The Populist Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Lithuania: From Criticism to Conspiracy Theories

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Abstract. The COVID-19 crisis became a great opportunity to spread populistic discourses that were usually accompanied by conspiracy theories. The article reveals a gradual process of politicization of the crisis by various Lithuanian populist actors, transforming the COVID-19 pandemic from a medical issue into a political one. Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism combined with William Felstiner's framework of politicization conceptualize these processes. The research showed that populist actors used a specific discourse dynamic to make the pandemic a political issue, moving from criticism of the specific measures to manage the pandemic, to an abstract and negative assessment of the situation as a whole.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, populism, COVID-19 pandemic, politicization.

Populistinis atsakas į COVID-19 pandemiją Lietuvoje: nuo kritikos iki sąmokslo teorijų

Santrauka. COVID-19 pandemijos sukelta krizė buvo puiki proga plisti populistiniams diskursams, kuriuos lydėjo įvairios sąmokslo teorijos. Šio straipsnio tikslas yra atskleisti laipsnišką pandeminės krizės politizacijos procesą, per kurį įvairūs Lietuvos populistiniai veikėjai COVID-19 pandemijos sukeltą krizę iš medicininės pavertė politine. Šiam procesui konceptualizuoti pasitelkta Ernesto Laclau populizmo teorija kartu su Williamo Felstinerio problemų politizacijos schema. Tyrimas atskleidė, kad politizuodami pandemiją populistiniai veikėjai pasinaudojo specifine diskurso dinamika, kai nuo atskirų kovos su pandemija priemonių kritikos palaipsniui pereinama iki visos situacijos abstraktaus neigiamo vertinimo.

Raktiniai žodžiai: sąmokslo teorija, populizmas, COVID-19 pandemija, politizacija.

Introduction

The interconnection between populism and conspiracy theories is easy to observe,[1] though it does not mean that every populist actor uses conspiracy theories in their discourse or that every conspiracy theory serves the purpose of creating a political discourse. The popularity of both phenomena is also linked to societal crises. Socially shocking events are usually explained in terms of various conspiracies. It is often in times of crisis that the need for a strong hand to bring things in order arises, also echoed by populists. The COVID-19 pandemic was probably the biggest crisis in the history of modern Lithuania, which had the greatest impact on people's daily habits. It is therefore not surprising that various political actors tried to take advantage of this crisis and mobilize people using conspiracy theories. The fact that this

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[1] See more Bergmann, E. *Conspiracy & Populism: The Politics of Misinformation.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

mobilization was at least partially effective was demonstrated by the protest organized in front of the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania amid the pandemic crisis in August 2021, which ended in riots.

It was immediately after the first reports of the COVID-19 cases that the first conspiracy theories on the origin of the virus or questioning its very existence appeared.[2] The human need for security and control of the situation ('people are more likely to believe conspiracy theories when they are anxious or worried and when they feel that they have no power'[3]) is one of the main reasons for the emergence of conspiracy theories.

Meanwhile, the use of the pandemic in populist discourses has been less obvious; although, as Ernesto Laclau argues, 'the emergence of populism is historically linked to a crisis of the dominant ideological discourse, which in turn is part of a more general social crisis,'[4] i.e., populism is fundamentally linked to societal crises. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation was slightly different. At least in its initial stages, the pandemic was perceived as a global threat, caused by external factors, which made it difficult to logically justify the traditional target of populists, the local elites. For the populists to take advantage of the pandemic crisis, it first had to be politicized[5] and transformed from being a random medical issue into political one. The article is aimed at this particular dynamic of the politicization of the pandemic. It demonstrates how populist discourse has gradually incorporated the pandemic challenges into the Manichean *populus* vs. enemy distinction, and emphasizes the role that conspiracy theories have played in this process.

To achieve these goals, first, I present the new research on these issues, paying a particular attention to the politicization processes in the Baltic region. Second, I introduce three main concepts: populism, conspiracy theories and the politicization of the pandemic crisis. I use Laclau's discourse theory of populism, alongside with Matthew R.X. Dentith's definition of conspiracy theories and William Felstiner's conceptualization of the politicization process. The third part of the article is dedicated to the methodology and ethical issues that are relevant to the topic. In the next two parts, I present research cases: the Lithuanian Family Movement as an extra-parliamentary populist power and mainstream Lithuanian populist politicians who were active in anti-pandemic protests. The article concludes with the findings.

1. The Novelty of the Research in the Baltic Context

Populism as a threat to modern liberal democracies has been a highly popular research subject in the academic field. The Baltic region is no exception. For example, Daunis Auers argues that, in contrast to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have specific configuration of populistic parties because of the 'lower barriers of entry to the political system.'[6] Zenonas Norkus suggests that a different, more left-leaning, trajectory of the Lithuanian post-communist populist configuration is the result of the impeachment and removal from the office of the former president Rolandas Paksas.[7] Though one can argue that the populist

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[2] See Butter, M.; Knight, P. *Covid Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective*. New York: Routledge, 2023. See also Pummerer, L.; Böhm, R.; Lilleholt, L.; Winter, K.; Zettler, I.; Sassenberg, K. Conspiracy Theories and Their Societal Effects during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2022, Vol. 13. No. 1, p. 49-59, https://doi.org/10.1177/194855062110002.

[3] Douglas, K.M. COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 2021, Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 271, https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220982068.

[4] Laclau, E. *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*. London: New Left Books, 1977, p. 175.

[5] See Bobba, G.; Hubé, N. COVID-19 and Populism: A Sui Generis Crisis. In: *Populism and the Politicization of the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe* / Eds. G. Bobba, N. Hubé. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021, p. 1-16, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66011-6_1.

[6] Auers, D. Populism and Political Party Institutionalisation in the Three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2018, Vol. 11, p. 353, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-018-0231-1.

[7] See more Norkus, Z. Carl Schmitt as a Resource for Democratic Consolidation Studies: The Case of the President's Impeachment in Lithuania. *East European Politics and Societies*, 2008, Vol. 22, No. 4, p. 784-801, https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325408316533. See also Norkus, Z. Political Development of Lithuania: A Comparative Analysis of Second Post-Communist Decade. *World Political Science Review*, 2012, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 217-251, https://doi.org/10.1515/wpsr-2012-0012.

discourses in the three Baltic States are slightly different, the evidence shows that the general trend of right-wing identity populism has been gaining popularity in the Baltic region.[8]

The Lithuanian Family Movement (hereinafter, the LFM), one of the cases analyzed in this article, is the newest and most striking example of this tendency. The article, in addition to contributing to the analysis of populism as such, by asking questions such as what adds to its popularity, or how populism impacts political systems, also explores the ways the populist actors politicize primarily non-political issues, in our case, the COVID-19 pandemic. A few attempts have been made to examine the patterns of the politicization process in the Baltic context; for example, a comparative analysis of all three countries, which partly covered populist politicization strategies,[9] and Andres Kasekamp, Mari-Liis Madisson and Louis Wierenga study, which analyzed discursive opportunities for the politicization of various themes in social media by the Estonian populist party.[10] The scant attempts, which explore the ways in which the populists could transform a non-political issue into public issue, clearly indicate that the topic under consideration is far from being exhausted.

