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# THE PERCEPTION OF THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION IN THE LITHUANIAN MAINSTREAM MEDIA: IS “GENDER IDEOLOGY” ON THE RISE?

Jorune Linkeviciute\*

## ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been an increase in the so-called anti-gender campaigns across Europe and Latin America. The main aim of these campaigns is to oppose “gender ideology”, or what is perceived as an unnatural subversion of traditional and acceptable gender norms, roles, and relations. The anti-gender campaigns were quickly deemed an international movement by scholars, specifically prevalent in Eastern and Central Europe. However, a lack of empirical case studies of the situation in each Eastern and Central European country and a tendency to overgeneralize make such claims debatable. This paper set out to answer the question of whether the anti-gender narratives had become salient in Lithuania—specifically, in the context of ratifying the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention—based on a comprehensive analysis of the Lithuanian online news media articles on the topic. The paper argues that the signing of the Convention acted as a mobilizing force for the topic of gender ideology to enter the Lithuanian mainstream media. Although the subject matter seems to have gained public traction as evident through the organization of rallies against the Convention in Lithuania, the mainstream media has not played a significant role in escalating the anti-gender narratives.

**Key words:** gender ideology, Lithuania, Eastern Europe, anti-gender, Istanbul Convention, gender-based violence

## Introduction

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 2018, the Free Society Institute (Laisvos Visuomenės Institutas)—a Lithuanian non-governmental organization that advocates for issues concerning traditional marriage, family, and freedom of religion—circulated a video alerting the general public about the perceived threats of “gender ideology”. The term was used to antagonistically describe what was

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seen as a foreign Western enterprise that denied the innate social characteristics of the sexes and was compared to the horrors of Nazism and communism. The video was titled “Let’s stop the Istanbul Convention” and was made in reference to the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Despite the Convention’s seemingly non-controversial intent to reduce gender-based violence by enacting comprehensive legal mechanisms at a state level, the video warned against the Convention’s seemingly ulterior motives. Specifically, the video critiqued the Convention’s emphasis on the distinction between sex and gender, highlighting the latter’s socially constructed nature. According to the Convention’s detractors, introducing the term “gender” into the Lithuanian legal system would lead to devastating consequences: mass disorder would follow from inappropriate subversion of conventional and acceptable forms of gender expressions, roles, and social relations (Kuhar – Paternotte, 2017, p.8).

While some articles in the Lithuanian online news media reprimanded the video for its fear-mongering rhetoric and a disrespectful use of Holocaust imagery (Jackevičius, 2018; Gritėnas, 2018), others emphasized the video’s message as worthy of public attention (Fernandez Montojo, 2018). A few weeks later, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March, 76 out of 141 members of the Lithuanian Parliament signed a declaration opposing the ratification of the Convention, arguing that it threatened to undermine traditional family values (ELTA, 2018). Both campaigns against the Convention summoned the threat of “gender ideology”—a notion used to object anything that is implied to fall under it, ranging from advancement of LGBT rights to de facto gender equality.

The opposition to the perceived threats of “gender ideology” in Lithuania is not a locally bound phenomenon. In fact, in recent years, there has been a surge of the so-called anti-gender movements across Europe and Latin America. Each campaign has been triggered by a variety of causes: an opposition to gender studies as an academic subject in universities, a critique of gender mainstreaming policies, a backlash against marriage equality or resistance to sex education reforms, among others. Even though these anti-gender campaigns have been deemed a transnational movement (Graff – Korolczuk, 2018; Kováts – Pöim, 2015; Kuhar – Paternotte, 2017), which calls for a global comparative analysis, the examination of national contexts may, nonetheless, illustrate local differences that, in turn, may challenge the perceived homogeneity of regional phenomena. Specifically, the anti-gender

campaigns in Eastern and Central Europe have been regarded as particularly similar, which demands further academic scrutiny to determine whether that is truly the case.

This study seeks to answer the question of *whether the anti-gender narratives have gained salience in the Lithuanian mainstream media over time*. In particular, it analyses whether claims pertaining to “gender ideology” have already entered the Lithuanian public imagination and if so, whether the signing of the Convention acted as a mobilizing force. This is achieved by performing a content analysis of 316 articles published in the three main Lithuanian news websites from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2010 to the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2019. Investigating mainstream media’s coverage of the notion of “gender ideology” and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention may shed light on how the media reflects societal attitudes as well as shapes how certain topics are constituted and subsequently understood.

