TODAY'S MEDIA TRENDS

LRT

FEBRUARY 23, 2026

THE GDELT PROJECT

TODAY'S MEDIA TRENDS

LRT

FEBRUARY 23, 2026

LITHUANIA FACES A DUAL CRISIS OF DOMESTIC POLITICAL INTEGRITY AND REGIONAL SECURITY AS A MAJOR CORRUPTION PROBE ENSNARES TOP LEADERSHIP WHILE THE WAR IN UKRAINE ENTERS ITS FIFTH YEAR.

DAY-AT-A-GLANCE

Lithuania’s political landscape has been jolted by a high-stakes corruption investigation led by the Special Investigation Service (STT), targeting prominent figures including former Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis and MP Kazys Starkevičius. The probe, which involved rare searches of parliamentary offices and private residences, centers on alleged irregularities within the State Plant Service. While Skvernelis has maintained his leadership of the "For Lithuania" party despite the "special witness" status initially assigned to him, the scandal has triggered internal fractures, most notably the resignation of MP Vytautas Bakas. This domestic turmoil coincides with a public release of the 2025 "Corruption Map," revealing that trust in the Seimas and political parties remains at a nadir, further straining the social contract during a period of heightened geopolitical risk.

Simultaneously, the regional security environment continues to deteriorate as the conflict in Ukraine approaches its fourth anniversary. Reports from the front lines indicate an expansion of the "grey zone"—now reaching up to 40 kilometers in depth—where traditional infantry maneuvers have been largely replaced by pervasive drone warfare. While Ukraine has successfully adapted to satellite communication restrictions, Russia persists in an "attrition through destruction" strategy, targeting critical infrastructure and civilian centers to create uninhabitable zones. Domestically, Lithuanian civil society remains highly mobilized through the "Radarom" initiative, though there is a perceptible undercurrent of "war fatigue" and anxiety regarding the potential for the conflict to spill over Baltic borders.

On the international stage, two major shocks have disrupted global stability: the death of Nemesio "El Mencho" Oseguera Cervantes, leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), and the implementation of 15% global tariffs by the Trump administration. El Mencho’s death during a specialized military operation has sparked a wave of retaliatory violence across Mexico, threatening to destabilize the North American security architecture. In Brussels, EU officials are grappling with the legal and economic implications of new U.S. protectionist measures, which threaten to derail long-negotiated trade agreements and signal a shift toward a more fractured global economic order.

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS

- **High-Level Political Corruption Probe:** The Special Investigation Service (STT) conducted unprecedented searches at the homes and offices of major political figures, including Saulius Skvernelis and Kazys Starkevičius, in connection with a graft investigation involving the State Plant Service.
  - Saulius Skvernelis announced he will remain as party leader after his "special witness" status expired, despite internal pressure.
  - MP Vytautas Bakas resigned from the party in protest of the leadership's handling of the scandal.
  - The 2025 "Corruption Map" identifies the Seimas and political parties as the most corrupt institutions in the eyes of the public.
- **Escalation of Attrition and Drone Warfare in Ukraine:** As the war enters its fifth year, the tactical environment has shifted toward a "death zone" dominated by fiber-optic and FPV drones, making traditional troop movements nearly impossible.
  - The "grey zone" in southeastern Ukraine has expanded to 40 kilometers, where any moving target is engaged by automated systems.
  - Russia is utilizing an "imperial logic" of scorched earth to render eastern territories uninhabitable for future colonization.
  - The "Radarom" fundraiser has surpassed 2.3 million euros to purchase robot squads for the Ukrainian military.
- **Destabilization in Mexico Following "El Mencho's" Death:** The killing of CJNG leader Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes during a military operation has triggered mass unrest and blockades across half of Mexico's states.
  - Violence and arson of vehicles have been concentrated in Jalisco, though the impact has reached international flight schedules.
  - Analysts warn of a potential power vacuum and civil war within the cartel, as the line of succession remains unclear.
- **U.S. Global Tariff Implementation:** Following a Supreme Court ruling, the Trump administration has imposed 15% tariffs on global imports, creating what EU officials call "tariff chaos."
  - The EU has halted trade negotiations to assess the legal impact of the U.S. executive actions.
  - Brussels is seeking to defend existing trade conditions while navigating a more aggressive American protectionist stance.
- **Overhaul of National Broadcaster (LRT) Governance:** A new legislative proposal seeks to restructure LRT management, including the creation of a five-member board and new rules for dismissing the General Director.
  - The proposal maintains a two-thirds majority requirement for the dismissal of the director to prevent political targeting.
  - Controversial provisions that would have limited private media collaboration were removed following industry criticism.