As for the pandemic crisis, the scholarly enquiry has mostly concentrated on the effectiveness of governmental response to the crisis.[11] Certain indicators show that the populist mobilization during the pandemics was the strongest in Lithuania of all three Baltic countries. Auers indicated that 'only the small populist opposition sought to politicize the pandemic'[12] in Latvia,[13] whereas Liisa Talvig and Piret Ehin concluded that only a 'few anti-restriction and anti-vaccination demonstrations also took place'[14] in Estonia. In contrast, in Lithuania, not only did many opposition politicians participated in the protests, but in one of the biggest protests in modern-day Lithuania, a guillotine was mounted in front of the Parliament, and the event itself ended in public disturbances, such as stone throwing at the Parliament windows and public clashing with the riot police.[15] It is safe to assume that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the populist mobilization of the people was successful in Lithuania, and it serves as an interesting example of the discourse that was gradually made political, taking it to the extremes.

[8]   Cf. Braghiroli, S.; Petsinis, V. Between Party-Systems and Identity-Politics: The Populist and Radical Right in Estonia and Latvia. In: *Multifaceted Nationalism and Illiberal Momentum at Europe's Eastern Margins* / Ed. A. Makarychev. London: Routledge, 2021, p. 81-100; Jurkynas, M. Populist Parties in Lithuania: The Curious Case of Party Order and Justice and Its Leadership. *Polish Political Science Review,* 2019, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 120-137, https://doi.org/10.2478/ppsr-2019-0008; Petsinis, V. Identity Politics and Right-Wing Populism in Estonia: The Case of EKRE. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics,* 2019, Vol. 25, No. 2, p. 211-230, https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2019.1602374.

[9]   See Jakobson, M.; Balcere, I.; Loone, O.; Nurk, A.; Saarts, T.; Zakeviciute, R. *Populism in the Baltic States: A Research Report*. Tallinn: Open Estonian Foundation, Tallinn University Institute of Political Science and Governance, 2012. Retrieved from https://www.digar.ee/arhiiv/nlib-digar:119434 [accessed 27/11/2023].

[10]   Kasekamp, A.; Madisson, M-L.; Wierenga, L. Discursive Opportunities for the Estonian Populist Radical Right in a Digital Society. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2019, Vol. 66, No. 1, p. 47-58, https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2018.1445973.

[11]   See *Governments' Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic in Europe: Navigating the Perfect Storm* / Eds. K. Lynggaard, M.D. Jensen, M. Kluth. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14145-4; Bortkevičiūtė, R.; Kalkytė, P.; Kuokštis, V.; Nakrošis, V.; Patkauskaitė-Tiuchtienė, I.; Vilpišauskas, R. *Nuo greitų pergalių prie skaudžių pralaimėjimų: Lietuvos viešosios politikos atsakas į COVID-19 pandemiją ir šios krizės valdymas 2020 m.* Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2021.

[12]   Auers, D. Latvia: From Hubris to Nemesis. In: *Governments' Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic in Europe: Navigating the Perfect Storm* / Eds. K. Lynggaard, M.D. Jensen, M. Kluth. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023, p. 223, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14145-4_19.

[13]   In Latvian case, it should be acknowledged that the Latvian political scene had its part in public discontent, especially on August 4, 2021, when an opposition MP, Aldis Gobzems, called for the public to protest. As the result, the 'Latvian police fined 2,350 people for organizing an unauthorized public protests against possible compulsory vaccination.' See Marszałek-Kawa, J. Forms of Protest in Latvia during the Pandemic Versus the Activity of the Police. *Baltic Journal of Economic Studies*, 2023, Vol. 9, No 1, p. 12-17, https://doi.org/10.30525/2256-0742/2023-9-1-12-17. In comparison with Lithuania, the protests in Latvia did not turn violent. More importantly, it did not significantly influence the configuration of the Latvian political field. See more Auers, D. *Latvia: From Hubris to Nemesis*, p. 223-234.

[14]   Talving, L.; Ehin, P. Estonia: Empowering the Executive. In: *Governments' Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic in Europe: Navigating the Perfect Storm* / Eds. K. Lynggaard, M.D. Jensen, M. Kluth. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023, p. 240, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14145-4_20.

[15]   See more LRT trumpai. Riaušės prie Seimo – kaip viskas vyko? *LRT.lt*, August 11, 2021. Retrieved from https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1466941/lrt-trumpai-riauses-prie-seimo-kaip-viskas-vyko [accessed 21/02/2023].

The proliferation of conspiracy theories during the pandemic has been a popular topic in general, including the Baltic region. Ainė Ramonaitė has analyzed the interconnection between the COVID-19 conspiracy theories and communist nostalgia.[16] Alfredas Buiko and Julita Slipkauskaitė have analyzed conspiracy theories generated by different pandemics, including COVID-19, focusing on similarities between health related conspiracy theories.[17] Arvydas Grišinas, Ainius Lašas and Ignas Kalpokas have examined the segments of Lithuanian population, which are more susceptible to rely on conspiracy theories.[18] Mari-Liis Madisson and Andreas Ventsel have outlined the COVID-19 conspiracy theories that have been circulating in all three Baltic States.[19] Anda Rožukalne et al. have examined society's susceptibility to pandemic disinformation, including conspiracy theories in Latvia.[20] As one can see, populism and conspiracy theories are often explored separately in the Baltic region, though these two phenomena are clearly interlinked.[21] The perceptions of a conspiracy enemy helped to push further the pandemic populist mobilization. Although the COVID-19 pandemic could be considered as a rather unique crisis in terms of its magnitude, one can assume that, especially in the digital era, the use of conspiracy theories in the populist discourses will not disappear; therefore, it is worth exploring them in detail.

2. Theoretical Assumptions about Populism, Conspiracy Theories and the Politicization of the Pandemic Crisis

In Ernest Laclau's theory, as revealed in his *On Populist Reason*, populism is understood as a certain logic of discourse formation aimed at creating a populist collective identity or, in other words, mobilizing people.[22] I have chosen Laclau's definition of populism as discursive logic, as opposed to, for instance, a thin-centered ideology[23] or a specific rhetoric,[24] for several reasons. First, I analyze the discursive shift, or the ways in which the topic of the pandemic was gradually made political and incorporated into the populist discourse.[25]

[16] Ramonaitė, A. Does Communist Nostalgia Lead to COVID-19 Conspiracy Beliefs? *European Societies*, 2022, Vol. 25, No. 1, p. 489-508, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2022.2132525.