The paper’s insights into the Lithuanian online news media’s portrayal of the Convention may also inform future studies pertaining to both the Convention’s depiction itself as well as the broader anti-gender discursive practices in other national contexts. Lastly, the paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship concerning the salience of anti-gender narratives in both national and transnational settings.

## 1. Origins of “gender ideology”

Although the so-called anti-gender campaigns have only gained traction in recent years, they are not a contemporary invention. In fact, these campaigns could be traced back to the mid-1990s, during which the anti-gender narratives were developed within Catholic circles in response to the recognition of sexual and women’s rights at the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 as well as the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. During these conferences the notion of gender and its institutionalization were opposed by the Holy See on the ground that it would act as a catalyst for legitimizing abortion, acknowledging sexual and reproductive rights, and normalizing homosexuality (Corredor, 2019).

Even though the critique of the term “gender” and its perceived implications originates within Catholic circles, nowadays, the anti-gender campaigns have expanded beyond religious groups (Valkovičová – Maďarová, 2019). The movement has been deemed “a symbolic glue” (Kováts – Pöim, 2015), which

allows for a variety of different actors to cooperate “despite the differences in their basic ideological framework” (Kuhar – Zobec, 2017, p.36). Furthermore, the movement is not considered to be a mere continuation of preceding forms of conservative resistance against progressive politics. According to **Kuhar** and **Zobec** (2017, p.31), contemporary anti-gender campaigns are “new manifestations of resistance, shaped by new forms of organization, new types of mobilization and new discourses that seek to address wider audiences”. The elusiveness of the term “gender ideology” could be considered strategic in terms of attracting allies from different political and ideological spectra.

On a transnational scale, there are certain global networks and regional non-governmental organizations that not only foster cooperation and organizing among anti-gender activists, but also provide common strategies and discursive techniques for transnational mobilization. For instance, *Agenda Europe*—an informal network consisting of anti-gender organizations and actors from more than 30 European countries—has laid the groundwork for common strategies to be implemented through local initiatives in its manifesto titled “Restoring the National Order: An Agenda for Europe” (Datta, 2018). The initiatives by *Agenda Europe* include mobilizations against abortion, LGBT rights, and the Istanbul Convention.

Certain scholars posit the opposition to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention as the crucial point for anti-gender campaigns in Poland (Graff, 2014), Slovakia (Valkovičová – Maďarová, 2019), and Hungary (Grzebalska – Pető, 2018). Specifically, in Poland, the backlash against the Convention led to a wave of protests, petitions, and political campaigns, which forged the threat of “gender ideology” as a mainstream notion instrumentalized for social and political gains. Academic literature on the ratification of the Convention and the topic of gender ideology suggests that particularly in Central and Eastern Europe the refusal to ratify the Convention is justified by pointing to its presumably ulterior motives. In Hungary, for example, the government argues that, instead of preventing and combating violence against women as indicated in the document’s title, the Convention actually seeks to implement “gender philosophy” by being the “Trojan horse of gender ideology” (Kováts, 2018, p.530). The Polish former Minister of Justice has also compared the Convention to a Trojan horse, arguing that its ratification would threaten the conception of traditional families and undermine Christian values (Graff, 2014).

The anti-gender activists frame the Convention’s definition of gender as “socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given

society considers appropriate for women and men" (European Commission, 2011, p.3) to be their main source of contempt. Defining gender as separate from sex posed issues with translation in those countries that only have one word in their national language to denote sex and gender. For instance, in the Latvian anti-gender rhetoric, the inability to translate the term accurately had led to a variety of translations, which fostered claims that the Convention itself was ambiguous and confusing. The inconsistency in the term's translation sent a message that "gender is something complicated, incomprehensible." (Zitmane, 2016, p.118) Similar linguistic barriers were noted in Hungary and Poland, where the distinction between sex and gender could not be accurately translated as there are no words in either Polish or Hungarian that could denote the notion of gender. According to **Grzebalska and Pető** (2018), anti-gender proponents are particularly successful at fostering the sentiments of suspicion and distrust by presenting the term "gender" as a foreign influence, or an idea that is fundamentally alien to one's perceived culture, tradition, and social values.

