Populism and Conspiracy Theories: The Case of the Lithuanian Family Movement

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Abstract. Populism and conspiracy theories usually gain their momentum during the societal crises. The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the biggest crises in Lithuania and the rest of the world in recent years, during which the new populist movement – the Lithuanian Family Movement – reached its peak of popularity, using a number of various conspiracy theories in its populist discourse. The aim of this article is to reveal the specific role of conspiracy theories in the populist discourse and to show its dynamic nature. Ernesto Laclau's discursive conceptualization of populism is used for theorization of populism and conspiracy theories; discourse analysis method is used in the research itself. The research has showed that conspiracy theories played a specific role in the discourse of Lithuanian Family Movement, especially important for the gradual construction of the identity of the populist enemy, moving from the concrete to the abstract.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, populism, Ernesto Laclau, Lithuanian Family Movement, COVID-19 conspiracy theories, LGBT conspiracy theories.

Populizmas ir sąmokslo teorijos: Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdžio atvejis

Santrauka. Ištikus visuomenės krizėms suklesti ir populizmas, ir sąmokslo teorijos. Bene didžiausia pastarųjų metų krizė Lietuvoje ir pasaulyje buvo COVID-19 pandemija, kurios metu piką pasiekė naujas populistinis judėjimas mūsų šalyje – Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis, panaudojęs ne vieną tiek su pandemija, tiek su kitais dalykais susijusią sąmokslo teoriją. Straipsnio tikslas ir yra atskleisti, kokį specifinį vaidmenį atlieka sąmokslo teorijos populistiniame Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdžio diskurse ir kokia yra šio vaidmens dinamika. Remiamasi Ernesto Laclau diskursyvia populizmo konceptualizacija, o atliekant tyrimą naudojamas diskurso analizės metodas. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, kad sąmokslo teorijos Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdžio diskurse atliko specifinį vaidmenį, ypač svarbų laipsniškam, judant nuo konkretumo iki abstraktumo, populistinio priešo identiteto formavimui.

Raktiniai žodžiai: sąmokslo teorijos, populizmas, Ernestas Laclau, Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis, COVID-19 sąmokslo teorijos, LGBT sąmokslo teorijos.

Introduction

Were the COVID-19 pandemic containment measures just hysteria created by those in power and the pharmaceutical industry for their own gain? Was the state of emergency imposed in Lithuania due to the war in Ukraine a pretext for banning rallies and subtly pushing through laws imposing an 'LGBT dictatorship'? These and other conspiracy theories, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, have become the subject of daily debate for a large part of society. Various populist actors have been exploiting this situation and actively disseminating conspiracy theories. The Lithuanian Family

Movement (Lith. *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis*; hereinafter referred to as 'the Movement'), which has included a number of conspiracy theories in its populist discourse, is perhaps the most prominent in the country. The aim of this article is to bring to light the structural role of conspiracy theories in populist discourse by examining the case of the Movement.

For several decades now, populist movements have been gaining ground in political life worldwide and in Lithuania, especially during periods of crises, when a simplistic Manichean perception of the political field becomes even more attractive to voters who when in crisis situations, want 'concrete solutions' and 'naming the guilty'. Conspiracy theories play a similar discursive role. Next to the rapid increase of social networks, they have found crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic a particularly fertile ground. Of course, not every conspiracy theory is linked to populism, and not every populist discourse makes use of conspiracy theories, but it is hard not to notice that these phenomena are often complementary.[1] It is precisely during the pandemic crisis that the Movement, which has been at its most popular, provides perhaps the ideal conditions for revealing not only the role of conspiracy theories in helping to shape the image of the populist enemy but also the dynamics of this role, which change depending on the intensity of the crisis.

The phenomenon of populism has been widely discussed in the academic literature from various perspectives. It can be noted that in an attempt to conceptualize populism, a few major trends have been formed (populism as a discourse, populism as an ideology, etc.),[2] which can be used to explore a particular manifestation of populism. Conspiracy theories, meanwhile, although they have been receiving increasing attention, do not enjoy such a thorough conceptualization. In most cases, scholarly articles either take conspiracy theories for granted as a phenomenon that does not require any further explication, or limit themselves to a descriptive listing of their characteristics, without any attempt to find a universal formulation.

In order to at least partially address this problem, e.g. to conceptualize both populism and conspiracy theories, in this article, I have singled out Ernesto Laclau's theory of discourse.[3] Although the original aim of this theory was to explain the discursive logic of populism, due to the similar methods of constructing the enemy and simplifying the political field, it can be successfully applied in explaining the discursive elements of conspiracy theories.