[17] Buiko, A.; Slipkauskaitė, J. It Spreads Like a Disease–Pandemics and Conspiracy Theories. *Filosofija. Sociologija*, 2022, t. 33, Nr. 3, p. 318-324, https://doi.org/10.6001/fil-soc.v33i3.4781.

[18] Grišinas, A.; Lašas, A.; Kalpokas, I. Lietuvos gyventojų polinkis kliautis sąmokslo teorijomis. *Politologija*, 2022, t. 108, Nr. 4, p. 42-84, https://doi.org/10.15388/Polit.2022.108.2.

[19] Madisson, M.-L.; Ventsel, A. Covid-19-Related Conspiracy Theories in the Baltic States. In: *Covid Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective* / Eds. M. Butter, P. Knight. New York: Routledge, 2023, p. 185-200, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003330769-19.

[20] Rožukalne, A.; Murinska, S.; Tifentale A. Is COVID-19 an "Ordinary Flu" That Benefits Politicians? Perception of Pandemic Disinformation in Latvia. *Communication Today*, 2021, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 68-82. Retrieved from https://dspace.rsu.lv/jspui/bitstream/123456789/6961/1/06._ROZUKALNE_et_al._CT_2_2021.pdf [accessed 27/11/2023].

[21] See, cf., Bergmann, E. *Conspiracy & Populism: The Politics of Misinformation*; Bergmann, E. Populism and the Politics of Misinformation. *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 2020, Vol. 21, No. 3, p. 251-265, https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2020.1783086; Oana, I.E.; Bojar, A. Populist Attitudes, Anti-Technocratic Attitudes, and Covid-Related Conspiracy Beliefs Across Europe. *Comparative European Politics*, 2023, Vol. 21, p. 515-534, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-023-00331-x; Vieten, U.M. The "New Normal" and "Pandemic Populism": The COVID-19 Crisis and Anti-Hygienic Mobilisation of the Far-Right. *Social Sciences*, 2020, Vol. 9, No. 9, p. 1-14; https://doi:10.3390/socsci9090165; Jonutis, K. Populism and Conspiracy Theories: The Case of the Lithuanian Family Movement. *Aktualu rytoj / Relevant Tomorrow*, 2021, Vol. 1, No. 20, p. 93–107, https://doi.org/10.51740/RT.1.20.5.

[22] Laclau, E. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso, 2005.

[23] See Mudde, C. The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 2004, Vol. 39, No. 4, p. 541-563, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x.

[24] See Moffitt, B.; Tormey, S. Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style. *Political Studies*, 2014, Vol. 62, No. 2, p. 381-397, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12032.

[25] The concept of populism as ideology is predominantly essentialist. It does not leave any variations—a politician or a political party is or is not populist. Such conceptualization allows only certain variations, such as neoliberal populism, national populism, etc. See more Mudde, C.; Kaltwasser, C.R. Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America. *Government and Opposition*, 2013, Vol. 48, No. 2, p. 147-174, https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2012.11. Consequently, none of the gradation is allowed; whereas a lot of research strongly suggests exactly the gradual nature of the populist phenomena. See, e.g., Jagers, J.; Walgrave, S. Populism as Political Communication Style: An Empirical Study of Political Parties' Discourse in Belgium. *European Journal of Political Research,* 2007, Vol. 46, No. 3, p. 319-345, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00690.x. Paradoxically, most of them operate in categories proposed by C. Mudde and M. Canovan (see, e.g., Aslanidis, P. Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective. *Political Studies*, 2016, Vol. 64, No. 1, p. 88-104, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12224), yet at the same time, they renounce its core theoretical assumptions.

Second, Laclau's definition is normatively neutral, which makes it possible to study the phenomenon without preconceived negative connotations.[26] Third, while the important distinction *populus* vs. *elite* is common to all definitions of populism mentioned above, Laclau is the only one to use the other significant category, the concept of the political demand, which is important for further elaboration of the process of politicization. This is important in the context of conspiracy theories and politicization because by introducing common societal problems in the form of demands, it treats the creation of populistic discourse as a dynamic process (in comparison with other populist conceptualizations), where the new demands are incorporated and the image of the 'Other' is constantly recreated.[27] In this case, conspiracy theories work as facilitators that help incorporate the newly formed demands into, to use Laclau's term, *chain of equivalence* by relating these demands to the common evil enemy of the people. In other words, conspiracy theories in the populist context are treated as specific articulation of the same demands. This conceptualization is exceptional to Laclau's theory of populism, bringing conspiracy theories to the very core of the dynamic of populist discourse creation.

Since the aim of this article is to show the processes of politicization and incorporation of the pandemic into the populist discourse rather than to provide a comprehensive analysis of populism as such, it is limited to a minimal definition of populism and does not discuss all the components of the populist discourse in detail. In Laclau's theory, populism is perceived as a specific logic of the discourse with the minimal category of the aforementioned political demand. Specifically, through the *empty signifier*, the merging of political demands shapes the populist discourse and creates a division between the *populus* that makes these demands and the elite that does not meet them. Empty signifier is a particularistic demand, which, due to certain circumstances, has taken on an abstract role that denotes the entire populist discourse. For instance, the empty signifier, such as the demand for order, which is so often found in various populistic discourses, has different meanings depending on the sphere in which it is being demanded (e.g., 'solved problem of corruption,' 'organized medical care,' etc.); however, it does not have a kind of universal meaning (is empty). Its only meaning is structural—it makes the discourse coherent.[28]

Two elements of populism are central to this article. First, how the new pandemic demands are incorporated into the populist discourse. Second, how this transforms the figure of the populist enemy. I use Felstiner's conceptualization to examine the process of politicization.[29] It consists of three stages:

(1) **Emergence** (Naming) stage, when the problem is identified as political;

(2) **Confrontation** (Blaming) stage, when someone is blamed for this problem; and

(3) **Managing** (Claiming) stage, when an alternative solution to the problem is proposed.

These are the steps by which populist actors incorporate new issues, in our case, the COVID-19 pandemic, into their discourse to mobilize people. This, of course, requires *naming* that the COVID-19 crisis depends on government action, *blaming* that the pandemic management measures are wrong, and *claiming* that there are other better solutions.[30] In the second stage, populist actors also try to use conspiracy theories. Dentith's definition of the minimum elements required for a conspiracy theory has been used to describe the latter.[31] Neutrality is of the most valuable qualities in Dentith's definition, in comparison with the attempts to present conspiracy theories in relation to the truth or to the quality

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[26]   If we agree that populism is a thin-centered ideology, it would be possible to compare it to other thin-centered ideologies (like green ideology or anti-globalism). However, it is hardly imaginable because none of the populists tends to describe themselves as such; they are always something different (Eurosceptics, Nationalists, True right-wing representatives, etc.). This makes such a conceptualization at least impartial in comparison to other ideologies. Even if we take the main element of populism, anti-elitism, its antitheses, elitism, should be considered a thin-centered ideology as well, but it is obvious that it is not.