It is important to note that the opposition to "gender ideology" in general and the Istanbul Convention in particular is not rooted in a genuine confusion regarding certain terms and their definitions. **Kováts** (2017) notes that one should be wary of reducing the debate about the ratification of the Convention to a sole dispute over translation and interpretation. If that were the case, then a proper, in-depth explanation and a good faith debate would have been enough to sway the sceptics. However, the debates over the Convention's ratification have been highly politicized in different national contexts for the overarching purpose of effective mobilization.

Academic literature on the anti-gender campaigns in Lithuania is relatively scarce and its extent is limited. **Dovaine Buschmann's** (2017) study on the discursive strategies of the Lithuanian anti-gender campaigns is currently the only piece that focuses on the phenomenon and its manifestations in Lithuania. **Buschmann's** paper is limited to analysing one aspect of the anti-gender discourse in Lithuania—specifically, the parallel between "gender ideology" and communism in three media articles—which only provides a glimpse into the multifaceted phenomenon at hand. In fact, comparing gender ideology with such notions as communism and cultural Marxism is a common tactic among anti-gender activists: from warning against the threat of social engineering to capitalizing on the historical trauma rhetoric (Corredor, 2019; Denkovski et al., 2021; Korolczuk – Graff, 2017).

## 2. Mainstream media: friend or foe of the anti-gender activists?

The Lithuanian mainstream media is perceived as an important and influential agent in regard to both informing the public as well as shaping politics. 45% of Lithuanians tend to trust online news media, which is above the EU average of 34% (Standard Eurobarometer 88, 2017, p.27) In addition, a 2016 survey about institutional influences on political decisions in Lithuania indicates that over a third of respondents (33.6%) perceive the news media as having the greatest influence on political decision-making processes. In comparison, only 8.1% of respondents believe that citizens have the greatest impact on such processes (Radžiūnas, 2018).

While all three main Lithuanian news websites—DELFI, 15min, and Lrytas—position unbiased reporting as their objective, the alternative media in Lithuania—such as Tiesos and Bernardinai—tends to be critical and suspicious of the mainstream news reporting. Specifically, the mainstream media is perceived as a monopoly that spreads misinformation and protects specific business and political interests. The mainstream media is regarded as being predominantly liberal and socially progressive, which is understood as going against the media's proclaimed neutrality and its refusal to openly align with a particular political orientation (Garškaitė, 2020).

On the other hand, a growing number of studies on the perceived threats of the anti-gender campaigns describe the mainstream media as being a catalyst and a tool for legitimizing anti-gender narratives in the public discourse (Hammer, 2000; Kuhar – Zobec, 2017; Marling, 2010). For instance, **Juhász** (2015) notes that anti-gender claims outnumber other views in the Hungarian public sphere. Additionally, **Zitmane** (2016) acknowledges the importance of mainstream media in the spread of the anti-gender sentiments in the Latvian society. **Behrensen** and **Stanoeva** (2019) assert that mainstream media is especially willing to escalate public fears, which has contributed to the spread and visibility of anti-gender narratives in national contexts. If the anti-gender proponents have also successfully mobilized and reached public salience in Lithuania, one might expect to see an anti-gender perspective dominating the mainstream media's coverage of the Istanbul Convention.

### 3. Research design

The study seeks to answer the question of *whether the anti-gender narratives have gained salience in the Lithuanian mainstream media over time*. The aim of the study is twofold: firstly, to investigate whether the notion of “gender ideology” has entered the mainstream media in the context of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, and, secondly, to explore the nature—in terms of attitude and frames of reference—of the topic’s coverage in the Lithuanian mainstream media. To reach the aforementioned aim, I pose the following three hypotheses:

1. The media mentions of “gender ideology” have been low prior to 2013 and have been displaying an upward trend ever since, following the signing of the Convention.
2. The coverage of gender ideology across three main Lithuanian online news media websites—DELFI, 15min and Lrytas—is distributed similarly in terms of attitude (i.e., positive, negative, neutral).
3. The anti-gender frame of reference dominates the media’s portrayal of the Istanbul Convention.