1. Theoretical Definitions of Populism and Conspiracy Theories

In Laclau's theory, as revealed in *On Populist Reason*,[4] populism is understood as a certain logic of discourse formation aimed at creating a populist collective identity or, in other words, mobilizing people. Thus, conspiracy theories, insofar as they are applied in populist discourse, serve the same purposes. In Laclau's theory, the category of political demand, from which any political movement begins, is the initial – necessary but insufficient – unit of analysis of populist discourse. In order for a populist discourse to begin to manifest itself, this demand must be unsatisfied and gradually merged with other demands to form, in Laclau's terms, *chain of equivalence*. This means that a collective identity begins to emerge among the particular elements (different groups with different demands), and at the same time, an antagonistic front between the dissatisfied *populous* ('the people') and the power that is ignoring the demands ('the elite', 'the regime', etc.) starts to form. The emerging chain of equivalence must create a common denominator that unites the populist camp. This is usually a particular demand, which, due to certain circumstances, has taken on an abstract role as a signifier of the entire populist discourse.
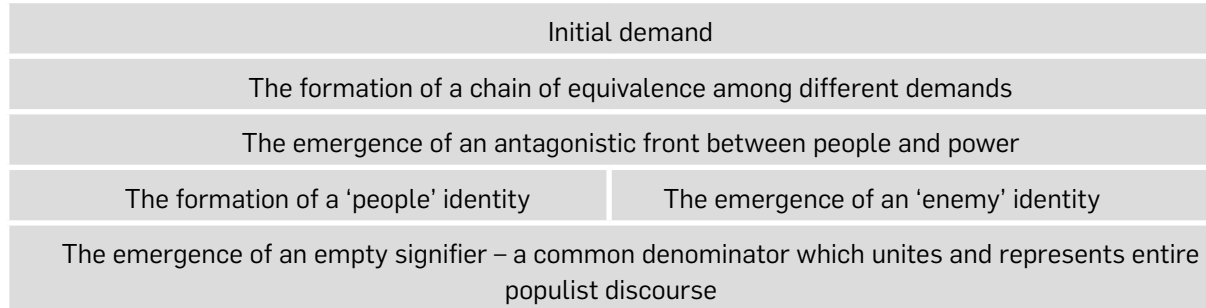
[1] See more Bergmann, E. *Conspiracy & Populism: The Politics of Misinformation*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

[2] See more Jonutis, K. Ernesto Laclau populizmo teorija ir jos operacionalizacija: politinės partijos 'Drąsos kelias' atvejis. *Sociologija. Mintis ir veiksmas*, 2018, t. 43, Nr. 2, p. 43–70, https://doi.org/10.15388/SocMintVei.2018.2.2.

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

[4] *Ibidem*.

This common denominator, because of its structural role, is known as an empty signifier, e.g. 'justice' often found in political discourse takes on different meanings depending on who is demanding it ('fair pensions', 'fair taxes', etc.), but does not have a common or universal meaning (it is empty). Its only meaning is structural for it consolidates the discourse itself.[5] The formation of populist discourse can be illustrated by the following scheme 1:

Initial demand
The formation of a chain of equivalence among different demands
The emergence of an antagonistic front between people and power
The formation of a 'people' identity / The emergence of an 'enemy' identity
The emergence of an empty signifier – a common denominator which unites and represents entire populist discourse

Scheme 1. **Emergence of populist discourse**

Before attempting to conceptualize conspiracy theories, it should be stressed that a normative approach to conspiracy theories is still prevalent in the academic literature, with a pejorative perspective[6] and an attempt to present conspiracy theories in relation to the truth or in relation to the quality of argumentation. Matthew Dentith noted[7] that both of these approaches are epistemologically unproductive and that such an argumentation ends up with a myriad of exceptions or limitations, either by claiming that there are 'true' conspiracy theories[8] that meet the authors' definitions of quality, or altogether falling into a tautological trap, in which the existence of a conspiracy theory is contingent upon its confirmation.[9]

For these reasons, in this article I try avoiding normative approach in order to provide as general and complex a definition of conspiracy theory as possible. The literature on conspiracy theories highlights the following minimum elements that define a conspiracy theory:

(1) **Targeted nature**. There is a plan, and actions are not random.[10] At this stage, the analysis of the discourse essentially answers the question *What is happening?*

(2) **Secrecy**. There are secret objectives. The real objectives or activities are actively hidden from the public.[11] The question here is *What is behind it, or what is really going on?*

(3) **Acting group**. There are conspirators – a group that pursues the above-mentioned objectives.[12] At this stage, the question is *Who is responsible for this?*

Since we are talking about conspiracy theories specifically in populist discourse, this initial definition can be supplemented with some additional characteristics:

(1) Targeted actions address the issues that irritate society and are related to the demands of the *populous* ('the people') mentioned in the definition of populism, which are either covertly intended to harm, or are used for ulterior motives.

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5   See Jonutis, K. *Ernesto Laclau populizmo teorija ir jos operacionalizacija: politinės partijos 'Drąsos kelias' atvejis*, p. 51–54.

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

7   *Ibidem*.

8   E.g. Räikkä, J. On Political Conspiracy Theories. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 2009, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 185–201, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2007.00300.x.

9   Dentith, M. *The Philosophy of Conspiracy Theories,* p. 124–144.

10 E.g. Bergmann, E. *Conspiracy & Populism: The Politics of Misinformation*, p. 56–57.

11 E.g. Hameleers, M. They Are Selling Themselves Out to the Enemy! The Content and Effects of Populist Conspiracy Theories. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 2021, Vol. 33, No. 1, p. 40, https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edaa004.

12 E.g. Barkun, M. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003, p. 3–4, https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520238053.001.0001.

(2) The cover-up is usually carried out by a corrupt media, and the public is misled but can or is beginning to grasp the fact. This motive of a corrupt or biased media is intrinsic to both populism and conspiracy theories.[13] At the same time, this secrecy is linked to the construction of the image of the populist 'enemy' and to the mobilization of 'the people'.

(3) One of the key differences between conspiracy theories and populism is that conspiracy theories do not necessarily create a unified image of the people as the acting subject.[14] In addition, conspiracy theories, although rare, do not necessarily pursue bad goals, i.e. there are also 'good' conspiracy theories.[15] Meanwhile, when combining populist discourse and conspiracy theories, the latter serves precisely to add color to the image of the Manichean enemy; in this case, the conspirators are always bad guys, who, for one reason or another, seek to harm 'the people'.[16] The conspirators themselves can only be both the local elites against whom the populist movement is fighting, and external groups that hold power over the local elites in various ways.