[27]   See Laclau, E. *On Populist Reason*, p. 224.

[28]   See more Jonutis, K. Ernesto Laclau populizmo teorija ir jos operacionalizacija: politinės partijos "Drąsos kelias" atvejis. *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmas*, 2018, Vol. 43, No. 2, p. 43-70, https://doi.org/10.15388/SocMintVei.2018.2.2.

[29]   Felstiner, W.L.F., Abel, R.L.; Sarat, A. The Emergence and Transformation of Disputes: Naming, Blaming, Claiming… In: *Theoretical and Empirical Studies of Rights* / Eds. L.B. Nielsen. London: Routledge, 2017, p. 255-306, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315236353-12.

[30]   In our case, the better solution was to demand to abandon all the pandemic confines.

[31]   See Dentith, M. *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

of argumentation, which end up with almost certain exceptions of 'unclear' conspiracy theories[32] that do not meet the authors' definitions of quality, which are still prevalent in academic literature.[33]

Dentith's definition has been slightly broadened in order to correspond specifically populist discourses. There are three essential components of conspiracy theories:

(1) **Purposefulness.** There is a plan, and actions are not random. People are deliberately and purposefully harmed or ignored. In our case, this component remains unchanged and implies that the COVID-19 pandemic or individual measures to manage it are purposefully directed against *people*.

(2) **Secrecy.** There are hidden agendas, which are actively concealed from the public, usually by a bribed media. The public is misled, but thanks to the populists, it is 'waking up.' This component is about the benefits that the elite obtain, thus harming people.

(3) **Operating group.** There is a secret group of conspirators, who obscurely seek to benefit themselves. In this case, it is either the ruling elite or the global groups that manipulate it.

While the first component remained practically unchanged in our case, the other two had their own dynamic. This was related to the more suggestive inclusion of the pandemic issue in the populist discourse and, even more important, to the role of shaping the image of the enemy. In order to illustrate the changes in the image of the beneficiary and the enemy, two distinctions provided by the researchers of conspiracy theories are used. Michael Barkun defines the distinction between individual events about which conspiracy theories are created, conspiracy theory systems that explain many events, and super-conspiracies, which combine many conspiracy theory systems to explain long periods of history.[34] Jesse Walker's distinction draws a line between internal conspirators operating inside society and external conspirators operating outside society.[35] In this research, both of the distinctions are not considered as having fixed value, i.e., being strictly one or another, but more as the dynamic variables showing the direction or dynamic of the tendency, which especially in conspiracy theories can take on demi-meanings.

3. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The study employs post-foundational discourse analysis (hereinafter, PDA), developed by Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.[36] Its main assumption is that the social meaning of objects depends on their position in certain discourse, which in our case means that every written or verbal articulation by a populist actor actively creates and changes the discourse. The purpose of PDA is to identify certain scenarios (in this case, populism and conspiracy theories) and capture changes in discursive elements that constitute them. Another assumption of PDA, which is important in the context of this research, is that it does not try to establish manipulative or hidden meanings of the discourse in order to answer the question: What is the subject really trying to achieve, or what are their real motives? The examination of the discourse concerns the investigation of what has been said or written, trying to reveal the pattern and logics that bind the discourse into a coherent structure and not trying to find the answer to the question whether, for instance, the claims of government's incompetence are justified or unjustified.[37]

In order to define the time frame of the study and the choice of research objects, it is necessary to briefly introduce the pandemic-political context of Lithuania. In December 2020, a new center-right

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[32] See Dentith, M. *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories,* p. 31.

[33] E.g., Barkun, M. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America.* Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003, p. 16.

[34] See Barkun, M.A. *Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, p. 6.

[35] See Walker, J. *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory.* New York: Harper, 2013, p. 10-12.

[36] Laclau, E.; Mouffe, C. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics.* London: Verso Books, 2014.

[37] See, cf., Jørgensen, M.W.; Phillips, L.J. *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method.* London: Sage, 2002, p. 21, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208871.

coalition government was formed in Lithuania, which consisted of the Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats, Liberals' Movement and Freedom Party. It is at this point that the two periods of reaction to the pandemic management can be distinguished; even though, it is impossible to say to what extent this or that reaction is due to the specific measures used to manage the pandemic, or to what extent the attitude towards specific parties has been previously formed. Therefore, it is more expedient to choose one of the two periods, either before the formation of the new government or under the new government. The latter period was chosen because the measures adopted to combat the pandemic during it led to a significantly higher level of public opposition and several protests, the largest of which resulted in riots at the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania in August 2021.

The 'Opportunity Passport' (introduced in May 2021), which gave those who had been vaccinated or tested negative for COVID-19 the right to visit most of the shops, entertainment venues, etc., was the most-opposed measure during the pandemic. February 2022, when almost all pandemic restrictions were lifted and the outbreak of war in Ukraine finally took over the COVID-19 pandemic, marked the end of the study.

The choice of the objects was also influenced by the aforementioned protest at the Parliament, which was the culmination of the mobilization of society and, at the same time, the politicization of pandemic management measures. The LFM, a new political entity (officially registered in June 2021), played a key role in the protest, with the primary aim of opposing the Istanbul Convention, the law on homosexual partnership and other 'genderist laws' that, in their view, were threatening the family institution. In May 2021, the movement organized one of the largest protests in the history of modern Lithuania, the Great Family Defense March, aimed against the adoption of the aforementioned laws[38]; however, soon it began to focus more on pandemic management.[39] The discourse of this movement is analyzed in a separate section. Its novelty and the fact that its members did not occupy any official political office made their politicization of the pandemic somewhat different from that of professional populist politicians.

The choice of professional politicians was influenced by several criteria. First, it was the active support for the protest (three of the politicians in question were speakers at the event), and second, the political weight of a politician in the Lithuanian political field. Thus, four politicians were selected:

(1) Petras Gražulis (hereinafter, PG), a long-serving member of the Parliament,[40] chairman of the right-wing populist party[41] the People and Justice Union, has been notorious for his fierce homophobic rhetoric.[42] After the protest, there was an unsuccessful attempt to impeach him for organizing the riots. After the event, he spread conspiracy theories that the riots were organized by provocateurs hired by the ruling parties.

(2) Mindaugas Puidokas (hereinafter, MP) is a member of the Parliament, former member of the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (until 2019), at the time of the rally, a member of the populist Labor Party,[43] from which he resigned in February 2021, when the party dissociated from his

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[38]   See "Didysis Šeimos Gynimo Maršas 2021" startavo ir tęsis toliau – įgarsinti reikalavimai aukščiausiai šalies vadovybei. *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis,* May 19, 2021. Retrieved from https://seimusajudis.lt/naujienos/didysis-seimos-gynimo-marsas-2021-startavo-ir-te-sis-toliau-igarsinti-reikalavimai-auksciausiai-salies-vadovybei/ [accessed 22/02/2023].