The method of content analysis is employed to examine articles and opinion pieces concerning the topics of gender ideology and the Istanbul Convention. In addition to quantitative content analysis, a qualitative analysis of 10 articles is carried out in order to construct a frame of reference that lists the main themes identified in articles either supporting or dismissing the “gender ideology” rhetoric. A mixed-method approach was chosen in hopes of establishing concrete trends in mainstream media depictions of anti-gender narratives that could, then, be nuanced and elaborated upon through the qualitative component.

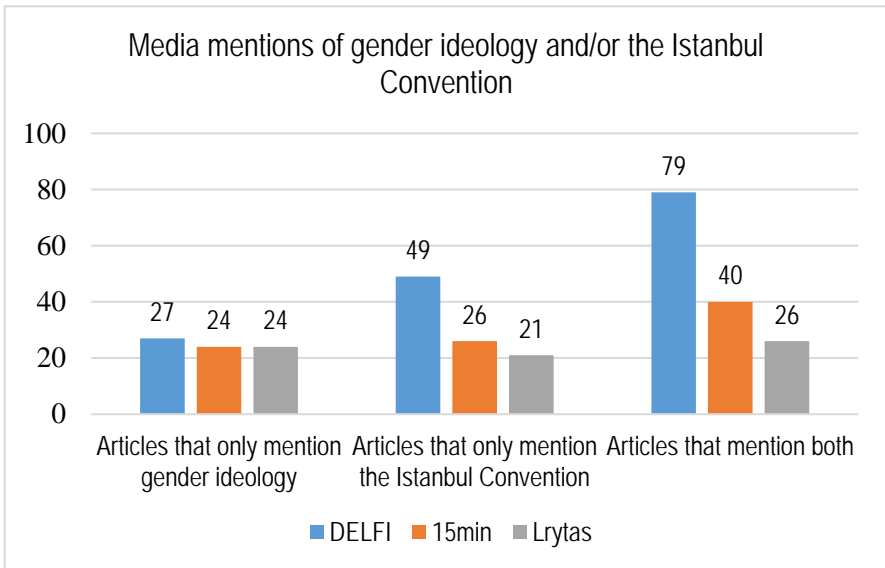
Altogether 316 articles were collected from the three main Lithuanian news websites over a ten-year period from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2010 to the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2019. The news websites—15min, DELFI, and Lrytas—were selected based on their popularity. In addition to being the most frequented news websites in Lithuania, these websites also account for 54% of the total time spent on Lithuanian websites by visitors (gemiusAudience, 2020). The three news media websites could be considered quite similar in their political and social orientation; however, they all have slightly different foci. 15min is known for its investigative reporting that gained prominence by uncovering money laundering schemes and cases of corruption in the Lithuanian



Parliament. Lrytas focuses on local news and caters to a comparatively more conservative stratum, whereas DELFI focuses on publishing opinion pieces that discuss issues from competing angles.

The relevant articles were identified by using the archive and search functions on each news media website. Articles that contained the Lithuanian equivalents to the terms “gender ideology”, “genderism”, “gender”, “social sex”, “Istanbul Convention”, and “Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence” were searched for. Only those articles that referred to the notion of gender in the context of gender ideology were included in the dataset<sup>1</sup>. 155 articles from DELFI, 90 articles from 15min, and 71 articles from Lrytas were collected – their thematic content pertaining to this study can be seen in graph 1.

**Graph 1:** *Number of articles that reference gender ideology, the Istanbul Convention or both in the three main Lithuanian news websites*