Conspiracy theories are classified in many ways, ranging from thematic[17] to structural.[18] In this article, I chose to use two classifications, which help to reveal certain dynamic features of the role of conspiracy theories in populist discourse. The first is Michael Barkun's classification of the scope of conspiracy theories. He divides conspiracy theories into the following groups:

(1) Individual isolated events that are explained by a conspiracy theory. E.g. the death of Princess Diana.

(2) Conspiracy theories systems that explain multiple events. E.g. Masonic or Zionist conspiracies.

(3) Super-conspiracies that combine many conspiracy theories to explain long historical periods. E.g. David Icke's super-conspiracy linking reptoids, Zionists, space aliens, etc. and explaining events going back to biblical times.[19]

In the framework of this article, I am interested not so much in the questionable distinction between conspiracy theory systems and super-conspiracies, but the tendency of conspiracy theories to become more complex and interconnected.

The second classification I employ is Jesse Walker's categorization of conspiracy theories based on the position of the enemy. The author distinguishes:

(1) The 'Enemy Within'

(2) The 'Enemy Outside'

(3) The 'Enemy Above', and

(4) The 'Enemy Below'.[20]

Combining these four categories into a certain matrix gives us four types of enemy:

(1) Inner-elite

(2) Internal-marginal

(3) External-elite, and

(4) Outer-marginal.

It is hard to imagine that the marginal could have any role in the context of populist discourse, so in this article I focus mainly on the first and third types of the enemy.

Partly based on the classifications discussed above, this article attempts to show two dynamic characteristics of conspiracy theories: the move from simplicity to complexity and the move from the internal enemy to the external one, and their implications for populist discourse.

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[13]   See Bergmann, E. *Conspiracy & Populism: The Politics of Misinformation*, p. 39.

[14]   See *ibidem*.

[15]   See more Walker, J. *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory.* New York: Harper, 2013.

[16]   See Bergmann, E. *Conspiracy & Populism: The Politics of Misinformation*, p. 40.

[17]   See Deutschmann, P. Conspiracy Theories, Discourse Analysis and Narratology. In: *'Truth' and Fiction: Conspiracy Theories in Eastern European Culture and Literature* / Eds. P. Deutschmann, J. Herlth, A. Woldan. Bielefeld: Verlag, 2020, p. 19, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839446508-002.

[18]   See Bergmann, E. *Conspiracy & Populism: The Politics of Misinformation*, p. 51.

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

[20]   Walker, J. *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*, p. 10–12.

2. Methodology

I base my research on post-foundational discourse analysis (PDA), which treats discourse as a set of repertoires of the issues at stake, in this case, populism and conspiracy theories. The underlying assumption here is that every written or verbal articulation of the content of a political movement (when it appears in the name of the political project) manifests and actively creates its discursive reality. Another important assumption is that I do not attempt to 'go beyond' the discourse, i.e. to discover what the subject under question 'really' wanted to articulate. The point of this analysis is not to decipher manipulative or false statements, but to examine what was communicated by revealing the logic and scenarios by which the separate points of the discourse are brought together into a coherent whole.

PDA does not require a large data sample because its aim, unlike content analysis, is to identify elements (in this case) of populism and conspiracy theories.

The timeframe of the research was naturally limited by the accessibility of the research sources, with the first piece of news on the Movement's website being available in March 2021. As the Movement still exists, albeit somewhat weakened, I have chosen the end date of the research only formally – the last news item included in the research is November 2022. The main sources for the research were:

(1) The group's posts on the Movement's Facebook page (the page was created on September 2021;[21] the Movement's representatives claim that an older Facebook group existed, but it was closed down by the host company (Facebook, Inc.), and the material shared on the page of this group, such as articles in *Kauno Forumas*, *Respublika*, *Infa.lt*, etc., YouTube channels, such as Tautos TV, and the opinions of people who formally do not belong to the Movement, such as Ignas Vėgėlė.[22]

(2) The Movement's website[23] (first news appeared on March 2021).

(3) The Movement's YouTube channel.[24]

3. The Movement's Discourse

3.1. General Features of the Movement's Populist Discourse

Using Laclau's definition of populism, it is not difficult to prove that the Movement's discourse is populist. Since the main aim of this article is to examine conspiracy theories and their impact on populist discourse, rather than the characteristics of the populist discourse of the Movement's itself, I will describe the latter in general terms.

