Defending the "Natural Family" in Lithuania: Gendered Nationalism and Familism in the Discourse of Right-Wing Populists

Evelina Juchnevičiūtė

Department of Sociology at Vytautas Magnus University
Vytauto Didžiojo universiteto Sociologijos katedra
evelina.juchneviciute@vdu.lt
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8364-2687
https://ror.org/04y7eh037

Abstract. The aim of this article is to examine the interplay between gender and nationalism in the political discourse of right-wing populists in Lithuania. In recent years, the political landscape in Central and Eastern Europe has been increasingly characterized by the rise of right-wing populism and anti-gender campaigns. The founding of the Lithuanian political party the National Alliance is linked to this shift. This party is defined as nationalist, conservative, anti-system and populist political movement. Employing political discourse analysis, this study analyses the National Alliance' public statements from 2020 to 2024. The analysis shows that the discourse of the National Alliance uses a hyperbolic and alarmist language to represent progressive gender policies, invokes gendered nationalist and familist notions to delegitimize them, and advocates a model of society based around the "natural family" in which identity is controlled and space for expressions of non-conformity is restricted.

Keywords: nationalism; familism; anti-gender; discourse; right-wing populism.

„Prigimtinės šeimos" gynimas Lietuvoje: lytinis nacionalizmas ir familizmas dešiniųjų populistų diskurse

Santrauka. Šio straipsnio tikslas – ištirti lyties kaip socialinės kategorijos ir nacionalizmo sąveiką dešiniųjų populistų diskurse Lietuvoje. Pastaraisiais metais Vidurio ir Rytų Europos šalių politinėje erdvėje iškilo dešinysis populizmas ir prieš lyčių lygybę nukreiptos antigenderistinės kampanijos. Lietuvos politinės partijos Nacionalinis susivienijimas įkūrimas siejamas su šiais procesais. Ši partija gali būti apibūdinta kaip nacionalistinis, konservatyvus, antisisteminis populistinis politinis judėjimas. Pasitelkus politinę diskurso analizę, šiame tyrime analizuojami 2020–2024 m. paskelbti vieši Nacionalinio susivienijimo pareiškimai. Diskurso analizė rodo, kad Nacionalinis susivienijimas, pristatydamas progresyvias politines iniciatyvas lyčių lygybės klausimais, vartoja hiperbolizuotą alarmistinę kalbą. Siekdama tas iniciatyvas delegitimuoti, ši partija remiasi antigenderistinėmis, nacionalistinėmis ir familistinėmis nuostatomis ir pasisako už visuomenės modelį, kurio centre yra „prigimtinė šeima", kontroliuojanti tapatybės apibrėžtis ir ribojanti nonkonformizmo raišką.

Raktiniai žodžiai: nacionalizmas; familizmas; antigenderizmas; diskursas; dešinysis populizmas.

Introduction

In Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, gender has become a significant point of contention between conservative and progressive forces. In these countries, shaped by their unique histories under communism, gender has evolved into a Laclauian "empty signifier", a flexible marker for "divorce, gay marriage, social acceptance of promiscuity, abortion, the demise of the traditional family" (Graff and Korolczuk 2021; 17), while opposition to it has become a way to rebuild lost communal bonds and achieve social stability (Mayer and Sauer 2017). This shift is linked to a broader crisis of neoliberalism and the failed promise of prosperity, which, as Kuhar and Pajnik (2024; 2) argue, has led to the resurgence of right-wing populism and processes of "de-democratization, illiberalization and renationalization of citizenship".

As of 2024, Lithuania is among five European Union (EU) member states that have not ratified the Istanbul Convention (or the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence), and one of the last EU jurisdictions without any legal recognition for same-sex relationships (Slavinska-Kostigova 2024). The 2023 Gender Equality Index (EIGE 2023) and the 2023 Rainbow Map & Index (ILGA Europe 2023) indicate that Lithuania performs below the EU mean in terms of ensuring equality for women and sexual minorities. Opinion polls also show that Lithuanian society is more conservative on gender equality (European Social Survey 2020) and sexual minorities (European Commission 2019) than other European countries.

In Lithuania, as in other countries in CEE, right-wing populist political parties play an important role in the proliferation of anti-gender discourses (Graff and Korolczuk 2021; Kováts and Põim 2015). As Graff and Korolczuk (2021; 7) observe, these political parties have "embraced anti-gender rhetoric in order to enhance their popular appeal as defenders of the common people against the depraved elites", both at home and abroad. This image-building is situated within a nationalist framework, where it is positioned as a form of resistance to ideological influence from the West and as a protection of national sovereignty. Nationalism, as defined by Yuval-Davis (2011; 2), can be understood as a "politics of belonging" that constructs narratives about identities, including those that are gendered. The concept of gender is defined within a strictly heteronormative framework, based on the gender binary and traditionalist, essentialist views of gender relations. The primacy of heteronormativity acts as a barrier to the emergence of non-conforming cultures, resulting in non-conforming individuals becoming legitimate "others" within their own nations (Berlant and Warner 2002; 192–193). This tendency in Lithuania became particularly pronounced following the 2020 Lithuanian Parliamentary elections, which resulted in the formation of a conservative-liberal coalition government, and in renewed debates on various progressive gender policies in Lithuania (Pocė and Skulte 2023; Juchnevičiūtė et al. 2023; Mickūnas 2021). It is therefore argued that the opposition to gender can be analysed in relation to nationalism. Alongside nationalism, familism, which prioritizes the collective rights of the family over the individual rights of its members, has emerged as a basis for the delegitimisation of progressive gender policies (Linnamäki 2022).