Source: author’s calculations

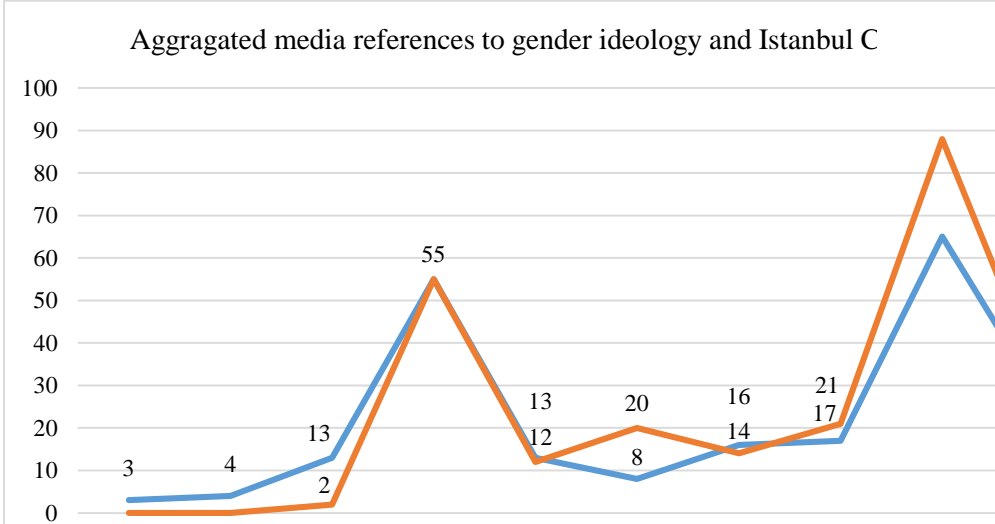
<sup>1</sup> If an article mentioned gender without any—implied or direct—references to the legal, social, political or cultural implications of the term’s usage, then it was not added to the dataset.

All articles from the three news websites were grouped by year in order to construct a chronological sketch of the phenomenon's development. The particular time frame—from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2010 to the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2019—was chosen because it includes the period before and after the Convention was ratified, which allows for an assessment of whether the signing of the Convention had an impact on the media's mentions of the term and if so, to what extent.

The unit of analysis was an article. In order to facilitate the coding process, key words were identified in the text and then a paragraph was coded to determine the article's stance on the topic of interest. Validity was preserved through constant referencing to and comparison with the coding of previous article in order to ensure consistency. The overall sentiment of the article was decided deductively based on three predetermined categories—supportive of “gender ideology” rhetoric, dismissive of “gender ideology” rhetoric, and neutral. A supportive attitude points toward an understanding of “gender ideology” as an existing and legitimate threat to the Lithuanian society, values, and culture. A dismissive stance, on the other hand, denies the proclaimed threats of “gender ideology”. These attitudes often overlap with an opposition to and support for the Istanbul Convention, respectively. A neutral stance suggests impartiality and a balanced presentation of both the supporting and opposing arguments. Whereas identifying the author's and, consequently, the article's stance in opinion pieces was relatively easy, journalists' reports were more difficult to evaluate. To gain a clearer understanding, particular attention was paid to the adjectives used: certain reports described the Convention as “important” and the anti-gender proponents as “uninformed” (Tvaskienė, 2017), which alluded to a dismissive stance toward the “gender ideology” rhetoric.

#### 4. “Gender ideology” in the margins of mainstream media

**Graph 2:** Number of articles that reference “gender ideology” and the Istanbul Convention across time



Source: author’s calculations

The first hypothesis predicts that the media mentions of the term “gender ideology” had been low prior to 2013 when the Istanbul Convention was signed and have been displaying an upward trend ever since. This is tested by calculating the number of times such notions as “gender ideology” and “genderism” were mentioned in all three news media portals each year from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2010 to the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2019. The identified articles (n=220) are grouped by year (see graph 2). The distribution of data is bi-modal, peaking in 2013 and 2018 when the terms “gender ideology” and “genderism” were mentioned in 55 and 65 articles respectively. The results indicate that prior to 2013 the media mentions of gender ideology had indeed been low and then tripled in 2013. The overall trend suggests an upward progression over time, which confirms the first hypothesis.

Additionally, the number of articles (n=241) that mention the Istanbul Convention (see graph 3) also displays an almost identical upward trend over time, peaking in 2013 and 2018 when the Istanbul Convention was mentioned

55 and 88 times accordingly. The few articles that contained references to “gender ideology” prior to 2013 were mainly about the “Gender Loops” project—a gender mainstreaming initiative aimed at early childhood education. An increase in media mentions of gender ideology and the Convention in 2018 coincides with the timing of Lithuania’s former President Dalia Grybauskaitė’s official note to the Lithuanian Parliament urging to ratify the Convention. However, the correlation between political events and media mentions does not immediately imply either a causal relationship or point to the mainstream media’s direct influence on politics. Due to reverse causality, it might be the case that media coverage is driven by politics and public opinion as opposed to the other way around, which leaves room for further causal investigations.