The initial demand of the Movement was directed against the Istanbul Convention. During the first mass rally 'The Great March for the Defense of the Family 2021' that took place in Vingis Park on May 15, 2021, the demand 'Not to deliberate over the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the Seimas and to immediately remove this issue from the Seimas agenda'[25] was presented as a fundamental demand. The Movement saw the Istanbul Convention as the main threat to 'our families, children and the future of Lithuania'.[26] This demand, together with the opposition to the 'civil partnership act'[27] and the 'amendment to the law on the protection of minors against the negative effects of

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[21]   Accessed via: https://www.facebook.com/lietuvosseimusajudis.lt.
[22]   Famous Lithuanian lawyer, strong opponent of the pandemic containment measures.
[23]   Accessed via: https://seimusajudis.lt/.
[24]   Accessed via: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7y6I9GRODb1Y9y8eWIpC0g.
[25]   „Didysis Šeimos Gynimo Maršas 2021" startavo ir tęsis toliau – įgarsinti reikalavimai aukščiausiai šalies vadovybei. *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis*, 2021-05-19. Retrieved from https://seimusajudis.lt/naujienos/didysis-seimos-gynimo-marsas-2021-startavo-ir-tesis-toliau-igarsinti-reikalavimai-auksciausiai-salies-vadovybei/ [accessed 09/11/2022].
[26]   Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdžio kalėdinis sveikinimas Lietuvos žmonėms. *Kauno forumas*, 2021. Retrieved from https://kaunoforumas.com/2021/12/24/lietuvos-seimu-sajudzio-kaledinis-sveikinimas-lietuvos-zmonems/ [accessed 04/11/2022].
[27]   *„Didysis Šeimos Gynimo Maršas 2021" startavo ir tęsis toliau – įgarsinti reikalavimai aukščiausiai šalies vadovybei.*

public information',[28] forms the main and recurring 'anti-genderist' set[29] of the Movement's discourse of resistance to the threatened 'LGBT dictatorship'[30], *ad hoc* supplemented by 'less significant' demands, such as 'the ousting of the Director General of the Lithuanian National Radio and Television, Monika Garbačiauskaitė-Budrienė, under whose leadership the public broadcaster has turned into a voice of genderism.[31] This set is often accompanied by the demand not to discuss another law, the 'decriminalization of drugs act', as detrimental to the family or children.

Another major set was the demand to abolish policies of one kind or another to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. While the first rally focused on the LGBT set of laws, as the anti-pandemic measures became stricter, especially during the rally that ended with the riots in front of the Lithuanian Parliament on August 10, 2021, the 'anti-vaccination' demands came to the fore – to get rid of the an 'opportunity passport', 'forced testing and vaccination', 'on-line education', etc.[32]

Since its inception, the Movement has been active in various rallies and protests, so it is not surprising that the identity of the *populus* is associated with the 'active part of society'[33], the 'discontented ones', who are 'the engines of changes, and even progress'.[34] Parallels are also drawn (as the name of the Movement indicates) with the Reform Movement of Lithuania, *Sąjūdis*, as the participants of the Movement are 'the same people who defended Lithuania in 1991, their children and grandchildren'.[35]

The identity of the enemy, in addition to the traditional descriptive words used by populist movements, such as 'the elite',[36] 'the privileged',[37] or 'the regime', is clearly directed against the three ruling parties in Lithuania, which call themselves 'liberal', 'free' and 'conservative', but are in reality the 'new Communists'[38] or the 'Šimašoidai and the užingridai'.[39] This association of the enemy with 'neo-Marxists', 'Bolsheviks', 'new Communists' and the like is important both in the further investigation of conspiracy theories and in the description of the empty signifier.

The empty signifier in the Movement's discourse, which consolidates the entire discourse and decodes its individual points, can be described in two interrelated ways: firstly, 'anti-constitutional' and secondly, the threat of 'dictatorship'. The Istanbul Convention and the civil partnership act are anti-constitutional and aim at imposing an LGBT dictatorship;[40] the opportunity passport and forced vaccinations are anti-constitutional and divisive policies that in the future will lead to the introduction of

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[28] „Didžiojo šeimos gynimo maršo 2022" Rezoliucija. *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis*, 2022-05-19. Retrieved from: https://seimusajudis.lt/naujienos/didziojo-seimos-gynimo-marso-2022-rezoliucija/ [accessed 09/11/2022].

[29] Due to the Movement's own association with a supposedly imminent LGBT dictatorship, for the sake of simplicity, hereinafter all these laws will be referred to as 'LGBT laws'.

[30] Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis, kaip ir prieš „Didįjį šeimos gynimo maršą 2021", pradeda savo žygį per Lietuvą. *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis*, 2021-10-23. 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].

[31] „Didysis Šeimos Gynimo Maršas 2021" startavo ir tęsis toliau – įgarsinti reikalavimai aukščiausiai šalies vadovybei.

[32] *Ibidem*.

[33] Rusteika, A. Kaip valdžia užsiima antivalstybine veikla. *Valstietis.lt*, 2022-04-04. Retrieved from https://www.valstietis.lt/langas/kaip-valdzia-uzsiima-antivalstybine-veikla/123950 [accessed 04/11/2022].

[34] *Ibidem*.

[35] Kun. R. Grigas V. Landsbergiui: Profesoriau, galėtumėte būti dėkingesnis. *Laikmetis*, 2022-01-14. Retrieved from https://www.laikmetis.lt/kun-r-grigas-v-landsbergiui-profesoriau-galetumete-buti-dekingesnis/ [accessed 04/11/2022].

[36] *Ibidem*.

[37] Čepaitienė, R. Atminties pri(ch)vatizacija. *Laikmetis*, 2022-01-15. Retrieved from https://www.laikmetis.lt/dr-rasa-cepaitiene-atminties-prichvatizacija/ [accessed 04/11/2022].

[38] Rusteika, A. *Kaip valdžia užsiima antivalstybine veikla*.

[39] *Ibidem*. The word 'Šimašoids' contains the last name of Vilnius mayor, Remigijus Šimašius; 'užingridai' is made of two Lithuanian words: preposition 'už' meaning for and the first name of the current Lithuanian prime minister, Ingrida Šimonytė.