[39]   See Daunys, A. Atpildas vis tiek ateis. *Infa.lt*, October 24, 2021. Retrieved from https://infa.lt/64823/arvydas-daunys-atpil-das-vis-tiek-ateis/ [accessed 21/02/2023]. Arvydas Daunys is one of nine members of the LFM Council, acting as the primary leader of the movement.

[40]   On December 18, 2023, Gražulis was impeached by the Parliament for casting a vote for another MP and thus breaking the oath of office.

[41]   See more Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė, I. Populist Political Leadership and Political Parties in Lithuania. In: *The Rise of Populism in Central and Eastern Europe* / Eds. S. Kukovič, P. Just. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022, p. 99-114, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802205534.00014.

[42]   See, e.g., Homoseksualų eitynės baigėsi P. Gražulio ir K. Uokos išvesdinimu. *Delfi.lt*, May 8, 2010. Retrieved from https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/homoseksualu-eitynes-baigesi-pgrazulio-ir-kuokos-isvesdinimu.d?id=32013329 [accessed 21/02/2023].

[43]   See more Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė, I. *Populist Political Leadership and Political Parties in Lithuania*, p. 99-114.

statements on the causes of the war in Ukraine. He actively encouraged participation at the protest and gave a speech at the event.

(3) Viktor Uspaskich (hereinafter, VU) is a member of the European Parliament and a long-serving chairman of the Labor Party (until July 2022). He actively encouraged participation at the protest and gave a speech there. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he caused a scandal by selling water that supposedly protected against COVID-19.[44]

(4) Ramūnas Karbauskis (hereinafter, RK), a chairman of the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union Party, who resigned from the Parliament in December 2020; he was the only politician among the politicians in question, who did not attend the protest but actively called for the participation in it, and compared the actions of the police during the riots to the dictatorship in Russia and Belarus.[45] The party itself is described as moderately populist or the one that combines technocratic and populist discourse in its rhetoric.[46] The inclusion of this politician is determined by the fact that he is the leader of the largest opposition party that governed Lithuania during the first pandemic, and he has been an active critic of the current ruling coalition.

The study included the representatives from almost all opposition parties, i.e., the Farmers and Greens Union (32 mandates), the Labor Party (10 mandates), and a mixed group of parliamentarians under the name of the Lithuanian Regions Group (10 mandates). Only the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania (12 mandates) did not support the protest, and was often accused of collaborating with the ruling parties.

PDA does not require a large data sample since, unlike content analysis, its purpose is to identify elements of populism and conspiracy theories. The major sources of the study were as follows:

(1) Facebook (hereinafter, FB) pages of the LFM and other politicians in question. Not only original posts but also articles or shared opinions were considered the relevant research material.

(2) Official websites of the politicians and movements: www.seimusajudis.lt; www.uspaskich.eu/, etc.

(3) YouTube channels of the politicians or movements.

The research entailed three processes: 1) data acquisition of all the posts, YouTube links and articles connected to the COVID-19 pandemic on relevant FB pages; 2) data analysis using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software, i.e., coding of the categories in question; and 3) data interpretation implementing theoretical assumptions.

The majority of data used for this research came from FB, by far the most popular social network in Lithuania,[47] an important channel for Lithuanian political communication.[48] However, using FB as a data source can raise some ethical and methodological challenges. In our case, the most important issue was the lack of clarity over the boundaries between the private and the public space in FB.[49] The most suitable solution would be obtaining an informed consent, notwithstanding there are a few instances when a researcher might use FB posts without obtaining one. One of such instances, according to the British

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[44] See, e.g., Tarnybos aiškinasi, kaip veikia Uspaskicho reklamuotas vanduo. *Delfi.lt,* December 6, 2021. Retrieved from https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/tarnybos-aiskinasi-kaip-veikia-uspaskicho-reklamuotas--vanduo.d?id=88867293 [accessed 21/02/2023].

[45] See Karbauskis, R. Negalima pateisinti riaušių, bet jas akivaizdžiai išprovokavo valdžios arogancija. *Tv3.lt,* August 11, 2021. Retrieved from https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/lietuva/ramunas-karbauskis-negalima-pateisinti-riausiu-bet-jas-akivaizdziai-isprovokavo-valdzios-arogancija-n1109206 [accessed 21/02/2023].

[46] See Ulinskaitė, J. Lietuvos politinės partijos populizmo amžiuje: 2016 ir 2020 m. Seimo rinkimų programų turinio analizė. *Politologija*, 2021, t. 101, Nr. 1, p. 70, https://doi.org/10.15388/Polit.2021.101.2.

[47] See Atskleidė, kas šiemet pateko į populiariausių socialinių tinklų TOP10 Lietuvoje. *Delfi.lt,* December 2, 2022. Retrieved from https://www.delfi.lt/m360/naujausi-straipsniai/atskleide-kas-siemet-pateko-i-populiariausiu-socialiniu-tinklu-top10-lietuvoje.d?id=91922015 [accessed 21/02/2023].

[48] See more Aleknonis, G; Matkevičienė, R. Populism in Lithuania: Defining the Research Tradition. *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics*, 2016, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 26-48, https://doi.org/10.1515/bjlp-2016-0002.

[49] See more Zimmer, M. 'But the Data Is Already Public': On the Ethics of Research in Facebook. In: *The Ethics of Information Technologies* / Eds. K.W. Miller, M. Taddeo. New York: Routledge, 2020, p. 229-241.

Psychological Society, are 'public situations where those observed would expect to be observed by strangers.'[50] Since FB pages of the politicians in question, in contrast with the private accounts, have a status of a 'Public figure page,' and consequently, are available for public dissemination, it is considered that the above condition is met. The same applies to the only organization in question, the LFM.

The biggest methodological questions apply to idiosyncrasies of the FB data. First, it is impossible to create a direct link to the FB post to confirm its authenticity. Second, the posts can be easily edited or even deleted by their authors. These circumstances create a few risks making it difficult to verify the data of the research. The usage of shared articles or reposted opinions raises yet another methodological question. For example, sharing certain information could be an act of irony or even have some negative connotations. In this case, the researcher took all the risk of correct interpretation of the data available. Nevertheless, it was important to analyze the links that pointed to relevant news articles and shared opinions in order to understand how a broader agenda of topics was used for the populist mobilization.