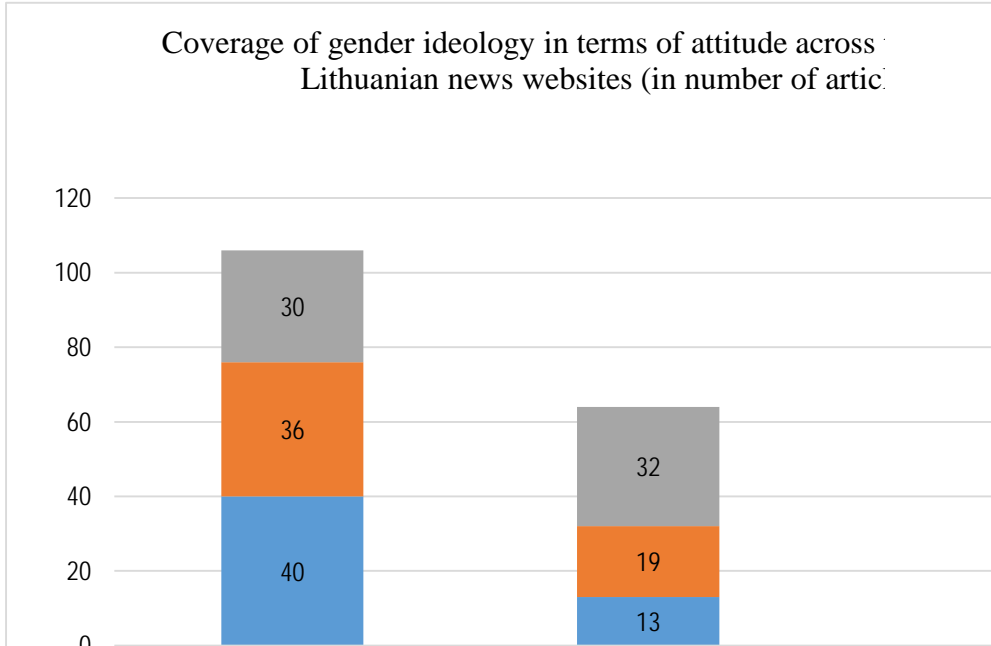
The second hypothesis assumes that each online news media website discusses the topic of gender ideology similarly in terms of attitude. In order to test it, each article was coded based on its perspective on the perceived legitimacy and opinion of gender ideology.

**Table 1:** *Distribution of attitudes (in percentages) expressed in the news media articles on the topic of gender ideology in the three main Lithuanian news websites*

	DELFI		15min		Lrytas	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Dismissive of gender ideology rhetoric	40	38%	13	20%	8	16%
Supportive of gender ideology rhetoric	36	34%	19	30%	10	20%
Neutral	30	28%	32	50%	32	64%
Total	106	100%	64	100%	50	100%

Source: author’s calculations

**Graph 3:** *Distribution of attitudes (in numbers) expressed in the news media articles on the topic of gender ideology in the three main Lithuanian news websites*



Source: author's calculations

The results do not support the hypothesis that each news media website displays similar trends in terms of attitude when reporting on the topic of "gender ideology" (see table 1 and graph 3). In 15min and Lrytas more articles reflect a supportive position of "gender ideology" rhetoric, whereas a dismissive position dominates in DELFI. In both 15min and Lrytas most articles portray the topic of gender ideology in a neutral light (50% and 64% of articles respectively), whereas in DELFI only 28% of the articles discuss the topic with a neutral sentiment. Even though a dismissive stance dominates in DELFI's coverage of "gender ideology", compared with the other two websites DELFI also publishes the highest percentage of articles supportive of "gender ideology" rhetoric.

It is possible that a higher number of articles that harbour supportive sentiments towards "gender ideology" was written because of higher

engagement from the anti-gender proponents themselves. The anti-gender activists might have been more prolific in writing articles than their counterparts. The differences in the total number of articles that were written in a supportive, dismissive or neutral tone in regard to “gender ideology” do not uncover an evident bias—in fact, an opposite observation could be made given a high percentage of articles written in a neutral tone in each news website. The finding is consistent with recent literature on mainstream media and gatekeeping (Barnidge et al., 2017). Specifically, this paper supports the idea that the mainstream media does not prevent certain opinions from reaching the public.