This article aims to explore the interplay between gender and nationalism within the National Alliance (Lith. *Nacionalinis susivienijimas*; hereinafter referred to as "NA") political discourse. What are the main strategies used to represent progressive gender policies in the NA's political discourse? What gendered nationalist and familist notions are articulated in the NA's discourse? What kind of gendered model of society does the NA advocate?

The NA was selected as a case study for several reasons. Firstly, it is a Lithuanian far-right political party that can be defined as nationalist, conservative, anti-system and populist. Secondly, the NA, founded in 2020, has emerged as one of the most prominent and consistent critics of progressive gender policies in Lithuania, along with far-right politicians Petras Gražulis and Mindaugas Puidokas, lawyer and law professor Ignas Vėgėlė (who entered politics after publicly opposing Lithuania's COVID-19 restrictions), and former MP Kęstutis Pūkas, founder and host of "Pūkas" radio. This opposition also includes the grassroots Lithuanian Family Movement (Lith. *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis*), various religious and parental NGOs, and the Lithuanian Catholic Church, which has often allied with these actors to maintain socially conservative norms in Lithuanian society. Mirroring trends observed elsewhere in CEE (Graff and Korolczuk 2021; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), these actors and their anti-gender struggle have gained traction in the Lithuanian public sphere since the early 2010s, and particularly since 2020, coinciding with intensifying debates on progressive gender policies and social polarization. Thirdly, the NA participated in the 2024 Lithuanian Parliamentary elections and won one seat, marking the first success for a nationalist political party in parliamentary elections in contemporary Lithuania.

This article consists of five sections. The first section clarifies the study's theoretical standpoints and explains the complex and dynamic interplay between gender and nationalism. Theoretical clarifications are continued in the second section by examining the phenomenon of familism and its role in anti-gender rhetoric in CEE. The third section defines methodology and explains the strategy for collecting the data for this study. The fourth section presents the findings of the study, giving an overview of the NA's representation of progressive gender policies. The article ends with a discussion of the findings. The analysis show that the NA uses the same discursive strategies as various anti-gender actors in other CEE countries to negatively present progressive gender policies in its political discourse. It presents them as a threat to the "natural family", a form of ideology, a neocommunist construct. By placing the "natural family" at the centre of society and presenting it as pivotal for social stability and national cohesion, the NA establishes heteronormativity as a focal concern of its nationalist vision of society and constructs an antagonistic relationship between the "natural family" and individual rights. It also underscores the NA's vision of a society in which heteronormative identities are privileged markers of citizenship, promoting the exclusion of those who do not conform to this framework. It exemplifies the classical divide between egalitarianism and nationalism.

1. Gendered Nationalism

According to McClintock (1993; 61), "all nations depend on powerful constructions of gender [and] have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender difference". From a feminist perspective, national unity is constructed through gender difference, which implies not only the existence of gendered dimensions of nationalism, but also gendered social relations and hierarchies. As such, Enloe (2014; 44) argues that nationalism grew out of "masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope". This perception is influenced by the historical dominance of men in the public sphere and decision-making positions (Nagel 1998; 252). This suggests that nationalism is primarily a male phenomenon and that the defence of the social and political *status quo* is fundamentally linked to the defence of "male privilege, culture and identity" (ibid.; 258). Meanwhile, women are primarily associated with the private sphere (Enloe 2014; 4) and are seen as the primary figures responsible for the biological and cultural reproduction of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997). By assigning the function of reproduction to women, nationalism subjects gendered bodies to violent classification into the essentialist gender binary. Reproduction is also secured through the regulation of reproductive processes, which includes the promotion of heteronormative families, practices and norms (Ranchod-Nilsson and Tétreault 2000; 60). In this way, gendered reproductive practices perpetuate social inequalities that hinder the participation of women and non-conforming individuals in the public sphere (Roseneil et al. 2013; 901).

The enforcement of the gender binary is inherently linked to the regulation of sexuality. It is also important for nationalist ideologies, as sexuality is linked to the reproduction and continuity of the nation (Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2017; 3). Therefore, the delineation of sexual boundaries is a crucial mechanism in the construction, maintenance and defence of national borders. According to Rubin (1998; 151–152), Western societies tend to categorize sexual behavior according to a value system in which some sexual behaviors are considered positive and others negative. In this context, "good" sexuality is characterized by heteronormativity, marital status, monogamy, reproductive function and non-commercialization, whereas "bad" sexuality is associated with homosexuality, unmarried status, promiscuity, non-procreative function and commercialization. Contemporary conflicts over sexuality "have much in common with the religious disputes of earlier centuries", are largely symbolic, and often serve as vehicles for "displacing social anxieties and discharging associated emotional intensity" (ibid.; 143). Thus, the stigmatization of non-conforming sexuality is likely to increase during periods of social stress.