[40] Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis, kaip ir prieš „Didįjį šeimos gynimo maršą 2021", pradeda savo žygį per Lietuvą. *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis*, 2021-10-23. 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].

a 'de facto dictatorship and segregation of the people';[41] and the decriminalization of drugs will make it 'easier to rule the people' in a future dictatorship.

To sum up, the active part of the society, as in the times of *Sąjūdis*, opposes the various anti-constitutional initiatives proposed by the 'new Communists', through which the latter are trying to establish a dictatorship in the country.

3.2. The Movement's Conspiracy Theories

The very signifier of dictatorship, which consolidates populist discourse, can be treated as a kind of conspiracy theory. The millennial motif of 'the end of the world', or in this particular case, a point of no return, is characteristic of many conspiracy theory systems.[42] However, since the Movement's discourse does not provide a consistent answer as to what the dictatorship will mean, it can be seen rather as a reference to conspiracy theories, which take on different meanings in different thematic areas.

The conspiracy theories used in the Movement's discourse, like the populist demands, can be divided into two large thematic blocks: the COVID-19 and the LGBT conspiracy theories. The former seeks to unveil what is really behind the measures to fight the pandemic; while the latter searches for the answer what is really behind the Istanbul Convention, the Civil Partnership Act and other 'LGBT laws'. There is also a separate block of overlapping conspiracy theories, where conspiracy theories are grouped together or linked to events that thematically are unrelated.

3.3. Conspiracy Theories Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 conspiracy theories emerged immediately after the first news about the virus.[43] While the first conspiracy theories were more concerned with speculations about the origin of the virus, as the pandemic gathered momentum, separate virus containment measures, and in particular the issue of vaccines, received the most attention.

The most popular pandemic-related conspiracy theories around the world can be grouped into three sub-groups:

(1) Doubts about the existence of the virus itself;
(2) The claim that vaccination will become compulsory as a way of controlling people (e.g. 'microchipped'); and
(3) The claim that the COVID-19 pandemic is linked to other phenomena (e.g. 5G development).[44]

The dominance of the second thematic sub-group in the Movement's discourse suggests that populist discourse is better suited to localized conspiracy theories related to pandemic management measures rather than global conspiracy theories explaining the pandemic as such, which were only referenced in the Movement's discourse after the pandemic had reached its peak.

Due to the clear sequence of the pandemic crisis itself and the policy measures to counter it, this case offered a remarkable opportunity to observe the dynamics of both populist arguments concerning the pandemic and conspiracy theories related to it. The image of the enemy has undergone through

41 Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdžio programa, apie kurią didžioji žiniasklaida bijo net užsiminti – ar žinote kodėl? *Uteniskiai.lt*, 2021. Retrieved from https://uteniskiai.lt/2021/09/20/lietuvos-seimu-sajudzio-programa-apie-kuria-didzioji-ziniasklaida-bijo-net-uzsiminti-ar-zinote-kodel/ [accessed 09/11/2022].

42 See more Barkun, M. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, p. 15–39.

43 See more Douglas, K. M. COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 2021, Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 270–275, https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220982068.

44 See more Grimes, D. R. Medical Disinformation and the Unviable Nature of COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories. *PLoS One*, 2021, Vol. 16, No. 3: e0245900, p. 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0245900.

particularly visible changes, shifting from an internal enemy to an external one as the pandemic has gathered momentum, and becoming part of an external system of conspiracy theories.

Before turning to conspiracy theories, I want to distinguish three phases of the Movement's demands for anti-pandemic measures:

(1) **Concrete demands**. Demands or criticisms of individual government measures to combat the pandemic. For example, demands to abolish protective facial masks: 'to abolish the requirement for mandatory use of personal protective measures,'[45] to get rid of 'enforced testing'[46] or 'open all schools to contact teaching'.[47]

(2) **Semi-abstract demands**. As the measures to fight the pandemic have become increasingly strict, individual demands have been combined into more abstract ones and subordinated to a populist discourse. This has mainly involved demands for the abolition of the 'discriminatory opportunity passport,'[48] for 'discrimination against children. The government is using the rhetoric of war to incite bullying and crises in society and families'.[49] Those measures have been undermining society, which is 'divided, ridiculed, and segregated'.[50]

(3) **Completely abstract demands**. One can see the Movement moving towards a radically negative framing of the whole situation – approaching the brink of conspiracy theories. At this stage, the aforementioned emphasis on anti-constitutionality make an appearance: 'the anti-constitutional system will come into force in full on September 13. The breakers of constitution will not retreat'[51] or 'the people demand to cancel them, they demand respect for the constitution and they want to regain their freedom of choice'.[52] The argument that the fight against COVID-19 is 'just a smokescreen'[53] is used saying that 'the pandemic hysteria will finally break the society and destroy the remnants of democracy and statehood'[54] or, in other words, would return to the empty signifier – 'the imposition of a de facto dictatorship'.[55] It should be noted that at this stage, those in power have been increasingly associated with an external enemy, e.g. as 'temporarily administering the territory of Lithuania'.[56]

Demands or accusations have become increasingly abstract, gradually merging into a populist discourse and approaching the brink of conspiracy theories. The latter have also been developed through a similar dynamic by attempting to answer who really is behind the pandemic containment measures and reshaping the answer from concrete accusations into increasingly abstract ones, thus shifting the position of the enemy outwards.