In order to test the third hypothesis and determine whether the anti-gender sentiment dominates the overall coverage of the Istanbul Convention alone, the total number of articles that discuss the Convention in all three news media websites (n=241) was examined and coded based on whether the article mentioned “gender ideology” or made no reference to it. The articles were further coded into three categories—pro-Convention, anti-gender, and neutral—based on the sentiment expressed in the article. The anti-gender sentiment is a proxy for attitudes that are supportive of “gender ideology” rhetoric. The total number of articles that mentioned the Convention were compared to the number and proportion of articles that referenced gender ideology with a particular sentiment (see table 2).

**Table 2: Aggregated number of articles that mention gender ideology in the pool of articles that discuss the Istanbul Convention**

	DELFI		15min		Lrytas	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Articles that mention the Istanbul Convention	137	100%	70	100%	53	100%
Articles that refer to gender ideology	86	63%	43	61%	29	55%
Articles with a neutral perspective	28	20%	28	40%	22	42%
Articles with a pro-Convention perspective	32	23%	8	11%	5	9%
Articles with an anti-gender perspective	26	19%	7	10%	2	4%

Source: author’s calculations

A closer look at the frequency of media mentions of gender ideology in the three main Lithuanian news media websites reveals that more than half of the articles in each news media website refers to both the Convention and the topic of gender ideology. Most of the articles in 15min and Lrytas were written in a neutral tone (40% and 42% respectively), whereas only 20% of articles were written neutrally in DELFI. The third hypothesis cannot be confirmed because the anti-gender sentiment does not dominate the online media's portrayal of the Istanbul Convention. In fact, across all three news media websites the majority of articles (57% in DELFI, 79% in 15min, and 87% in Lrytas) either did not make any references to gender ideology or only mentioned the gender-related debates in a neutral way.

More than one third of articles in DELFI and 15min (37% and 39% respectively) made no reference to the topic of "gender ideology" in their depiction of the Istanbul Convention, whereas in Lrytas almost half of the articles (45%) did not mention it when discussing the Convention, which points to the notion's limited prevalence, at least within the context of ratifying the Istanbul Convention. The fact that most articles either do not mention the topic of "gender ideology" altogether or only discuss it in a neutral tone in the context of the Convention's ratification suggests that the topic as such has, in fact, entered the public sphere in Lithuania; however, it is not the domineering view in the mainstream media's depiction of the Convention. Given that the dataset of 316 articles constitutes the total number of articles addressing the topic of "gender ideology" and the Istanbul Convention in the three main Lithuanian news websites over a decade, one may wonder whether the anti-gender debates are mainly taking place outside of the mainstream media—for instance, on social and/or alternative media.

Lastly, to gain a more in-depth understanding of what is meant by "gender ideology" supportive or dismissive rhetoric, 10 articles were chosen that were deemed to be representative of each position (5 articles for each side). An in-depth, qualitative analysis of these articles was performed in order to construct a frame of rhetoric (see tables 3 and 4), which lists the main themes identified in both narratives.

**Table 3:** *Main themes and their examples identified in articles that are supportive of gender ideology*

General themes	Examples
Communism	"the gender ideologues are constructing our culture just as the communists did before" (Vaitoška, 2012b, DELFI)
Biological determinism	"the bureaucrats in Brussels claim that biology is no longer relevant. Déjà vu: during Stalinist times in the Soviet Union, genetics was also regarded as a pseudo-science" (Vaitoška, 2012a, DELFI)
Traditional family	"the contemporary fundamentalists of gender ideology are determined to deny the people's innate right to call themselves husband and wife, mother and father. They are seeking to legalize such notions as "parent A" and "parent B" or "partner A" and "partner B". (Aleknaitė-Abramikienė, 2014, DELFI)
Children	"[gender ideology] is seeking to train children to manipulate their own and other's sexualities with the goal of seeking the most pleasure" (Rubavičius, 2015, DELFI)
Religion	"It is scary when in the free world people are forced to accept gender ideology, which states that a person can freely choose their sex. This ideology is like a dynamite underneath the foundation of Christian morality and family values." (Tamkevičius, 2017, 15min)
Social constructivism of gender	"Social sex is the idea that sex is not determined at birth, but can be chosen freely at any time" (Purytė, 2013, 15min)