Consequently, nationalism carries with it expectations about how gendered identities should be performed. According to Butler (1999; 173), gender is not an inherent bodily reality but a performance constituted by repetitive acts that manifest themselves externally. Gender also operates under a regulatory regime that consists of two distinct elements: the symbolic domain and social norms. The symbolic domain refers to culturally predetermined assumptions that are seen as immutable and eternal. These assumptions are associated with symbolic

positions such as femininity and masculinity or motherhood and fatherhood. In the absence of a definitive authority, the symbolic realm is supposed to resolve any uncertainty created by gendered possibilities. Meanwhile, social norms lack an independent ontological status and exist only through social practices (Butler 2004; 41–48). Unlike the symbolic, social norms can be changed; however, non-conformity can reinforce the regulatory zeal underlying them (ibid.; 55).

These considerations demonstrate that gender is a significant determinant of one's experience of belonging to a political community (Nagel 1998; 159). This gives rise to the intricate question of citizenship as a form of collective belonging. As outlined by Yuval-Davis (2011; 46), citizenship is "the participatory dimension of belonging to a political community", which encompasses a set of civil, political, and social rights. The Republican understanding of citizenship, which has been the dominant paradigm for decades, is characterized by a distinctive homogeneity shaped by "myths of a common origin and/or common destiny" (ibid.; 85). However, the limitations of the concept of collective belonging as a horizontal process became apparent when analysed from the perspective of non-conformity. The unequal distribution of gender-related rights was brought to light by the advent of feminist and LGBTQ+ rights movements and their conceptual foundation in the notion of oppression in the latter half of the 20th century, as well as by the emergence of a novel dimension to citizenship, namely that of intimate citizenship. The latter is characterized by a heteronormative understanding of intimacy in the majority of global contexts, which gives rise to a multitude of "moral, religious and political contests" (ibid.; 60–61). The notion of collective belonging doesn't represent a horizontal process, but rather a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, which, in the sphere of intimacy, is marked by an "unprecedented penetration of state surveillance into the intimate lives of the people under their control" (ibid.; 78).

The dissolution of the USSR in the early 1990s unleashed a new dynamic of nationalism in countries in CEE. Liberal nationalism, which embraced globalism, cosmopolitanism and human rights (e.g., women's and LGBTQ+ rights), was a contributing factor in the dissolution of the USSR. However, this was challenged by the emergence of "resurgent nativists" who advocated for a return to traditional national elements (Kubicek 2022; 333). The post-socialist transformation within a neoliberal framework, coupled with social, economic and cultural uncertainties, has decoupled nationalism from liberalism, with illiberalism becoming the default mode. Illiberal nationalism opposes neoliberal globalization, defends "national authenticity" and can limit individual rights in favor of collective needs. It can be broadly described as an "intolerant, exclusionary and anxiety-driven nationalism" (ibid.; 337).

Therefore, the phenomenon of familism emerged as a response to some of the uncertainty caused by these fundamental changes. As gender became the central aspect in the construction of "ideal post-socialist societies" (Reingardienė 2002), familism reinvigorated the aforementioned gendered notions and began to promote the "warmth of the family" as a refuge from the "onslaught of neoliberalism" (Graff and Korolczuk 2021). This phenomenon will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

2. Familism and Anti-Gender Rhetoric

The concept of familism is transdisciplinary in nature, with a variety of definitions contingent upon the specific discipline under consideration. However, this study is concerned with the ideological deployment of familism and thus aligns with a more ideologically oriented definition of familism, as outlined by Linnamäki (2022; 16), as "an ideology that prioritizes the family over other social institutions or that claims the family as the model for other social institutions".

In their study of the Hungarian case, Dupcsik and Tóth (2014; 29), identified two interdependent and mutually reinforcing types of familism. Social familism is a social condition (or conditions) in which "every institution, legal regulation, or economic context pushes people towards living in marriage and with family" (ibid.). Meanwhile, ideological familism is defined as:

> A set of ideas which associates only positive values with the normative family, places the family in the center of social discourse, which presents the family as an incubator of macro-level sociability or, with other metaphors, as the basic building-block of society. (ibid.)

Researchers argue that the roots of social familism can be traced back to the socialist era, when reliance on family ties served to mitigate the political and economic instability characteristic of the period. However, the dissolution of socialist regimes did not alleviate institutional mistrust. The ideological familism emerged to legitimize this distrust and the resulting social passivity in the period following the early 1990s. Therefore, familism can be regarded as a reaction to a crisis of values (Inglehart 1997; Inglehart and Baker 2000), providing a sense of stability through a micro-level plan of action centered on family formation and dependency. Although the "familist" family may be of any composition, in societies where familist discourse is prevalent, an ideal type has emerged: the heteronormative family (Dupcsik and Tóth 2014; 30).

Familism became an integral part of anti-gender campaigns that exploded in CEE in the early 2010s, but their roots can be traced back to the Vatican in the mid-1990s (Graff and Korolczuk 2021; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his right-wing party Fidesz (Hun. *Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége*), backed by the Catholic Church and the bogus NGOs sector, have used ideological familism to restrict women's reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights and promote illiberal and pronatalist policies (Linnamäki 2022). Similarly, in Poland, the right-wing Law and Justice Party (Pol. *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*), supported by the Catholic Church and the fundamentalist NGO Ordo Iuris, implemented policies that restricted women's reproductive rights and marginalized the LGBTQ+ community under the pretext of protecting Polish families and defending Christian values (Graff and Korolczuk 2021). Other countries in CEE, like Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania, have also seen right-wing and sometimes nominally left-wing parties, as exemplified by Robert Fico's government in Slovakia, mobilize against gender and equality policies. These parties, supported by local Catholic or Eastern Orthodox churches and their affiliated NGOs, portray these policies as threats to traditional social structures (Kuhar and Pajnik 2024; Kuhar 2014).