4. The Case of the Lithuanian Family Movement

The LFM started its activities with the demands against the Istanbul Convention and the Partnership Law, which the movement perceived as a threat to 'our families, our children and the future of Lithuania'[51] and their adoption as an 'LGBT dictatorship.'[52] The element of imminent dictatorship is the empty signifier of the entire populist discourse of the LFM, which would later also incorporate the demands for pandemic management measures. The politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic used by the LFM can be divided into several stages:

(1) Criticism of **specific** pandemic management measures. This phase coincided with the first protest organized by the LFM, the Great Family Defense March, where the Istanbul Convention and other issues played a central role. However, calls for the 'dismissal of Arūnas Dulkys, the Minister of Health, whose controversial and incessantly changing decisions were creating confusion in the society,'[53] could also be heard at the event. At this stage, such measures as masks, student testing, distance learning, etc., were criticized. As the previous government was already dealing with the pandemic, when the LFM did not exist yet, according to Felstiner's classification, this stage can be classified as an intermediate position between *naming* and *blaming*. In this case, the blame was directed not so much at the government's pandemic management policy as its inconsistency, i.e., 'creating confusion.'

(2) **Semi-abstract** requirements. This stage started with the introduction of the Opportunity Passport by the government. It was seen as a 'segregationist and unlawful'[54] measure that 'totally opposes and divides society.'[55] Although the demand to abolish the Opportunity Passport was specific, its implications ('discrimination' and 'segregation') were abstract and encompassed the entirety of the government's pandemic policy in general. Thus, this stage was undoubtedly the *blaming* stage.

(3) **Abstract** requirements. The third stage coincided with the culmination of public dissatisfaction with the pandemic management measures, i.e., the riots at the Parliament. It proclaims that 'under

50 Oates, J.; Carpenter, D.; Fisher, M.; Goodson, S.; Hannah, B.; Kwiatkowski, R.; Prutton, K.; Reeves, D.; Wainwright, T. *BPS Code of Human Research Ethics*. Leicester: British Psychological Society, 2021, p. 23, https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsrep.2021.inf180.

51 Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdžio kalėdinis sveikinimas Lietuvos žmonėms. *Kauno forumas*, December 24, 2021. Retrieved from https://kaunoforumas.com/2021/12/24/lietuvos-seimu-sajudzio-kaledinis-sveikinimas-lietuvos-zmonems/ [accessed 04/11/2022]. Here and hereinafter, the translations from the Lithuanian are by the author of the article.

52 Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis, kaip ir prieš „Didįjį šeimos gynimo maršą 2021", pradeda savo žygį per Lietuvą. *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis,* October 23, 2021. Retrieved from https://seimusajudis.lt/naujienos/lietuvos-seimu-sajudis-kaip-ir-pries-didiji-seimos-gynimo-marsa-2021-pradeda-savo-zygi-per-lietuva/ [accessed 09/11/2022].

53 *"Didysis Šeimos Gynimo Maršas 2021" startavo ir tęsis toliau – įgarsinti reikalavimai aukščiausiai šalies vadovybei.*

54 Daunys, A. *Atpildas vis tiek ateis.*

55 *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis, kaip ir prieš „Didįjį šeimos gynimo maršą 2021" pradeda savo žygį per Lietuvą.*

the guise of fighting the coronavirus,' the government is imposing an 'outright dictatorship'[56] that is 'unconstitutional'[57] and 'people are demanding to recall them, they are demanding to respect the Constitution and return their freedom of choice.'[58] Here, the empty signifier of dictatorship had emerged, and all the pandemic demands were finally subsumed into the general populist discourse of 'people's resistance to the dictatorship of the elite.' Although the demands for the abolition of pandemic measures did not offer any alternative, they could be attributed to the last stage of politicization, that of *claiming*.

The politicization of the pandemic issue and its inclusion into the populist discourse was accompanied by increasingly abstract claims, until it reached the borderline of conspiracy theories, balancing on the accusations of introducing dictatorship. Conspiracy theories are important for the construction of the image of the enemy, which is being transformed by similar accusations moving from the specific to the abstract, suggesting that the 'fight against the pandemic is just a pretext,'[59] under which the conspiracies of various kinds hide:

(1) **Specific corruption** conspiracy theories. It states that many of those involved in the management of the pandemic 'have profited directly or indirectly from it,'[60] or that 'the artificially induced pandemic hysteria has provided unlimited opportunities for embezzlement'[61]; thus, the elite is corrupt, and the measures to fight the pandemic are just another opportunity to steal. Using Barkun's and Walker's distinctions, conspiracy theory still concerns individual events, the acting group is internal to society, and its benefits are material.

(2) **Semi-abstract corruption/control** conspiracy theories. This type of conspiracy theory is best described by the LFM's assertion that 'the wish of old pseudo-political dinosaurs to steal increasingly more has coincided with the desire of the new homo-juniors to fundamentally change society, by receiving even more globalist notes in their bank accounts and getting other bonuses for the right to exercise totalitarian control over all areas of society.'[62] As a result, some representatives of the elite seek to steal, while others seek to control and thus, change society. All of this is financed by 'globalist' sources.' For its part, the LFM declared war on this looming dictatorship ('an open war against the rule of globalists, money, image, lies and bureaucracy has begun'[63]). We are approaching a system of conspiracy theories, where the enemy, although still internal, is linked to external forces and called the 'temporary managing group of Lithuania,'[64] which, in addition to material benefits, also gain undemocratic control over society.

(3) **Abstract external conspiracy theories.** A typical example of such conspiracy theories is the statement of 'Klaus Schwab's Covid school for dictators,'[65] where the COVID-19 pandemic is used to impose 'a neo-communist-sanitary dictatorship'[66] and where the Lithuanian elite is called

56   Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis: Trauktis nebėra kur. *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis*, August 5, 2021. Retrieved from https://seimusajudis.lt/naujienos/lietuvos-seimu-sajudis-trauktis-nebera-kur/ [accessed 09/11/2022].

57   *Ibidem.*

58   Vilniaus keliai blokuojami, pasak važiuojančių, protestas prie Seimo buvo išvaikytas gilią naktį. *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis,* August 11, 2021. Retrieved from: https://seimusajudis.lt/naujienos/vilniaus-keliai-blokuojami-pasak-vaziuojanciu-protestas-prie-seimo-buvo-isvaikytas-gilia-nakti/ [accessed 09/11/2022].

59   Daunys, A. *Atpildas vis tiek ateis.*

60   Prof. Ignas Vėgėlė siūlo visuomenės nuomonės formuotojams pandemijos valdymo klausimais pasirašyti „sąžiningumo deklaraciją". *Infa.lt*, October 30, 2021. Retrieved from https://infa.lt/65082/prof-ignas-vegele-siulo-visuomenes-nuomones-formuotojams-pandemijos-valdymo-klausimais-pasirasyti-saziningumo-deklaracija/ [accessed 04/11/2022].

61   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis, kaip ir prieš „Didįjį šeimos gynimo maršą 2021" pradeda savo žygį per Lietuvą.*

62   *Ibidem.*

63   *Vilniaus keliai blokuojami, pasak važiuojančių, protestas prie Seimo buvo išvaikytas gilią naktį.*

64   *Ibidem.*

65   Atskleidžiama: Klauso Schwabo mokykla „Covid" diktatoriams, puikus „Great Reset" planas. *Infa.lt,* January 22, 2022. Retrieved from: https://infa.lt/67955/atskleidziama-klauso-schwabo-mokykla-covid-diktatoriams-puikus-greatreset-planas-video/ [accessed 04/11/2022].