Source: author's translations



**Table 4:** *Main themes and their examples identified in articles that are dismissive of gender ideology*

General themes	Examples
Gender equality	“This term [gender ideology] is an imaginary idea that is used to oppose gender equality . . . [Anti-genderists] are simply against women and men’s equality, against respect for one another, against non-violent conflict resolution methods” (Purvaneckienė, 2013, DELFI)
Denial of the existence of such a phenomenon as gender ideology	“there is no such thing as genderism and to continue using this self-made concept is a disgraceful misunderstanding” (Vasiliauskaitė, 2019, DELFI)
Mockery of the gender ideology rhetoric	“And what about the genderist fools (meaning those who care about gender issues?), who supposedly feed propaganda to the people and wish to build communism.” (Tereškinas, 2020, 15min)
Social constructivism of gender	“gender defines socially constructed women and men’s characteristics such as norms, roles and relations between them. . . . It is important not to confine people into stereotypically defined feminine and masculine roles.” (Šakalienė, 2018, DELFI)

Source: author’s translations

There seems to be a different understanding of the term “gender”—also translated as social sex in Lithuanian—between those who are dismissive and those who are supportive of “gender ideology” rhetoric. Whereas the former promulgate the Convention’s definition of social sex by emphasizing the social aspect of gender roles, norms, and relations, the latter interpret the term as replacing sex and turning it into a socially constructed category, which,

consequently, results in the rejection of biological differences between women and men. Furthermore, the Lithuanian translation of gender as “social sex” further consolidates the perception that gender somehow threatens to replace sex as a category, which would then lead to the perceived implementation of “gender ideology”.

The supporters of “gender ideology” rhetoric invoke the values of traditional family and the protection of children as mobilizing factors, whereas those who are dismissive of “gender ideology” rhetoric call for the importance of equal rights. References to traditional family, children, and religion indicate an overlap with the conservative agenda to preserve the status quo. In addition, those who dismiss “gender ideology” rhetoric, tend to ridicule the opposing side or deny the existence of “gender ideology” as such in an attempt to expose the perceived illegitimacy of the opponents’ claims. This strategy may further solidify a pre-existing sentiment on the anti-gender side that “gender ideology” has been brought and forced upon by the elites who are distant from the common folk. In general, the themes identified in the Lithuanian articles that are supportive of “gender ideology” rhetoric align well with those documented in other national contexts, suggesting a common framework of transnational anti-gender narratives.

## Conclusion

The academic scholarship on the anti-gender narratives, movements, and activists has proliferated over the recent years, which resulted in the phenomenon being described as a new social movement with wide-reaching implications and consequences. In certain national contexts—such as Poland and Hungary, among others— “gender ideology” has gone beyond being a mere rhetorical device to a mobilizing strategy with tangible consequences that are assumed to pose legitimate threats to liberal democracies (Grzebalska – Pető, 2018). The proliferation of LGBT- and gender-free zones in Poland (Korolczuk, 2019) and the ban on gender studies as an academic subject by the Hungarian government showcase the effects of anti-gender narratives once they become mainstream.

If mainstream media mentions of “gender ideology” were indeed a proxy for public opinion, one might suspect that the anti-gender narratives were yet to gain a concrete political, social, and cultural standing in Lithuania. However, in 2021 the office of Lithuania’s President Gitanas Nausėda commissioned a poll,

asking respondents whether they agreed that Lithuania should ratify the Istanbul Convention, to which 48.8% of respondents either “disagreed” or “rather disagreed”. In addition, about 10,000 people showed up to the Great Family Defence March on 15 May 2021. The event’s website stated that it was a rally against “aggressive genderist propaganda” and the Istanbul Convention. Although the survey’s methodology and accuracy are debatable, it is undoubtable that anti-gender discourses have already stepped into the public arena in Lithuania. Such discrepancy between what the mainstream media suggests and what unfolds in public domains poses further questions as to whether the mainstream media is able to accurately gauge public opinions, specifically, in regard to contentious topics. Future studies could examine how anti-gender narratives are disseminated across different media platforms as well as to what extent these platforms enable mobilization that result in public campaigns and political action.

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