Scholars describe these campaigns as conservative, traditionalist, illiberal and populist mobilizations against the achievements of gender equality, feminist and LGBTQ+ movements, and modernization in general (Gregor and Verebes 2023; 4). But Graff and Korolczuk (2021; 4–5) argue that their real goal is "a wholesale elite change in the spheres of politics, culture, education and transnational institutions, ending the decades-long ideological and political dominance of progressive liberalism in the West". By accusing women's and LGBTQ+ rights [movements] of seeking to "destroy our families" and "brainwash our children" (Kuhar 2023; 116), anti-gender campaigns use family ideologies to entrench their illiberal ideological positions in mainstream politics.

In anti-gender discourses, the familist framework redefines the citizen-state relationship to prioritize the heteronormative family within the social order, upholding patriarchal gender roles that distinctly separate men and women into specific societal spheres (Lindsey 2021; 318). It reinforces patriarchal gender structures and ensures their perpetuation by invoking "practical and moral grounds for governance based on a civic myth of kinship and a public discourse that privileges the family", despite evolving underlying practices (Joseph 2011; 150). As such, the term "family" became an elusive word "directed against the possible diversity of forms of living together and against LGBTIQ* and women's liberation that are thus seen as a threat to the reproduction of religious, national and other types of communities" (Möser et. al. 2022; 16). It prioritizes the "rights of the family" over individual rights as well as leverages the "rights of the family" to "undermine women's rights" and "demonize non-heterosexual people" (Linnamäki 2022; 23). Thus, familism in the political sphere has become a means of regulating gender and sexuality, which goes hand in hand with "misogyny, homophobia, heteronormativity and opposition to sexual and gender diversity" (Möser et al. 2022; 4).

Other features of this anti-gender familist discourse include the labelling of ideological opponents as proponents of "gender ideology", "gender theory" or "genderism", which are perceived as "fake" belief systems seeking to impose Western "sexual delusions" on the "silent majority" (Kuhar 2023; 116). Garbagnoli (2016; 187, 193) asserts that these terms reflect a political backlash "against the entry of minorities into the fields of politics and theory", and against theoretical shifts prompted by feminist and LGBTQ+ movements, which "make visible and thinkable the social origins of the oppression they bear". Despite the religious origin of the anti-gender movement, its discourse is couched in secular language. Kuhar (2014; 86) describes this as a strategy to "secularize its discourse in order to 'clericalize' society". Some anti-gender advocates frame "gender" as a "culture war" (Felix 2015; 68) and oppose it on the basis of "cultural exceptionalism" (Pető 2015; 127). Gender has also become a "symbolic glue" for right-wing discourses, integrating "anti-EU, anti-liberal, anti-communist and homophobic attitudes" (Felix 2015; 77).

3. Methodology and Sample

The present study, by looking into how the NA represents diverse progressive gender policies in its political discourse, is interested in the way the interplay between gender and nationalism

plays out in the NA's discourse. By situating this study within the broader political context of Lithuania and CEE, it explores the NA's perspective on gender dynamics and the ideological underpinnings behind it.

Political discourse analysis (PDA) is used in this study as it focuses on "the reproduction of political power, power abuse or domination through political discourse" (van Dijk 1997; 11). This approach also treats political discourse as a form of political action and interaction that is conducted by political actors (e.g., politicians, political parties, government), is an integral part of political processes or events (e.g., governance, legislation, election campaigns, party propaganda), and can be conveyed through a variety of forms of communication (e.g., written, printed, computer-mediated) (ibid.; 12–15). In democratic societies, political discourse plays a pivotal role in fostering public debate, expressing diverse viewpoints and influencing policy decisions – making it an essential component of the democratic process (van Dijk 2002). PDA provides a critical perspective for analyzing political discourse in socio-political contexts, allowing researchers to look beyond the direct political process and the political event to the contextual functionality of political discourse and its consequences (van Dijk 1997; 37–41).

As van Dijk (2006; 732) notes, political discourse is a profoundly ideological phenomenon, arguably more so than any other kind of discourse. Ideologies, such as nationalism in the case of this article, are belief systems that represent the social identities of groups and shape political discourse by facilitating the cognitive processing of political information by political actors, influencing their knowledge and attitudes (ibid.; 730). In times of social struggle (e.g., competition, conflict, domination between groups) ideologies become more visible, creating polarized structures that categorize people into ingroups and outgroups (ibid.; 734). This polarization is often expressed through populist rhetoric, which Wodak (2015; 2) identifies as an increasingly prominent feature of contemporary political discourse. Populists exploit fear by targeting minorities and combining new meanings with existing ones to justify discriminatory policies under the pretext of security. The key strategies employed in the construction of such rhetoric are the "politics of fear" and the "arrogance of ignorance", which create new social divisions through the construction of Manichean dichotomies and appeal to common sense and anti-intellectualism (ibid.; 5).

