition of Society Security from a Socio-Cultural Point of View**

A socio-cultural point of view is the interpretation of human relations, their interaction and expression of activity on the basis of respect for natural rights. It is the respect for natural rights – the life, health, freedom and property of the individual - that is the fundamental basis of being independent people. Therefore, it is no coincidence that section II of the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania "The relationship between human and the state" begins with the Article 18, which emphasizes that "human rights and freedoms are natural".

Socio-cultural interpretation of human interaction can cover various aspects of human being, including security. This approach combines two terms - "social" and "cultural" and covers all former and existing spheres of human activity. R. Nisbet revealed that the referent of "sociality" was almost always a community (Nisbet, 2000, p.101). As St. Thomas Aquinas states, a human by nature is destined to live in a community (Anzenbacher, 1992, p. 229). Therefore, he is characterized not only by the natural (primary) nature, but also by the secondary - cultural nature, which he forms in the process of socialization by taking over the culture of a particular community. Since the nature of the socio-cultural point of view is twofold, it can be used to interpret the expression of the material and spiritual reality of any community (society, its group), its understanding of the realization of basic human needs.

Culture is understood in two ways: 1) objectively it is the products of activity created by human and society, its forms and systems, the functioning of which allows the creation, use and transmission of material and spiritual values; 2) from the subjective point of view it is a degree of perfection achieved by a person in a field of science or activity; literacy. Therefore, it can be stated that the socialization of the individual occurs in a socio-cultural context, in which a person becomes a socio-cultural personality. Two socio-cultural contexts are distinguished: (1) social interaction that transmits cultural knowledge and ways of thinking, and (2) participation in daily activities, cultural practices and cultural measures that embody goals and meanings to achieve those goals that are valued in culture (Gauvain, 2013, p. 425-444). It can be stated that only the harmony of both contexts determines the strength of personality socialization.

Thus, a human is both a social and a cultural being at the same time: individuals are connected in the society by a variety of social ties and relationships. This is determined by the dual nature of the individual: on the one hand, he is an autonomous individual, but on the other hand, an individual can not become a personality without the relations with other people. Individuals communicate and cooperate, in most cases not in a random way, but in accordance with their respective rights and obligations, which constitute the content of various social contexts, which are linked by their fundamental characteristic - respect or disrespect for natural rights. Although human relations and relationships are regulated and predictable through respect for their rights and responsibilities, their sustainability is not determined by the potential power of the subjects, but by their respect for natural rights. On the other hand, the quality of universal observance of rights and obligations is based on the corresponding socio-cultural context, which we call a social order.

A social order is a set of characteristics of community relations and relationships that occur and develop in individual societies or social groups, the practice of which helps to survive and achieve a higher standard of living for as many members of the society or social group as possible. Together, people create their own living environment (cultural and psychological structures) and it is important for them to increase security of their community and freedom of

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its members, without increasing the oppression of the authorities. Therefore, in this most extensive historical process, natural rights must inevitably have been formed and their socio-cultural expression institutionalised as the basis of the cohesion of the socio-cultural contexts of individual communities and the integrity of their members. It can therefore be assumed that compliance with the rules of the general social order guarantees the safety of individuals and social groups.

Security is a state of protection and protection against dangers and confidence in one's own knowledge. This threefold interpretation of the meaning of security is due to the fact that security itself expresses a relationship in which there are no threats to the participants in the relationship. There can be a variety of relations: a person himself with himself, with other people, their groups and between them, with the objects of nature, with work and its tools, with God. The reasons for the occurrence of threats may also be various: 1) subjective, such as subjective interpretation of the behavior of the participant(s) in the relationship as posing a threat; 2) the emergence and functioning of objective threats that are independent of, for example, the will of the participants in the relationship; 3) mixed relationships, such as those arising from a subjective desire to control threats, generate new threats. Security therefore includes both objective security and a sense of security (subjective security) and confidence in security (lack of doubts).

Security is one of the basic human needs, the need for satisfying which is beyond doubt. It was the constant desire of the primary communities to control the state of security that led to the formation and development of social control as a mechanism for social regulation. It is therefore no coincidence that the creator of humanistic psychology A. Maslow outlined the main human needs in hierarchical order and stressed that "these needs, or values, are hierarchically and evolutionarily related in terms of strength and priority. For example, security is more powerful and stronger, more urgent, previously emerging, more vital need than love, and the need for food is usually stronger than every other. In addition, all these needs can be seen as steps along the time path to general self-actualization, which includes all basic needs" (Maslow, 1989, p. 343). It is therefore reasonable to say that security is or must be implied in all socio-cultural contexts and human activities of society.