In all the conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 and used in the Movement's discourse, the first point of the definition of a conspiracy theory presented in the theoretical part of this article remains the same – those are pre-planned means of combating the pandemic. However, the other two components: what are they trying to achieve secretly and who are the conspirators, differ. I found it convenient to categorize these variables along the lines of Barkun's scope of conspiracy theories and Walker's internal and external

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[45]   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis Facebook page*, 19/08/2021.

[46]   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis Facebook page*, 06/10/2021.

[47]   *„Didysis Šeimos Gynimo Maršas 2021" startavo ir tęsis toliau – įgarsinti reikalavimai aukščiausiai šalies vadovybei.*

[48]   *Ibidem*.

[49]   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis Facebook page*, 22/11/2021.

[50]   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis Facebook page*, 17/11/2021.

[51]   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis Facebook page*, 10/12/2021.

[52]   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdžio kalėdinis sveikinimas Lietuvos žmonėms.*

[53]   Daunys, A. *Atpildas vis tiek ateis. Sarmatai,* 2021-10-25. Retrieved from https://www.sarmatas.lt/10/arvydas-daunys-atpildas-vis-tiek-ateis/ [accessed 04/11/2022].

[54]   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdžio kalėdinis sveikinimas Lietuvos žmonėms.*

[55]   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis Facebook page*, 14/12/2021.

[56]   Vilniaus keliai blokuojami, pasak važiuojančių, protestas prie Seimo buvo išvaikytas gilią naktį. *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis*, 2021-08-11. Retrieved from: https://seimusajudis.lt/naujienos/vilniaus-keliai-blokuojami-pasak-vaziuojanciu-protestas-prie-seimo-buvo-isvaikytas-gilia-nakti/ [accessed 09/11/2022].

conspiracy theories already mentioned in this article, introducing the additional heuristic category of benefits:

(1) **Inner-corruption conspiracy theories**. Here, the current ruling majority and its representatives are accused of having 'received direct or indirect proceeds from this act or are somehow involved in the management of the pandemic in Lithuania'.[57] The scale of the conspiracy theory is unitary rather than systemic, the enemy is internal, i.e. 'the party, which has lost the nation's trust, and media authority'[58], and the benefits are concrete and material.

(2) **Intermediate conspiracy theories**. Here, alongside the element of corruption, there is also the element of public control or a component of dictatorship: 'the interest of the old pseudo-political dinosaurs to steal more and more coincided with the desire of the new Communists to change the society from the ground up, receiving more globalist money and other bonuses that guarantee them the right to exercise totalitarian control over all spheres of society's life'.[59] The pandemic hides a 'crawling, supposedly temporary dictatorship', presumably imposed gradually by a still internal enemy, but influenced by the 'globalists', and by the aforementioned 'persons temporarily administering the territory of Lithuania'.[60] In this case, conspiracy theories border on becoming systemic in scope (no longer just linked to the COVID-19 epidemic but also to malicious plans for the future). The enemy is still internal, but it is guided by external forces, and the benefits of the material and the concrete are becoming increasingly abstract and linked to the control of society.

(3) **External conspiracy theories**. In this group, 'health policy decisions are gradually being transferred from national governments to undemocratically elected global bodies'.[61] The 'Klaus Schwab schools for COVID dictators, the brilliant Great Reset plan' is emerging, also that our politicians are only controlled by 'the very rich and powerful', e.g. 'conservative Dr. Laima Andrikienė proposes to launch a debate on a universal basic income, or UBI in Lithuania. The Great Reset plan is moving forward at an accelerating pace'.[62] And the Movement opposes precisely this sweeping 'Neo-Communist-Sanitary Dictatorship'.[63] This is clearly a case of conspiracy theory systems (or perhaps super-conspiracies), when the enemy is the external international elites, whose goal is an abstract dictatorship, and the Lithuanian government members are merely puppets controlled or bribed by them.

In this case, conspiracy theories follow a similar dynamic (and thus serve a similar function) as the criticism of pandemic management measures in general. As the pandemic containment measures become more strict and public discontent grows, there is a move from concrete to increasingly abstract demands / accusations, while the existing internal enemy – the ruling or local elites – is gradually being linked to external malicious global forces and conspiracy theory systems.

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[57] Prof. Ignas Vėgėlė siūlo visuomenės nuomonės formuotojams pandemijos valdymo klausimais, pasirašyti „sąžiningumo deklaraciją". *Infa.lt*, 2021-10-30. Retrieved from https://infa.lt/65082/prof-ignas-vegele-siulo-visuomenes-nuomones-formuotojams-pandemijos-valdymo-klausimais-pasirasyti-saziningumo-deklaracija/ [accessed 04/11/2022].

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

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

[60] Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis: Trauktis nebėra kur. *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis*, 2021-08-05. Retrieved from https://seimusajudis.lt/naujienos/lietuvos-seimu-sajudis-trauktis-nebera-kur/ [accessed 09/11/2022].

[61] Ar PSO įves privalomus skiepus visame pasaulyje? *Sarmatai*, 2022-04-15. Retrieved from: https://www.sarmatas.lt/04/ar-pso-ives-privalomus-skiepus-visame-pasaulyje/ [accessed 09/11/2022].

[62] Atskleidžiama: Klauso Schwabo mokykla „Covid" diktatoriams, puikus „Great Reset" planas. *Infa.lt*, 2022-01-22. Retrieved from: https://infa.lt/67955/atskleidziama-klauso-schwabo-mokykla-covid-diktatoriams-puikus-great-reset-planas-video/ [accessed 04/11/2022].