The data for this study was collected from the NA's official website (https://susivienijimas. lt/). A total of 32 public statements[1] were identified that pertain to progressive gender policies. This genre of political discourse was selected because, as products of internal consensus, they would most accurately reflect the party's collective position. The term "progressive gender poli-

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[1]   At the end of this article, after the references, there is a list of public statements made by the NA that were directly quoted in the article. The list is in the original Lithuanian language, so the NA is referred to in the list as "Nacionalinis susivienijimas" (Eng. *National Alliance*). However, in the findings and discussion sections of the article, the English acronym "NA" is used. This is to ensure clarity that the "NA" in the findings and discussion sections refers to the "Nacionalinis susivienijimas" in the list presented at the end of this article.

cies" refers to the Istanbul Convention, laws on same-sex civil partnership and gender-neutral civil union[2], and sex education[3], which are policies that have been considered in Lithuania in recent years and thus received attention from the NA. The timeframe of April 2020 to February 2024 was selected based on data availability.

To analyse the data, a mixed method approach was applied. Documentary analysis method is used for the "skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination) and interpretation" of the documentary material (Bowen 2009; 32). This method views the documents as "conduits of communication" that enter the social field as receptacles, have agency of their own, and can be used as agents for action by others (Given 2008; 230). Therefore, it is a widely used research method in political communication (Benoit 2010) and is well applied in the analysis of political positions (Blassnig 2023). Meanwhile, the most straightforward approach to document content analysis is the content analysis method. This method entails the categorization of qualitative textual data into conceptual categories in order to derive meaning from textual data (Given 2008; 120). The content analysis of the documents was carried out using MAXQDA software. The inductive or open-coding approach was employed, as no preconceived notions of codes were formulated prior to the coding process (Creswell 1998). This approach yielded five themes: "natural family", ideology, neocommunism, unconstitutionality, and cultural intangibility. These themes were used to facilitate the analysis of the study results in the following section.

4. Findings

4.1. Danger to the "Natural Family"

The NA represents progressive gender policies as a threat to the "natural family", which serves as the central discursive strategy. The concept of the "natural family" is linked to the Natural law doctrine, which defines the family as a strictly heteronormative unit consisting of a man, a woman and their children. Rooted in Catholic social teaching, it also understands reality as created by God and interpreted by humans "through the faculty of reason" (Garbagnoli 2016; 188). This definition of the family is coupled with the perception of the ontological complementarity of men and women, which is synonymous with humanity in Vatican' discourse (ibid.). The NA also regards the "natural family" as the foundational social institution and the highest societal value. As such, the establishment of the "natural family"

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[2]   In 2021, a draft law on same-sex civil partnership was first introduced in the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas), but failed to gain enough support and was rejected in a vote. In 2022, as a compromise, a draft law on gender-neutral civil union was introduced. As of November 2024, it is still pending and waiting for a vote due to insufficient support.

[3]   A comprehensive sex education programme does not currently exist in Lithuania. The most proximate approximation to a comprehensive sex education programme is the Life Skills Programme. In September 2023, the Life Skills programme was introduced, which also includes limited information classes on sex education. The introduction of this programme has prompted a moral panic among parents and other key stakeholders.

as the constitutional definition of family is perceived as a necessary measure "in this war of values" (NA, September 29, 2020).

The metaphor of the "war of values" is employed, reflecting the NA's perception of being in conflict with societal changes that challenge the established values of society. This framing suggests that the NA positions itself as a defender of traditional values against what it sees as the erosion of these values by "neoliberal" and "neocommunist" reforms. These reforms are depicted as endangering the "natural family" by reshaping perceptions of gender and gender relations, which the NA argues could inflict substantial long-term damage. The Istanbul Convention, linked to the promotion of transsexuality, and same-sex or gender-neutral civil union laws, linked with the endorsement of non-heteronormative family structures, are presented as significant threats to the "natural family". In this context, the anti-gender rally called the Great Family Defense March, which took place in Vilnius, Lithuania, in 2021 and mobilized around 10,000 people, is regarded as an act of civil disobedience by citizens who advocated for the preservation of the "natural family".

The ideological opponents, identified as national and global elites, are perceived as seeking to alter the prevailing understanding of the family. The NA argues that "the so-called elites and globalist institutions (mainly EU) are aggressively trying to 'install' the progressive notion of 'family is whatever' in society" (NA, September 29, 2020). In Lithuania, these elite and globalist institutions are represented by unidentified "neoliberals" and "neocommunists". The involvement of foreign actors in any capacity to prompt legal changes in Lithuania is regarded as an unwarranted incursion into Lithuania's internal affairs.

The comparison between *natural* and *artificial* is used to argue against the passage of same-sex partnership and gender-neutral civil union laws. The NA posits that the Constitution of Lithuania inherently defines the family as the "natural family", a notion that is positioned against the Constitutional Court's more inclusive and diverse definition of family. This broader interpretation is dismissed by the NA as an "artificial distortion" of both the "natural order" and the Constitution itself. The NA further extends this rhetoric to the international arena, asserting that a similar pattern of "artificial" equations between the "natural family" and same-sex relationships exists within international law. The NA claims that "there are no so-called 'human rights' in international law that pertain to same-sex 'families' or, in particular, to the legalization of same-sex 'marriages'" (NA, June 20, 2023).