The socio-cultural contexts of human and public life presuppose natural, social, economic, political, legal, cultural, social-psychological, information-communicative conditions. Their interaction is the engine of the development of social order and constantly creates changing socio-cultural contexts of human life, to which individuals not only seek to adapt, but also manage to change them through their individual and collective activities. This constant interaction of socio-cultural contexts of human life and its activities is not only a dynamism of the social order, but also the main source of human insecurity, which it is impossible to neutralize. Therefore, when dealing with security, we face problems in the protection of various values.

Protecting some of the values, such as human life, health, status, well-being, freedom, is very difficult, because losing them is difficult, and in some cases even impossible to restore them. In order to protect them, the world community has legally obliged all legal entities to protect human rights and freedoms internationally. Thus, it can be summarized that human and societal security are socio-cultural living conditions that do not or do not pose a threat to human life, health, liberty, honor and property. And the pursuit of constant security, which is inherent in the need of all people, guarantees the unification of the people and the demand for respect for natural rights.

When the development of socio-cultural living conditions poses not only an individual but also a social threat to the existence of groups of people and society, we move on to public

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and state national security. The state of society security and its development are determined by the interaction between the institutions of the state political regime and active (civic) groups of society, forming and transforming social phenomena that directly and indirectly affect the confidence of individuals and society in security. The nature of this interaction is conditioned by the political regime of the state.

In a liberal democracy, society security is closely linked to the civic status of the society and national security. In the broadest sense, national security is a state of protection of people, society and the state against internal and external threats, in which public authorities can ensure a constitutional democratic order, a standard of living that respects human rights and freedoms, social sovereignty and territorial integrity, and its sustainable development, defense and security. Thus, the state is the main subject of national security.

At the level of national security, political, economic, military, social, legal, informational, and spiritual and moral aspects of security are distinguished most often. The basis of all these aspects is individual security: "although <...> basically it is subordinated to higher-level political structures, i.e., the state and the international system. ... 'but' the pursuit of individual security has a multifaceted effect on national security. Where there is a strong conflict between the state and the citizens, the internal mess can threaten the coherence of the state in such a way that it is problematic to apply the concept of national security in general" (Buzan, 1997, p. 91).

Therefore, it can be stated that the value-normative state of society is the primary source of national security/insecurity. This means that from the socio-cultural point of view, when examining national security, it is very important to pay attention to the tendencies of the development of the value-normative state of the social groups. They are most noticeable when examining the interaction of groups of society in the public sphere.

### **Public Opinion and Its Impact**

Public opinion is the views, assessments and decisions of various social groups about the events of social life, the activities (behavior) of individual personalities, organizations and parties, important social, political, cultural problems of society. The majority of society is usually not directly involved in political processes. Therefore, their social activity is most often manifested in public opinion, which can be expressed by commenting on the texts of authors of electronic media and communicating in social networks. Public opinion on specific actions and acts of public subjects shall be expressed in their approval or in their condemnation. The more members of society have their opinion and express an active civic position, the stronger and more effective public opinion is formed.

Public opinion is not only a self-generated, but a purposefully formed social phenomenon. Public communication through the media and social networks has a decisive influence on the existence of modern society as a whole. Free movement of information through the media system and social networks helps members of the public to form their views on the events taking place in society, to orient themselves towards real and potential like-minded fellows, and to find a reference group with which to show solidarity. As a result, public opinion is, in most cases, socially differentiated and therefore has a limited social role.

Public opinion, as a social phenomenon, has its own structure, which distinguishes three main components: rational, emotional, and volitional. In terms of practical implementation, public opinion has two structural aspects: public appreciation and public will. The expression and interaction of these aspects may be different. For example, there may be a very clear public assessment of a particular social problem, but there may not be enough public will to pressure the relevant authorities to act on the expressed assessment. However, it may also be that public

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opinion is deliberately shaped as a contradiction to public social order and takes the form of social polarisation. In this case, the social role of public opinion is strengthened, which can generate serious challenges to society security and even to the constitutional order of the state. Therefore, socially polarized public opinion is a potential source of society insecurity.