KEY GOVERNANCE TOPICS

Corruption & Governance: The STT investigation into the State Plant Service highlights systemic vulnerabilities in political "trust teams" (political appointees). Discussion in the Seimas suggests that appointees often lack oversight, operating in shadow roles that facilitate corruption. The public perception that political parties are the primary drivers of corruption poses a significant threat to state capacity and legislative legitimacy.

Geopolitical Power Dynamics: Russia's influence operations have shifted toward a "fear front" strategy, using verbal threats and historical narratives to demoralize Baltic populations. While NATO is militarily superior, the Kremlin targets the vulnerability of Western will, portraying the alliance as weak to Lithuanian audiences while claiming it is an existential threat to Russian audiences.

Energy Security: Tensions have escalated between Hungary and Ukraine over the safety of oil pipelines. Hungary alleges that Ukraine is endangering its energy supply, while Ukraine points to Russian drone strikes as the primary cause of infrastructure damage. Hungary is leveraging its veto power over EU sanctions to demand the resumption of reliable energy transit.

National Security: Lithuania is intensifying efforts to counter hybrid threats and disinformation. Security experts recommend reducing time on non-Western social platforms like TikTok and Telegram, which are primary vectors for Kremlin-aligned narratives. Public anxiety remains high, with roughly two-thirds of the population expressing fear of direct conflict with Russia.

Investment Climate: The Lithuanian government is balancing the need for foreign investment with local environmental and noise regulations. The controversy surrounding the "Homanit" factory in Pagiriai illustrates the tension between "empathy for business" and the rights of residents to a healthy environment.

LEGISLATIVE ROUNDUP

Legislative activity has focused on institutional reform and the management of natural resources. Significant debate continues regarding the political neutrality of the national broadcaster and the state's role in forest conservation.

BILLS DISCUSSED/DEBATED:

- **LRT Law Amendments:** A proposal to restructure LRT's governing board and clarify the grounds for the dismissal of the General Director. It seeks to align with the European Media Freedom Act while strengthening professional requirements for board members.
- **Forest Management Policy:** The State Protected Areas Service is purchasing private forests (over 360 hectares so far) to create a more integrated and non-fragmented protected forest system.
- **Political Party Financing:** Following the corruption scandals, there is renewed debate over stricter oversight of party funds and the legal responsibility of party leaders for the actions of their subordinates.

HEARINGS & PRESS EVENTS:

- **Demokratų Sąjunga Board Meeting:** A critical session where Saulius Skvernelis defended his leadership and announced he would not step down, leading to the fracture of the party's parliamentary group.
- **STT Corruption Map Presentation:** The annual release of corruption metrics, which this year showed stagnating progress in eliminating graft from high-level politics.
- **Venice Commission Consultation:** Lithuanian lawmakers are awaiting conclusions from the Venice Commission (expected March 6) regarding the proposed changes to the national broadcaster's management.

DEEP DIVE: TRENDS AND THEMES

The Weaponization of Fear

A recurring theme is the transition from conventional hybrid warfare to a "Psychological Attrition" model. Russian disinformation is no longer just about spreading lies but about leveraging fear as a strategic weapon. By consistently messaging that "NATO will not defend you," the Kremlin seeks to create a self-fulfilling prophecy of Western abandonment. This is mirrored in Ukraine, where Russia's goal is to terrorize populations into flight, transforming vibrant regions into uninhabitable "grey zones" to simplify future territorial annexation.