The demographic situation of Lithuania is mentioned as another reason to reject progressive gender policies. The NA asserts that "the ratification of the Istanbul Convention would lead to increased attention to meeting the material needs of sexual minorities at the expense of natural families", and that introducing the concept of gender into Lithuania's legal system would harm demographics "by encouraging alternative family structures and polygamy" (NA, January 29, 2021). Similarly, the NA criticized Minister Health Artūras Dulkys' decision to subsidize intra-uterine hormone coils for females aged 15 to 17, stating that "Lithuania's social policy should not promote early sexual relations but rather foster responsible perceptions of sexuality, fatherhood, and motherhood" (NA, February 14, 2022). These positions reflect the NA's broader position that the State should uphold the "natural family" and traditional gender roles.

4.2. Ideology

The NA presents the concept of gender as a form of ideology. It dismisses its meaning as a social dimension and considers gender as something predetermined and inscribed in the individual's anatomy. In this way, the NA conflates gender with biological sex, turning gender into an ideologized tool of colonization that denies biological truth. This conflation is facilitated by the lack of a direct translation of the term "gender" in the Lithuanian language, as there is only one word for gender, which is derived from biological sex. The issue of terminology remains unresolved and is still being debated, leaving the term undefined and open to interpretation.

The interpretation of gender as an ideology is primarily associated with the Istanbul Convention, which is described as a "project of social engineering based on ideologized provisions that are incompatible with the norms of our society" (NA, April 28, 2020). The matrix of these provisions is termed as "genderism", or less frequently as "gender ideology". The NA argues that the ratification of the Istanbul Convention would oblige the State to:

> legally recognize the absurd and criminal dogma of genderist ideology [and] to acknowledge that objective physical and psychological differences between male and female biological sexes are not only irrelevant, but only supposed and don't really exist. (NA, January 29, 2021)

The NA concludes that the Istanbul Convention must be rejected *in toto* and that the State leaders must seek its rejection in international organizations. The Life skills programme, which prompted a moral panic in Lithuania in 2023 due to its inclusion of information about LGBTQ+ individuals and limited sex education classes in schools, is labeled as a "Trojan horse of genderism" (NA, September 8, 2023).

The promotion of transsexuality and gender identities beyond the gender binary are the main things associated with the representation of the concept of gender as an ideology. The NA argues that the ratification of the Istanbul Convention would lead to the State being forced to adopt legal acts "allowing people to declare not one gender, as it has been the case so far, but several or even dozens of genders" (NA, January 29, 2021). Therefore, it "creates" a new definition of gender.

The principles of "gender differentiation" and "gender complementarity" are part of the NA's essentialist and traditionalist interpretation of gender and gendered relations. These principles are seen as a fundamental aspect of socialization as differences and complementarity of sexes are what creates natural bonds of kinship and ensures the biological continuity of the nation. They are also among the main principles that define the "natural family". According to the NA, the concept of gender threatens the "natural family" as it makes these principles irrelevant and implies that gender can be chosen due to it no longer being constrained by nature and biological sex.

4.3. Neocommunist Construct

The NA describes progressive gender policies as neocommunist constructs. The NA argues that the vision of Lithuania espoused by the Lithuanian Reform Movement, a political organi-

zation that spearheaded the Lithuanian independence movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was never realized. It idealizes the first years of Lithuanian independence in the early 1990s, but associates the subsequent period with political and moral decline. Contemporary Lithuania is depicted as nearing a "neocommunist genderist dictatorship" where dissent against current politics is suppressed (NA, March 8, 2021).

According to the NA, the Istanbul Convention, same-sex partnership and gender-neutral civil union laws are being promoted by actors with neocommunist ideological parallels or direct links to the communist regimes of the 20th century. Domestically, the Freedom Party, which was elected to the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas) in 2020 on a human rights platform, is labeled by the NA as an "ideologically purified, openly totalitarian neocommunist party", and described as the "direct ideological successor of the Lithuanian Communist Party" (NA, December 3, 2020). The NA also highlights the communist ties of former Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius, who signed the Istanbul Convention on behalf of Lithuania in 2013, and portrays the Office of the Ombudsperson for Equal Opportunities as part of "the industry of spreading neocommunist ideas" (NA, October 21, 2022). Internationally, the European Parliament's 2021 resolution declaring the EU a zone of freedom for LGBTQ+ individuals is condemned as a product of far-left politics (NA, September 22, 2021).

In 2022, Russia's war against Ukraine entered the NA's political discourse on gender. The term "denazification" used by Russian President Vladimir Putin to justify the invasion, is interpreted by the NA as a broader process extending beyond Ukraine. The NA claims that Lithuania is experiencing a "soft denazification" under the guise of Western values, which includes "the suppression of resistance to Marxist totalitarian ideas" and "the deconstruction of national consciousness". Within this framework, progressive gender policies are implicated as part of the process of "soft denazification", contributing to Lithuania's social and geopolitical vulnerability (NA, May 21, 2022).

Nevertheless, the processes in Lithuania are not seen as unique, but as running parallel to those in other European countries. The NA claims that:

> The neocommunist revolution being attempted throughout the Western liberal-democratic world has the same goal as its predecessor, the communist revolutions of the 20th century: to dismantle the old world from its foundations. (NA, September 22, 2021)

According to the NA, LGBTQ+ individuals are the "sexual proletariat" and the promotion of LGBTQ+ rights is merely a cover and a tool for the broader effort to seize power and dismantle "natural human institutions and civilized ways of life", such as religion, nation, state and the "natural family". It is a precursor to a "new totalitarian tyranny" reminiscent of the oppressive regimes that once dominated many countries in CEE.