[63] *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis Facebook page*, 01/07/2022.

3.4. 'LGBT' Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories against LGBT people in general[64] or against the Istanbul Convention are common to various right-wing populist movements.[65] Here, as in the case of COVID-19, I try to answer what really lies behind the drive for 'LGBT laws'. In the most general sense, it is again a dictatorship, but this time an 'LGBT dictatorship'.[66] What exactly is at stake depends on the type of conspiracy theories used in a particular case. They can be categorized along the same lines as the COVID-19 conspiracy theories:

(1) **Internal conspiracy theories: 'LGBT laws are only the beginning'.** This option refers to future but currently secret objectives, and the proposed legislation is only an introduction. In this case, the Istanbul Convention conceals future 'penalty for the free expression of opinions' or the 'the right to bring up children according to one's own convictions in violation of 'multisexuality''.[67] They also claim that the law on civil partnership is 'just a whitewash and fooling', while the real aim is 'to adopt YOUR children'.[68] The changes to the law on the protection of minors against negative information hide the future 'forcing neo-Marxist sexual ideology from kindergartens onwards'.[69] One might assume that these hidden agendas should be considered as part of the above-mentioned 'LGBT dictatorship', however, this is not directly stated. Here, the conspirators are 'the current ruling coalition',[70] 'Aušrinė Armonaitė, the herald of the ideological revolution and chairwoman of the LGBT party',[71] etc. Thus, the conspirators at work are specific and local (those in power). The scale of action is close to a single conspiracy theory rather than a system of conspiracy theories, and the benefits gained from the implementation of the conspiracy are not clearly stated. It could be said that here the 'LGBT dictatorship' is an objective in itself.

(2) **Intermediate corruption conspiracy theories.** The second type of conspiracy theories concerns financial gain. Here, various NGOs or individual politicians are 'heavily funded by the European Commission, the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Swedish Embassy, LGBT organizations and other foreign kingdoms'[72] and LGBT marches are funded by the 'German Embassy'.[73] At the same time, there are calls to 'control the sources and methods of funding for sexual minority organizations'.[74] The conspirators are the NGOs receiving funding from foreign 'globalists', which in turn have either trained the current politicians who want to establish an LGBT dictatorship or have turned them into 'puppets'. In this way, the conspirators, unlike the conspirators of COVD-19, occupy an intermediate position between local and external forces (both external funders and their internal agents are at work). The scale of action is close to the conspiracy theory system, and the benefits depend on which part of the conspirators we take: for some, it is the material benefits, while for others, the benefits belong to the funders themselves.

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[64]   See more Korolczuk, E.; Graff, A. Gender as 'Ebola from Brussels': The Anti-colonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2018, Vol. 43, No. 4, p. 797–821, https://doi.org/10.1086/696691.

[65]   See more Isaacs, R.; Rudzite, L. Conceptualising Culture Wars in the Post-Communist Space: Latvia, the Istanbul Convention and the Struggle for Power. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2021, Vol. 73, No. 8, p. 1418–1440, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2021.1937574.

[66]   Daunys, A. *Atpildas vis tiek ateis.*

[67]   Rusteika, A. *Kaip valdžia užsiima antivalstybine veikla.*

[68]   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis Facebook page*, 07/05/2022.

[69]   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis Facebook page*, 05/03/2022.

[70]   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdžio kalėdinis sveikinimas Lietuvos žmonėms.*

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

[72]   Rusteika, A. „Kriaušių anatomija", kurios LRT nepastebės. *Minfo.lt*, 2022-05-31. Retrieved from https://www.minfo.lt/aktualijos/straipsnis/algimantas-rusteika-kriausiu-anatomija-kurios-lrt-nepastebes [accessed 04/11/2022].

[73]   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis Facebook page*, 19/06/2022.

[74]   Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis. Pareiškimas dėl šmeižto kampanijos. *BNS: spaudos centras*, 2022-05-06. Retrieved from https://sc.bns.lt/view/item/425885 [accessed 04/11/2022].

(3) External conspiracy theories. It is argued that 'LGBT laws' are either being imposed on us ('an EU directive'[75]) or it is an 'attempt by the EU Commission and Council to make them binding on all countries',[76] which no doubt means a dictatorship that we can only 'stop by working together with the peoples of Eastern and Central Europe'.[77] The 'EU federalists' work hand-in-hand with the 'WHO globalists', whose proposed draft treaty repeatedly mentions 'gender equality".[78] Our elites 'failed to inform and concealed from their citizens a document that violates their fundamental rights', which 'can be viewed as treachery and deceit towards the people of their country'. This is the level of the conspiracy theory system, of the destruction of the entire 'Western civilization'. In this case, the enemy is external, i.e. 'the liberal-Marxists are playing *vabanque*'.[79] Here, as in the first case, the benefits are self-evident; the aim is to establish a global dictatorship.

In populist discourse, conspiracy theories are adapted to the issues at hand and are often employed to combine different points of discourse or demands. For example, the two main themes of the Movement – the 'LGBT laws' and COVID-19 – are linked by the conspiracy theory that the harsh measures to combat the pandemic are just a smokescreen behind which 'the Civil Partnership Act, the Istanbul Convention, and many other things will destroy the very foundations of our social fabric'.[80] A nation is 'tired of protesting' and 'may not rise up anymore'.[81] This shows a certain hierarchy of discourse: the 'LGBT laws' are more important than the COVID-19 measures, which are just a pretext to pass them 'shrewdly'.