The "Digital Deadlock" on the Battlefield

The conflict in Ukraine has reached a technological stalemate where drones have rendered the battlefield transparent. Any concentration of armor or infantry is detected and destroyed within minutes. This has forced a regression to static warfare in "mirth zones" where soldiers are supplied solely by drones because ground access is too perilous. The strategic implication is that victory now depends more on industrial capacity and software (anti-drone signals) than on traditional military heroism.

Erosion of Political "Trust Teams"

The corruption probe into the State Plant Service reveals a significant flaw in the "political trust" (appointee) system. In Lithuania, political advisors often move into administrative roles in state agencies to act as informal intermediaries for their parties. This creates a "state within a state" where billion-euro sums are managed without adequate transparency, leading to the discovery of gold bars and massive cash reserves in the homes of mid-level officials.

STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

Short Term (1-4 Weeks): Expect heightened political volatility in the Seimas as the "For Lithuania" party deals with further defections. The STT may move to request the removal of parliamentary immunity for certain figures as the corruption investigation transitions from the "special witness" phase to formal charges. In Mexico, the CJNG's retaliatory violence will likely intensify before a new hierarchy is established.

Medium Term (1-6 Months): The EU will likely implement counter-tariffs or seek a carve-out from the U.S. 15% global tax. Lithuania's "Radarom" robot squads will reach the front lines, potentially providing a tactical edge in the drone-saturated environment. Hungary's energy demands will likely force a compromise on EU-Ukraine oil transit protocols.

Long Term (1-5 Years): The expansion of the "grey zone" in Ukraine suggests a permanent shift toward de-populated buffer territories along the Russian border. Lithuania will likely undergo a fundamental overhaul of its civil service laws to prevent the "shadow governance" by political appointees currently being exposed.

RECOMMENDATIONS & IMPLICATIONS

For International Policy:

- Allies must accelerate the delivery of counter-drone and electronic warfare systems to counter Russia's evolving scorched-earth tactics.
- The EU must maintain coalition cohesion against U.S. tariffs while preventing Hungary from using energy security as a tool to undermine the sanctions regime.
- International bodies (ICC/UN) should prioritize the Duterte and cartel-related investigations to prevent the perception of impunity for high-level crimes.

For Private Sector/Investors:

- **Supply Chain Risk:** The violence in Mexico poses a direct threat to logistics and manufacturing hubs in Jalisco; alternative routes should be secured immediately.
- **Regulatory Compliance:** Investors in Lithuania should anticipate stricter auditing and transparency requirements following the high-level corruption probes into state agencies.
- **Economic Hedging:** Given the 15% U.S. tariff threat, companies should evaluate the feasibility of "near-shoring" production within the EU to bypass American import barriers.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Today's Media Trends is a public interest experiment in applying deep thematic trend analysis to television news coverage from around the world to explore how responsibly applied advanced AI can help journalists and scholars better understand the overarching trends, themes and patterns of our global world.

No data is used to train or tune any AI model.

Each morning, in collaboration with the Internet Archive's TV News Archive, we apply Google's Gemini 3 to deeply examine yesterday's coverage from each television news channel to tease out the overarching themes and trends of its news coverage into a richly annotated thematic analysis. Each high-level insight is connected back to the original broadcast, allowing journalists and scholars to understand the dominate themes and trends and instantly click out to the underlying sources for details.

By helping journalists and scholars see the broader trends and patterns of global news coverage, this analysis helps them identify relevant stories and coverage they might not otherwise have encountered and uncover connections, emphases and narrative shifts that enable more comprehensive reporting and deeper, evidence-based research.

This report is entirely machine generated using Gemini 3 and may include errors and

omissions. Please verify all findings. No data is used to train or tune any AI model.

For questions or suggestions, please contact kalev.leetaru5@gmail.com. You can also learn more about the GDELT Project at https://blog.gdeltproject.org/ and the Internet Archive's TV News Archive at https://archive.org/details/tv.