4.4. Incompatible with the Constitution of Lithuania

In 2024, the Constitutional Court of Lithuania ruled that the Istanbul Convention was in line with the Constitution (Platūkytė 2024). Similarly, the rulings in 2011 and 2019 confirmed that the constitutional concept of family was gender-neutral and not based on marriage (Con-

stitutional Court of the Republic of Lithuania 2019, 2011). These rulings effectively removed any constitutional barriers to legal progress in women's and LGBTQ+ rights in Lithuania.

Nevertheless, the NA often underscores the unconstitutionality of progressive gender policies. In relation to the Istanbul Convention, the NA has taken the position that constitutional amendments would be necessary before it could be ratified. The Istanbul Convention would oblige the State "to change the basic constitutional provisions regulating the establishment of the family, freedom of thought and religion, the right of parents and guardians to educate children in accordance with their beliefs"; in addition, "the ratification of the Istanbul Convention will be legal only if Article 38[4] and other articles of the Constitution are amended and supplemented beforehand" (NA, April 28, 2020).

The NA's interpretation of the constitutional concept of family is based on the concept of the "natural family". In this sense, the same-sex civil partnership law is defined as an "unconstitutional initiative […] that grants same-sex couples the right to create a family through a partnership" (NA, May 6, 2021). Similar arguments were used against the adoption of the gender-neutral civil union law, when the NA argued that it would "compete with the conjugal concept of family formation enshrined in the Constitution" (NA, October 13, 2022). In addition, it is argued that the implementation of LGBTQ+ rights in other countries had led to the erosion of constitutionally enshrined rights and freedoms, like the right to freedom of thought and religion, the right of parents to educate their children according to their beliefs, and so on.

The Constitutional Court of Lithuania is accused of "legal manipulation" and of serving the interests of the political elites. The NA claims that:

> in order to maintain at least a decorative constitutionality of actions, the ruling majority of the Seimas can turn to the Constitutional Court, which, as usual, can declare that the norms of the country's Constitution absolutely meet the requirements of the neocommunist ideology and that precisely such provisions prepared by the authors of the Constitution. (NA, January 29, 2021)

This suggests that the Court can be used as a means of implementing a particular ideological agenda. This assertion is consistent with the NA's claim that Lithuania is ruled by a neocommunist regime and that the country's democratic principles are under threat.

4.5. Incompatible with Lithuanian Culture

The NA represents progressive gender policies as incompatible with Lithuanian culture. The NA argues that the ratification of the Istanbul Convention would compel the State to:

> promote changes in the social and cultural behavior patterns of men and women to eradicate superstitions, customs, traditions, and all other practices that supposedly contribute to the idea of the inferiority of women or stereotypical gender roles. (NA, April 28, 2020)

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4   Article 38 of the Constitution of Lithuania states: the family shall be the basis of society and the State. Family, motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood shall be under the protection and care of the State. Marriage shall be concluded upon the free mutual consent of man and woman.

Therefore, the potential threat to traditional cultural practices is highlighted, while the role these practices play in perpetuating stereotypical gender roles and reinforcing gender inequality is disregarded.

In this context, the NA puts forward the hypothesis that protecting individuals from gender-based violence may not be the real goal of the Istanbul Convention. It is proposed that the real goal is "the reeducation of society regarding the gender roles in the family" (NA, February 14, 2024). The adoption of a wide range of legal provisions listed in the Istanbul Convention would facilitate the implementation of changes in cultural practices within society. Such a course of action would effectively lead to the eradication of Lithuanian traditions and values as it would become an official policy.

Moral values and Christianity are emphasized in the NA's political discourse. The NA argues that the Istanbul Convention, same-sex civil partnership and gender-neutral civil union laws are incompatible with the moral values of Lithuanian society. Such incompatibility is seen as a sufficient reason to ban LGBTQ+ pride events (NA, September 29, 2020). Meanwhile, Christian morality is viewed as one of the EU's core values; the threat to it was first brought up after the Lithuanian parliamentary election in 2020, which led to the formation of conservative-liberal ruling coalition. The NA argues that the ruling coalition's agreement on progressive gender policies indicated the goal of "finally cutting off Lithuania's spiritual and historical roots and destroying its Christian civilizational identity" (NA, December 3, 2020). Meanwhile, the transformation of Lithuanian society into an open society would lead to further secularization of public and private life, and to the persecution of Christians for their faith (NA, March 9, 2021).

The decision by Poland's Constitutional Tribunal in 2020 to restrict access to abortion, resulting in one of the strictest abortion laws in the EU, was welcomed by the NA and hailed as an act against the "culture of death" and the protection of the "natural family" and the rights of parents and children (NA, November 17, 2020). Similarly, the decision of the Hungarian Parliament in 2021 to pass a law aimed at limiting the exposure of under-18s to information deemed to promote homosexuality was welcomed as being in line with "Christian moral teaching, human dignity and sovereignty" (NA, June 25, 2021). Both of these decisions were immediately condemned by European human rights groups as harmful to the health of women and girls (Amnesty International 2020) and as "an affront to the rights and identities of LGBTQ+ people" (Rankin 2021). However, in the NA's discourse it is seen as being in line with "Christian moral teaching, human dignity and sovereignty" (NA, June 25, 2021). Therefore, legal measures targeting women's reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights are seen as protective rather than restrictive.