66   Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis. *Facebook Page*, January 27, 2022.

'a government that serves the globalists.'[67] Here, we clearly see the conspiracy systems, where the enemy is external, and the local elites are their puppets. Thus, a threat that essentially is external, the COVID-19 pandemic, is linked, through conspiracy theories, to an indigenous populist enemy that is not only corrupt but also dependent on 'globalist masters.'

(4) As a separate type of conspiracy theories, **conspiracy theories specifically used to connect** populist discourse can be distinguished, where one element in the discourse is connected to the entirety by means of conspiracy theory. The COVID-19 pandemic measures were just a pretext for the introduction of an 'LGBT dictatorship,' because 'a society that is confronted and tired of protests, and freezing in queues to buy cereal in order to survive may not be able to rise again.'[68] This goes back to the original demands of the LFM (opposing the Istanbul Convention, etc.), which have been linked to the pandemic demands in a coherent populist discourse by means of conspiracy theory.

5. The Case of Populist Politicians

The comments made by politicians in question can be divided into similar, however, not identical stages to those of the LFM. This does not mean that all four politicians in question made identical comments or appeared at each stage. Common trends can be highlighted:

(1) **Advising those in power.** As the new government began its fight against the pandemic, some politicians advised how the new ruling coalition should act. RK, the leader of the former ruling party, the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union, was especially vocal: 'We are a constructive opposition that proposes possible solutions, and we see ourselves as helping the government.'[69] Other politicians also tried giving advice, e.g., MP: 'On behalf of the Seimas group, we have drawn up recommendations and sent them to the Ministry of Health.'[70] This stage does not fall within the Felstiner's politicization cycle, as it is essentially a continuation of the work of the previous government; however, it already signals of the challenges if the recommendations are not listened to.

(2) Criticism of **specific** pandemic management measures. This stage fully corresponds with the LFM discourse. It involved all the politicians in question, for instance, 'It is becoming apparent that the mask policy for young people was a complete tragedy'[71]; 'The decision to ban the movement [between the municipalities] did not work'[72]; 'Businesses need to be allowed to open'[73] and 'The aim is to defend from the destruction of business.'[74] The position in the Felstiner's classification is also identical to the LFM.

(3) **Semi-abstract requirements**. Even though this stage is similar to the LFM, one can distinguish between the politicians' desire to stress that the measures taken by those in power not only 'create divisions in society'[75] or 'divide, oppose and segregate society,'[76] but also that they do not listen to the advice given to them: 'Their arrogance makes it impossible for them to apologize, or even to say 'thank you' to those who have done the right thing in trying to help them.'[77] This is an attempt to single out and at the same time, use *blaming* for the current pandemic crisis, when, contrary

[67] Švarplys, A. Stambulo konvencija ir genderizmas. *YouTube*, February 28, 2021. Retrieved form https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jeHuRkcAyfc [accessed 09/11/2022].

[68] *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis, kaip ir prieš „Didįjį šeimos gynimo maršą 2021" pradeda savo žygį per Lietuvą.*

[69] Karbauskis, R. *Facebook Page,* January 25, 2021.

[70] Puidokas, M. *Facebook Page,* January 27, 2021.

[71] Uspaskich, V. *Facebook Page,* July 3, 2021.

[72] Karbauskis, R. *Facebook Page,* April 9, /2021.

[73] Puidokas, M. *Facebook Page,* April 14, 2021.

[74] Gražulis, P. *Facebook Page,* September, 18, 2021.

[75] Uspaskich, V. *Facebook Page,* October 11, 2021.

[76] Puidokas, M. *Facebook Page,* November, 22, 2021.

[77] Karbauskis, R. *Facebook Page,* April 9, 2021.

to the previous government, the new government, under the guise of incompetence, is 'adopting increasingly more bans that violate human rights.'[78]

(4) **Abstract requirements.** This stage is partly in line with the LFM, which also speaks of an imminent dictatorship: 'No to the creation of dictatorship!'[79]; 'Introducing an opportunity passport invented by Communist China, in other words, introducing dictatorship!!!'[80]; 'The government of Führer Šimonytė is similar to the Nazi times government!'[81] Only RK was slightly more moderate in emphasizing the differences between the former and the current governments: 'It does not try to silence people but makes efforts to foster the diversity of views. This government is ready to do whatever it takes to stop anyone who opposes its decisions.'[82] In contrast to the LFM discourse, the threat of 'mandatory vaccinations' received special attention. The politicians managed to stop ('VICTORY!'[83] 'We rejected mandatory vaccinations!'[84]) the mandatory vaccinations and showed that they were on the side of people: 'It is your pressure, dear people of Lithuania, that brings results!'[85], or 'The ruling politicians of the Parliament did not dare to impose full dictatorship. God is with us.'[86] Claiming proposals varied among different politicians. The Labor Party representatives (VU and MP) were the most radical, opposing vaccination ('vaccination against COVID-19 is not a panacea and can be detrimental to your health,'[87] or 'none of them end in the hospitals or encounter anything more serious'[88]), calling for all pandemic restrictions to end. PG said that the measures were too harsh and that the quarantine was 'disproportionately too long and too severe'[89]; therefore, he proposed to mitigate the measures. The representative of the former ruling party, RK, agreed with the measures in principle, but noted that 'we need to talk; we need positive encouragement to vaccinate and not coercion.'[90]

The process of politicization of the pandemic by populist politicians is very similar to the discourse of the LFM, which, despite some differences, moves from specific criticism of individual measures to manage the pandemic to abstract and negative assessment of the situation, even approaching the border of conspiracy theories. The first references to conspiracy theories appear with the naming of the threat of dictatorship, e.g., describing the ruling coalition as a 'Liberal Conservative Globalist pseudo-elite'[91] or 'the Lansbergis Mafia.'[92] However, the consistent dynamic of conspiracy theories (found in the LFM discourse) has been absent from the discourses of the politicians, and has only been used in a scattered and random manner:

(1) VU's conspiracy theories can be linked to his personal 'anti-medical' prejudice. He has marketed water that supposedly cures COVID-19,[93] repeatedly stressing that he does not take any modern