It is very important to note that public opinion has several effects on the consciousness and behaviour of society members. Psychological and communicative effects of public opinion can be distinguished. The psychological effect of public opinion is the effect on the behavioural motives of individuals and groups of society. Motives are incentives of activity related to satisfaction of the needs of the individual. To them can be attributed all that stimulates human activity: needs and interests, urges and emotions, preferences and ideals. Public opinion has a psychological effect on the behavioural motives of subjects in two main ways – motivating and restraining motives.

The result of the psychological impact of public opinion is the creation of images about reality or its particular sphere, about various social entities and their relations in a generalized and emotionally shaded form. The image of any area of reality and of social subjects and their relationships that exists in society is a distinctive and particular copy of the consciousness of society and its groups. Undoubtedly, the psychological impact of public opinion on the evaluation of the activities of state institutions influences the formation of image of area of reality or social entities and their relations. But this is only one aspect of creating an image of reality or social entities and their relations. Another aspect of creating this image is related to the imagination and perception of groups in society: how do facts and opinions differ?; what is the difference between knowledge and faith?; what should be the reasoned public opinion? The strength of the psychological impact of public opinion can also be guaranteed by its orientation towards the relevant historical memory and experience of society and its groups. As a consequence of the interaction of these phenomena, a corresponding social psychological climate of mutual trust between society and its groups is created, providing opportunities for various actors to manipulate public opinion.

The information-communication effect of public opinion is a transmission of public information through various communication networks, a formation of appropriate attitudes of society members and a promotion of feedback. The development of the appropriate approach to public opinion is influenced by information of a threefold nature: 1) rational information, which is implicit in the presentation of facts; 2) information that arises from the interpretation of facts; 3) information that is presupposed by opinions and their interaction. A positivist understanding of public opinion emphasizes the rational role of public opinion based on facts and arguments for their interpretation. The content and nature of the information spreading from the facts and arguments undoubtedly influence the formation of the attitude of the individual, the social group and the whole society towards public opinion. Rational information must help social subjects to understand the content of the fact, the circumstances of its occurrence and to embrace the ways of its interpretation and critical thinking.

In addition to this information, there is a continuous flow of information created by the interaction of public opinion with other social factors, phenomena and processes of public life. The content of this information is presupposed by several interactions: 1) the interaction of public opinion with the knowledge (education), value orientations and stereotypes of society and its groups; 2) the interaction of public opinion with social change; 3) the interaction of the rational beginning (presentation of facts) of public opinion with the social irrational beginning arising from communicative barriers. Communication barriers are psychological obstacles that prevent dissemination and acceptance of information. These obstacles are caused by various causes: people's superstition, their social, moral and other differences (such as differences in

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the source of information and its addressee), and the degree of distrust in public institutions. Thus, the information resulting from the interaction of facts and the social environment is of particular importance, as it determines the final functioning of public opinion.

Public opinion is an important source of society security and formation of legal culture in a liberal democracy, which has so far been under-examined and under-evaluated. An infinite understanding of the pluralism of opinions and their expression as inconsistent with the nature of liberal democracy has become entrenched in certain sections of society. This is not only a misunderstanding of it, but also completely inconsistent with the orientations of the doctrine of modern liberalism. It emphasizes that as the emancipation of the individual's will prevail, it is necessary to create common rules for social coexistence that will lead to peace and tranquility (Beniton, 2009, p. 71-72). This is a fundamental challenge in modern-day politics, and the answer to which lies in the ever-changing socio-cultural context. The relationship between the emancipation of the individual's will and the creation of rules of social behavior is possible if it is based on the cooperation of all stakeholders for the achievement of social peace.

Public opinion, which promotes cooperation between social subjects on social peace, also plays a very positive role in the processes of forming and shaping the legal culture of society, as the legal culture of civil society is the basis of the connection between society and national security. A cultured, enterprising and full-fledged citizen is the most important and smallest self-governing element of the social system. This means that the formation of civil society is inextricably linked to the idea of recognizing the value of individual freedom as an individual and to the obligations of the individual to society (the citizen). It is very important to understand the causal relationship between them. It is obvious that individual freedom is needed to spread individual autonomy. It must be such that it promotes the self-realization of the individual and does not become a destructive force on the lives of other individuals. It is the personality that is the real subject of legal culture and legal behavior, in the personal culture of which the legal and political cultural traditions of society are internalized to one degree or another (Šlapkauskas, 2018, p.21).