The importance of the 'LGBT laws' is also demonstrated by the fact that other events are linked to their adoption. For example, speaking on the subject of the war in Ukraine, 'On the pretext of the war in Ukraine, a dictatorship has been de facto introduced in the country and is being strengthened on a daily basis; the press is being censored, and the constitutional rights and freedoms of the citizens are being restricted and infringed'.[82] The ruling party will use this to 'push the Civil Partnership Act, the law on the decriminalization of drugs, and the introduction of genderism in our kindergartens again'.[83]

For their part, both the 'LGBT laws' and the anti-pandemic measures are aimed at imposing a 'neo-Communist'[84] or 'libertarian-Marxist'[85] dictatorship. This is achieved by specific organizations, such as the EU or the WHO, by specific individuals, such as Bill Gates or Jeff Bezos, or by abstract 'globalists' or 'neo-Marxists', destroyers of the state and the family. This merging of the two main themes into an external conspiracy theory shows that the very naming of an abstract dictatorship in a local context is insufficient or not convincing enough. Therefore, it is associated with global conspirators and global conspiracy theories, which the Movement opposes together with the '10 most important organizations, representing the interests of the families of their respective countries'[86] from various countries.

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[75]   Rusteika, A. Klausiat, kodėl reikėjo tų buvusiųjų gėjų iš Maltos? *Infa.lt*, 2022-11-04. Retrieved from https://infa.lt/79787/algiman-tas-rusteika-klausiat-kodel-reikejo-tu-buvusiuju-geju-is-maltos/ [accessed 09/11/2022].

[76]   Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis. Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdžio pareiškimas. *BNS: spaudos centras*, 2022-09-21. Retrieved from: https://sc.bns.lt/view/item/443245 [accessed 04/11/2022].

[77]   Rusteika, A. Ateina diktatūra. Ar priešinsimės? *Kauno forumas*, 2022. Retrieved from https://kaunoforumas.com/2022/09/23/ateina-diktatura-ar-priesinsimes/ [accessed 09/11/2022].

[78]   Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis. PSO globalistų ir ES federalistų planai. *Infa.lt*, 2022-10-03. Retrieved from: https://infa.lt/78223/pso-global-istu-ir-es-federalistu-planai/ [accessed 04/11/2022].

[79]   Rusteika, A. *Ateina diktatūra. Ar priešinsimės?*

[80]   Daunys, A. *Atpildas vis tiek ateis.*

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

[82]   Protesto mitingas „Apginkime Lietuvos Respublikos Konstituciją". *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis*, 2022. Retrieved from: https://seimusaju-dis.lt/protesto-mitingas-apginkime-lietuvos-konstitucija/ [accessed 09/11/2022].

[83]   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis Facebook page*, 16/03/2022.

[84]   *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis Facebook page*, 07/01/2022.

[85]   Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis plečia tarptautinį bendradarbiavimą. *Kauno forumas*, 2022. Retrieved from https://kaunoforumas.com/2022/09/15/lietuvos-seimu-sajudis-plecia-tarptautini-bendradarbiavima/ [accessed 04/11/2022].

[86]   Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis Prahoje dalyvavo įsteigiant Rytų ir Vidurio Europos šeimų organizacijų tinklą. *Karštas komentaras*, 2022-12-02. Retrieved from: https://www.komentaras.lt/featured/lietuvos-seimu-sajudis-prahoje-dalyvavo-isteigiant-rytu-ir-vidurio-europos-seimu-organizaciju-tinkla/92994/ [accessed 16/12/2022].

Conclusions

The main task of conspiracy theories is to identify the hidden agendas of decision-making, to uncover a secret political system with local functionaries that are either corrupt themselves or act as puppets of global powers. The most important role of conspiracy theories in the populist structure is the amplification of the image of the enemy, who deliberately and in concert with external conspirators tries to undermine the *populous*. The perception of an imminent dictatorship or other threat is reinforced when something is done in secret. This makes it possible to mobilize the people in a more powerful way.

Conspiracy theories usually speak of an imminent fatal threat. In the case of the Lithuanian Family Movement, it is a threat of an abstract dictatorship, which takes different forms at different points in the discourse. Such a fatalistic prediction of the future, which would come true if people would not join the movement, can make the populist discourse itself more emotionally convincing compared to populist communication without the element of conspiracy theories.

The role of conspiracy theories in populist discourse has certain dynamics. There is a move from more concrete accusations to increasingly abstract ones, from unitary to systems of conspiracy theories, and from the internal enemy to the external one. It is partly dictated by the very way in which populism constructs a discourse, subordinating all claims (and the conspiracy theories that go with them) to an empty signifier, in this case, the abstract threat of dictatorship. On the other hand, a Manichean distinction between *populus* and enemy is also characteristic of populism, so that the gradual attribution of local elites to global conspirators in conspiracy theories makes it easier to link the 'temporary administrators of Lithuania' to global problems.

Populist discourse in general and conspiracy theories in particular are creatively adjusted to societal issues. The latter can help to create new conspiracy theories, thus strengthening the populist discourse itself, or can be used to confirm and consolidate already existing conspiracy theories.

In the case of the Lithuanian Family Movement, the issue of 'LGBT laws' plays a central role. Eventually, other conspiracy theories become its subordinates, although the COVID-19 pandemic, due to its intense impact on society, has temporarily sidelined this issue. One can only speculate, if the legislation being fought against were passed, would it had changed the main theme of the Lithuanian Family Movement?

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