To sum up, the NA's political discourse can be characterized as populist. The Manichean construction of the discourse unambiguously delineates gender norms into two distinct categories: those that adhere to the "natural order" and those that are non-conforming. To this end, hyperbolic and alarmist rhetoric is employed in order to portray progressive gender policies in a negative light, rhetoric that has the potential to instigate a moral panic. The recent crises

of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine provided fertile ground for the propagation of such discourse. Furthermore, the use of information that has been refuted as untrue by various state and international institutions and human rights advocates is a recurring phenomenon. This is a common feature of right-wing discursive practices in their defense of the "natural order". Consequently, as Möser et al. (2022; 5) note, contemporary anti-gender discourses should be considered "in the context of post-truth and 'fake news' debates".

Discussion

This study examined the interplay between gender and nationalism by investigating how the NA represented diverse progressive gender policies in its political discourse. The analysis of the collected materials revealed five discursive strategies of representation used to represent progressive gender policies, running as follows: 1) as a danger to the "natural family"; 2) as a form of ideology; 3) as a neocommunist construct; 4) as incompatible with the Constitution of Lithuania; and 5) as incompatible with Lithuanian culture. It can be observed that these discursive strategies bear resemblances to those utilized by anti-gender actors in other countries in CEE. They are also in line with the NA's nationalist, anti-system and conservative political positions.

The representation of progressive gender policies as dangerous to the "natural family" was the most frequently used discursive strategy. The "natural family" occupies a privileged position within the discourse, offering insights into the NA's nationalist perception of gender and gender relations. As this heteronormative family structure is established as the foundational and key unit of society, responsible for ensuring social stability and national cohesion, progressive gender policies are linked to the promotion of non-heteronormative family structures that challenge the "natural order" and prevailing social, legal and cultural norms, as well as undermining national demographic concerns. This lends support to Pendleton's (2014; 21) assertion that gendered policies are "structured around specific national and cultural concerns". Concurrently, the governance of gender identities represents a pivotal element in the "defense" of the "natural family" structure. The gender binary is presented as the only valid interpretation of gendered reality, which is inscribed in human anatomy. Progressive gender policies that challenge the symbolic and unquestionable positions of masculinity and femininity are regarded as contradictory to reality. This reaffirms the assertion by Peterson (1999) that nationalism is a heterosexist ideology. The dismissal of the concept of gender serves to further reinforce this argument. With regard to the issue of reproduction, it seems reasonable to posit that the emphasis placed on the "natural family" reflects its role in the biological reproduction of the nation. However, biological reproduction was mentioned in the NA's political discourse on only a limited number of occasions. The cultural reproduction of society is of greater importance. The intention to guarantee the reproduction of a socially homogeneous society with restricted space for non-conformity is apparent. In accordance with Butler's (1999, 2004) theory of performativity, individuals in the NA's discourse are expected to perform gender roles in accordance with dominant cultural narratives, which are aligned with a heteronormative understanding of gender.

Furthermore, the construction of an antagonistic relationship between the concept of the "natural family" and progressive gender policies is employed to undermine their social legitimacy, based on the necessity to safeguard the "natural family" from non-conforming practices that are perceived to pose a threat to it. Consequently, in the discourse of the NA, the "rights of the family" are accorded greater precedence than individual rights. This pattern of argumentation is also observed in other countries in CEE. In some cases, familism has emerged as a legitimate illiberal alternative to the gender equality paradigm (Grzebalska and Pető 2017). It elevates the heteronormative family to a position of primacy among social institutions, and its accommodations serve as a rationale for the curtailment of individual rights. Furthermore, the espousal of ideological familism has the potential to elicit a response in Lithuanian society due to the presence of social familism as a consequence of the socialist past and the region's overall orientation towards survival-oriented values, among which is the family (Halman et al. 2022).

The aforementioned features of the discourse permit the argument to be made that the model of society promoted by the NA is heteronormative in nature and does not accommodate non-conformity. This model, which is based on Rubin's (1998) ideas about the hierarchization of sexual acts, represents a vision of society that values heteronormative and procreative relationships while simultaneously stigmatizing non-heteronormative relationships and gender identities. In this way, Yuval-Davis's (2011) ideas about citizenship illustrate how the NA utilizes inflexible gendered nationalist criteria to ascertain individuals' belonging within the collective. In this context, the concept of citizenship is not merely a legal status; rather, it is a marker of belonging that is inextricably linked to heteronormativity. This is evidenced by the fact that the NA consistently argues against the conferral of full citizenship rights upon those who do not conform to the heteronormative framework. As a result, it represents a model of society in which both identity and belonging are tightly controlled, fostering exclusion and discrimination.

Therefore, the promise of nationalism as an all-inclusive, horizontal community is particularly flawed once analysed from the perspectives of women and sexual minorities. In the case of the NA, a heteronormative framework is posited as the sole acceptable gendered reality, a perspective that is further reinforced by familism. This serves to discredit non-heteronormativity and to undermine the social legitimacy of progressive gender policies. Priority is given to the concept of the "natural family" over individual rights, particularly the rights of sexual minorities. Consequently, the NA's nationalist ideology offers minimal scope for the legal recognition of non-conformity. This exemplifies the schism between contemporary egalitarian demands and nationalist thought.

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