### **Polarization of Public Opinion - a Source of Subjective Insecurity Among Society Members During Extreme Situations**

Joonhong Ahn and co-authors who developed a new paradigm for nuclear safety state that “a situation is called ‘extreme’ when conditions are radically different from those of so-called ‘normal’ life and are unusually intense, becoming excessive, or even unbearable. Dealing with the extreme situation pushes people to their limits; to the edge of the abyss. The individual, group, organization, company, or more simply, the system is faced with extreme violence, a radical shake-up of life as they know it. The extreme situation leads to the destruction of identity, the loss of benchmarks and frames of reference. The explanation is simple; identity is shaped or manufactured by external relationships (specifically, compliance) with current social norms, adherence to common and therefore shared values, responses to social expectations, and dependency or even subordination between actors in the system. From the moment the (existing) value system is shattered, a change occurs—and a new system appears”. (Joonhong Ahn and others, 2017).

The spread of COVID-19 as a global pandemic in the territory of Lithuania caused the formation of a particularly extreme situation. Dry facts of extreme situation's intensification sound threatening: the first case of COVID-19 disease in Lithuania was confirmed in February 28, 2020, but because of the sharp increase in the number of patients on February 26 the extreme situation was declared in the country, and since March 16 for two weeks there was

introduced the first quarantine that continued till June 17; the second wave of the pandemic began in the country in autumn and in November 4 the second overall quarantine was introduced again, which lasted until July 1, 2021 (COVID-19 pandemija Lietuvoje). Vaccines against COVID-19 have been developed around the world at an accelerated pace, and this has given a hope of survival. In December 27, 2020 a vaccination of the Lithuanian population against COVID-19 disease started. A total of 6293 people have died from COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, according to statistics. Almost every seventh of them died in the past month, during the country's fourth wave of infection (Kas septintą gyvybę COVID-19 pasiglemžė per mėnesį: kuo ši šuolį aiškina medikai?).

Upholding J. Ahn's and his colleagues' point of view, it can be assumed that the value system currently in the process of managing the global pandemic of COVID-19 is in the process of collapse and a new system is forming in the context of its deepening. The contours of the emergence of this system can already be seen by comparing public opinion in different societies on the challenges of managing a pandemic.

The features of consciousness and behavior of individuals and groups of society are most evident during crisis periods, especially during extreme situations. We have been living in such conditions for almost two years. Unequivocally, it can be said that society faced a special "enemy", against which no country in the world had an efficient weapon. Only the conscious and active obedience of members of each society to the requirements of quarantine could help to survive until universal vaccination. Talking about gaining universal immunity against COVID-19 by going through the illness was not the right message. COVID-19 disease without vaccination usually causes particularly painful death. Therefore, it is no coincidence that there are members of society who have not acknowledged that their lives and health are in particular danger. For them, the most important challenge was not protecting their own health and that of other members of society but promoting freedom of movement and thoughts. This is clearly evidenced by the analysis of data on administrative infringement cases in which the plaintiffs contravened the fines imposed by officials:

1) the plaintiffs contravened the fines for non-compliance with the rules on the irregular wearing of masks and restrictions on movement during quarantine (LITEKO<sup>1</sup> - Lithuanian court information system);

2) the plaintiffs challenged fines for violating the restriction of meetings during the extreme situation (LITEKO<sup>2</sup> - Lithuanian court information system);

3) the plaintiffs challenged the fines for violating the restriction of direct contact (LITEKO<sup>3</sup> - Lithuanian court information system).

It should be noted in particular that the applicants sought to justify their disregard for the restriction on movement, assembly and direct contact with freedom of expression. However, L. Jakulevičienė, who analyzed the restrictions on freedom of movement in Lithuania during the COVID-19 pandemic from the point of view of international law, rightly states that "taking into account that the ban in Lithuania was based on the fact that Lithuanians are more likely to move around the country during the Easter period, thus increasing the likelihood of the virus spreading outside major cities during the pandemic, such a restriction was necessary in the current situation. As the restriction was applied for a very short period and the risk of virus spread was higher, it can be considered proportionate" (Jakulevičienė, L).

Unfortunately, the alleged restriction of freedom of expression prior to the vaccination process was not only underestimated in public opinion, but also the freedom of expression subsequently promoted led to the spread of freedom of belief in the threat of the vaccine to the life and health of the patient, which later became the freedom to distribute and form an anti-vaccination opinion, the freedom to refuse vaccination, the freedom to die free without a

vaccine. "The fear of death has somehow disappeared, the anti-waxers are not afraid of death, I do not understand", - political scientist Vytautas Dumbliauskas wondered on "Žinių radijas" (Sejonienė – apie skiepytis atkalbinėjančius medikus: jiems turėtų būti panaikintos licenzijos).