[78]   Uspaskich, V. *Facebook Page,* October 11, 2021.
[79]   Puidokas, M. *Facebook Page,* June 15, 2021.
[80]   Uspaskich, V. *Facebook Page,* September 13, 2021.
[81]   Gražulis, P. *Facebook Page,* June 14, 2021.
[82]   Karbauskis, R. *Facebook Page,* April 1, 2021.
[83]   Puidokas, M. *Facebook Page,* January 20, 2022.
[84]   Gražulis, P. *Facebook Page,* January 20, 2022.
[85]   *Ibidem.*
[86]   Puidokas, M. *Facebook Page,* December 30, 2021.
[87]   Uspaskich, V. *Facebook Page,* September 13, 2021.
[88]   Puidokas, M. *Facebook Page,* January 11, 2022.
[89]   Gražulis, P. *Facebook Page,* February 12, 2022.
[90]   Karbauskis, R. *Facebook Page,* August 25, 2021.
[91]   Puidokas, M. *Facebook Page,* January 11, 2022.
[92]   Gražulis, P *Facebook Page,* January, 20, 2022. Vytautas Landsbergis was the first Speaker of Reconstituent Seimas of Lithuania and one of the founders of the Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats Party. His grandson, Gabrielius Landsbergis, currently (as of 2023) serves as the chairman of the party. Political opponents sometimes refer to the Landsbergis family as 'dynasty' or in this case, 'mafia.'
[93]   See also Uspaskich, V. Gindamas savo tiesą apie struktūrizuotą vandenį esu pasiruošęs eksperimentui... ir dar šiek tiek tiesos apie valdžios nusikalstamą neveiklumą! *Uspaskich.eu.* 2021. Retrieved from: https://www.uspaskich.eu/aktualu/v-uspaskich-gindamas-savo-tiesa-apie-strukturizuota-vandeni-esu-pasiruoses-eksperimentui-ir-dar-siek-tiek-tiesos-apie-valdzios-nusikalstama-neveikluma/ [accessed 09/11/2022].

medicine and therefore, does not suffer from any illness.[94] VU's claims that vaccination is harmful, that 'journalists are hiding this information,'[95] and that vaccinated people are dying at a higher rate[96] were consistent, finally resulting in accusations that the government was falsifying pandemic statistics and hiding the deaths of those who died from vaccination.[97] Thus, VU's conspiracy theories did not reinforce populist critique of the government, but was an outcome of his personal distrust of global medical science, which later led to local conspiracy theories. One could say that, compared to the LFM, it was a reverse cycle, moving from global external conspiracy theories to unitary accusations of local government.

(2) In one of his reports, PG shared that the vaccines were an attempt to introduce a global governance system.[98] Such mention can be considered accidental. Another conspiracy theory, directly unrelated to the COVID-19 pandemic, promoted by PG, was the frequently repeated accusation that the riots at the Parliament were instigated by 'provocateurs trained by the special services.'[99]

(3) Of all the politicians in question, MP was most likely to talk about 'crimes against humanity by the globalist Schwab's elite,'[100] against whose the COVID-19 pandemic measures and dictatorship the people of the world must rise. Since he also referred to the Lithuanian ruling coalition as such on at least a few occasions,[101] one can see the attempts to link internal enemies with external enemies. However, those attempts were not consistent, and they only partially met the definitions of conspiracy theories, because there were neither indications of particular or abstract benefits, which the conspirators would receive, nor specific links (apart from the description of the 'globalists'), or secrecy.

(4) RK did not use full-fledged conspiracy theories in his discourse. He came closest to that when claiming the creation of 'ghettos'[102] for unvaccinated and the imposition of a 'communist regime'[103] by the government.

Conclusions

Laclau's theory of populism, combined with Felstiner's framework of politicization, helps to identify specific stages of populist mobilization around societal issues. By employing the variable of conspiracy theories, a new, more specific and applicable model can be constructed, drawing elements from both theories. This model, moving from specific to more abstract populist demands, could be useful for analyzing the discourse when all three elements—populism, conspiracy theories and politicization—are involved.

Both the LFM and individual populist politicians used a similar argumentative dynamic to politicize the pandemic, moving from criticism of specific measures used to manage the pandemic to an abstract and negative assessment of the situation as a whole, describing it as a looming dictatorship. Essentially, it went in line with Felstiner's *naming-blaming-claiming* cycle. It is true that the last part of the cycle, *claiming*, was mostly manifested in the basic demand for the abolition of restrictions, rather than in the proposal of alternatives.

The individual discourses of the politicians at this stage did not differ much from the LFM and mainly served to emphasize their work in the fight against the ruling elite and their difference from it. The LFM, as a new formation, did not have to argue that they do not belong to the ruling elite.

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[94]   Cf. Uspaskich, V. *Facebook Page,* November 20, 2021.
[95]   Uspaskich, V. *Facebook Page,* January 5, 2021.
[96]   Cf. Uspaskich, V. *Facebook Page,* January 6, 2021.
[97]   Cf. Uspaskich, V. *Facebook Page,* October 6, 2021.
[98]   See Gražulis, P. *Facebook Page,* January 17, 2022.
[99]   Gražulis, P. *Facebook Page,* August 20, 2021.
[100] Puidokas, M. *Facebook Page,* January 16, 2022.
[101] See, e.g., Puidokas, M. *Facebook Page,* January 11, 2022.
[102] Karbauskis, R. *Facebook Page,* July 20, 2021.
[103] Karbauskis, R. *Facebook Page,* April 1, 2021.

Conspiracy theories in the LFM populist discourse had their own dynamic and played several roles. First, thanks to conspiracy theories, the global and at the same time, external to Lithuania issue of the COVID-19 pandemic was gradually (moving from concrete-internal conspiracy theories to abstract-external conspiracy theory systems) linked to the Lithuanian elite, which was portrayed as 'temporary managers of Lithuania,' controlled by the global elite. Second, it highlighted the image of the ruling coalition as the enemy, who deliberately and jointly with external conspirators, tried to undermine the *populus* and reinforce the perception of imminent dictatorship or other threat, claiming that things were carried out in secret. Therefore, it became possible to mobilize people in more convincing way. Third, conspiracy theories helped to make the LFM populist discourse more coherent, e.g., the pandemic restrictions were presented as the opportunity to adopt the 'LGBT laws' inconspicuously.

Conspiracy theories played a relatively minor and very likely incidental role in the discourses of individual politicians in question. The political professionals, who wanted to continue to be involved in politics, avoided extremely radical conspiracy theories and wild accusations of local elites, because first, they could partially be seen as that elite, and second, those accusations could also resulted in legal consequences or parliamentary sanctions.

The threat of dictatorship, which recurred in the discourses of both politicians and the LFM, could also be considered a quasi-conspiracy theory. Although what exactly this dictatorship would entail had not been specified, this fatalistic prediction of the finite future, which is inherent in most of the conspiracy theory systems, made the populist discourse emotionally more suggestive.

The main question for further research should be whether the proposed model has universal or specific qualities. The COVID-19 crisis is difficult to compare to any other issue in terms of its scale and global impact on people's daily lives. Thus, it should be tested along with other socio-economic crises and even issues of a more local scale. Another interesting question to inquire would be the ways in which those in power conceptualize the populist discourse. Would they still try to use conspiracy theories as their main weapon of demonization, or would they resort to a more rational approach?

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