Gradually, public opinion on vaccination against the spread of COVID-19 acquired a politicizing dimension, which has been actively shaped by representatives of position and opposition. In this confrontation, the Presidency's position, which is both in favor of the need for vaccination and in terms of the freedom not to vaccinate, seems strange. An analysis of the public discourse of politicians on the fight against COVID-19 and their comments on the media and social networks, as well as the opinions of specialists and their articles, revealed that public opinion is not only politicized but also polarized. The message that neither vaccination nor non-vaccination will save from COVID-19 disease has become increasingly apparent in the public domain. "This topic, states politician I. Pakarklytė, it's just a choice of whether you're responsible for yourself and your environment and getting vaccinated or behaving differently and hoping to ride that bus without a ticket, to be a "fare dodger." This is simply a promotion of the fare dodger's mentality" (Pradėję atmetinėti Nausėdos veto valdantieji nedžiūgauja: panašu, kad tai karas).

Such polarization of public opinion on vaccination is fundamentally wrong. There are still attempts to explain the flaws of the conflict of polarized opinions and to find a way out of this polarization. "It seems to me, states L. Kukuraitis, that there is a very destructive way to enable society to focus on fighting a common enemy. Now the impression is that they have moved from fighting a common enemy to fighting each other: who has a National Certificate, who does not have, who is unvaccinated, who works remotely or not (Tokių mirtingumo skaičių Lietuva nematė beveik 20 metų: įvardijo, kodėl taip atsitiko). „There is only regret, says A. Ambrozaitis, that so many die, but let it lie on the conscience of people who do not fulfill the civil duty to vaccinate, who think that their egoism is above the public interest. Until they understand this, we can't end the pandemic. <...> we pay a huge price for people's faith in conspiracy theories, not experts, medics or the state. They believe they don't have to believe anything because everything is a lie and a fraudulence" (Kas septintą gyvybę COVID-19 pasiglemžė per mėnesį: kuo ši šuolį aiškina medikai?).

It has been a long time coming, but recently it has become more and more clear that public opinion on the inevitability of vaccination is being formed on the basis of facts: "if you are vaccinated, there is a fivefold lower risk of getting sick, a 10-fold lower risk of going to hospital, and a 25-fold lower risk of dying. This is proved by scientific research. This vaccine is not intended to reduce morbidity, but to prevent a person from becoming ill in severe form, being resuscitated and dying" (Kas septintą gyvybę COVID-19 pasiglemžė per mėnesį: kuo ši šuolį aiškina medikai?). Only with a sharp recent increase in the number of deaths from COVID-19, which accounts for about 90 percent of non-vaccinated deaths, the Seimas decided not to tolerate the alleged equivalence of testing and vaccination any more. These methods are completely unequal in the struggle for the lives of members of our society. Let us hope that this legal decision of the Seimas will help groups of society to get out of the state of polarization of public opinion, which has become the source of legalization of insecurity for all of us.

## CONCLUSIONS

The socio-cultural study of the state of society security emphasizes the importance of analyzing two socio-cultural contexts: (1) social interactions in the transfer of cultural knowledge and ways of thinking, and (2) participation in everyday activities, cultural practices and cultural means.

Public opinion has a psychological and communicative effect on the consciousness and behavior of members of society. Analysis of the internal structure of these effects reveals that public opinion not only transmits cultural knowledge and forms ways of thinking, but also promotes relevant cultural practices. It can therefore be reasonably stated that public opinion and the involvement of relevant subjects in its formation and dissemination are a very important attribute of the life of modern society and cover both socio-cultural contexts mentioned above.

Public opinion can perform both positive and negative functions. In an extreme situation, the unrestricted spread of negative public opinion can become an additional source of insecurity. The spread of the COVID-19 global pandemic caused the formation of a particular emergency situation in the territory of the Lithuania. A study of the presentation and commentary of public information on the management of the spread of COVID-19 revealed that public opinion formation is politicized and has become polarized in the vaccination process. Therefore, in general it can be stated that politicized and polarized public opinion not only contributes to the slowdown in vaccination coverage, but can also be seen as an additional source of subjective insecurity in society and as a starting point for the formation of a new value system.

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