

RELIGIOUS VOICES AGAINST "GENDER IDEOLOGY" IN THE DISCOURSE ON THE RATIFICATION OF THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION IN LATVIAN AND LITHUANIAN MEDIA¹

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ABSTRACT: Religion plays a public role in gender politics in a variety of ways. In public discussions, religious actors often oppose gender as a concept based on social construction and imposed by what they call "gender ideology." Concerns that this "ideology" could hijack the legal discourse is a common basis of their argumentation in the discussions on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. This paper presents the main results of the analysis of Lithuanian and Latvian secular and religious media coverage of the Istanbul Convention between 2011 and 2021. Both countries have signed but not ratified the Convention. The analysis shows that actors linked to religious organisations entered the mass media discourse by presenting arguments against the ratification of the Convention, which overlap with and support the opinions expressed by conservative political actors. These arguments are based on the idea that the Istanbul Convention is a threat to the future legal support of the natural rights of men and women, their natural roles and traditional and Christian values. The media discourse and the arguments used are similar in both countries, but the discursive strategies of religious and political actors differ. In Lithuania, where the Catholic Church is supported by tradition, religious actors are more often and more directly involved in the public debate than in Latvia. Nevertheless, in both countries, the religious voices analysed contributed to the rise of anti-genderist discourse in the post-secular public sphere and to the politicisation of religion.

KEYWORDS: Istanbul Convention, Anti-gender Discourse, Politicisation of Religion, Media Discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

The second decade of the 21st century was a time when political decisions to sign and ratify the Istanbul Convention (or the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence; hereafter, IC) triggered passionate public debates in many European countries. These debates involved individual actors, social groups and organisations on an unprecedented scale and in novel forms (Grzebalska 2016; Krizsán, Roggeband 2021; Kütük-Kuriş 2022; Dokoupilová 2019; Mađarová, Valkovičová 2021; Kováts 2018; Balogh 2020). It was also a decade marked by the rise of conservatism and populist right-wing politics, which partly reshaped the public space of civic action, particularly by restricting the critical perspectives of, for example, feminist organisations (Roggeband & Krizsán 2021). The IC is meant to ensure the human rights of an individual and gender equality; at the same time, it is a document formulated to protect women from domestic violence, which is, in part, tolerated by (Mileiko & Hamilton 2022), if not rooted in, conservative values and traditional understandings of family roles and models. It quickly became one of the key battlefields in the so-called “war against genderism” (see, for example, Graff 2014; Gaweda 2017; Balogh 2020, among others). Some scholars refer to it as a “culture war” (Isaacs & Rudzite 2021), pointing to the importance of values, norms, symbols (Petó 2015) and traditions.

Some active participants in this “war” are the various religious organisations and their sub-groups,² which seek influence over political decisions on the IC by various means, including active engagement in the public sphere. This is especially true in Lithuania and Latvia, two ex-Soviet countries in the north-eastern EU that have signed but not yet ratified the IC.

In Lithuania, the IC was signed in 2013 by Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius of the Social Democrat Party. However, the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania has still not ratified it and is currently (in late 2023) deciding whether to refer the matter to the Constitutional Court. In Latvia, the IC was signed in 2016 by the Minister of Welfare, Jānis Reirs, from the Liberal-Conservative party, “Unity,” but it was opposed by the Ministry of Justice, led by Dzintars Rasnačs (National Alliance Party), which ordered a legal analysis (Rudevska 2016) that concluded the IC is not compatible with the Satversme, the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia (Constitutional Assembly 1922). However, in 2020, the Constitutional Court initiated a case on the compatibility of the Convention with Satversme on the basis of a request by 21 MPs (CC 2020) and concluded in June 2021 that certain provisions of the IC³ are compatible with Satversme (CC 2021).

In both countries, the issue of the adoption of the IC is one of the topics of public debate, in which the dominant Christian communities are actively involved, as well as politicians, public figures and organisations supporting Christian values. Although the data from the Lithuanian Department of Statistics in 2020 states that 37 religious organisations are registered in Lithuania, according to the 2021 Population and Housing Census, 74% of Lithuanians identify as Roman

² The term “religious organisation,” as it is used here, refers “to the complex of recurrent social relationships, activities and rules within which religious ideas, attitudes and feelings are given stable social expression” (Backford 2020, 10). Religious organisation, in the more complex sense of the term, includes individuals and (sub)groups with different goals and roles in the life of the organisation. In general, the models and consolidation levels of those organisations are vastly different, as well as the administration forms and types of authority (Beckford 2020; Weber [1922] 1978). So, it is not only actors representing these directly religious administrations or the clergy who take part in the anti-genderism movement. There are a growing number of non-governmental organisations, similar in different countries, which are partly collaborating with churches (Sosa 2021), and, in many countries, with the government (see the case of KADEM in Turkey, Ayhan 2019).

³ Compliance of the Convention with the preamble, Articles 1, 99 and 110 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, of IC Article 4(4) with Article 91 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia and of IC Article 14 with Article 112 of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia were assessed by the Constitutional Court.

Catholic.⁴ In Latvia, according to official statistics, the largest religious organisation at the end of 2020 was the Evangelical Lutheran Church (287 congregations), followed by the Roman Catholic Church (275 congregations), the Russian Orthodox Church (128 congregations) and the Baptist Church (97 congregations).⁵

As is the norm in the European East (but contradictory in the European West), religious organisations in Lithuania and Latvia, due to their history as the opposition during socialism, have a stronger influence on public opinion, promoting what they call traditional values (for a longer discussion of this context, see Sasunkevich 2021). Their view on the "female" role in the family – as one of the most important networks of resistance against state power – is typical for the post-Soviet heritage of these countries (Reingardienė 2002, 21-25). Public opinion is shaped by the media, which operates within the "culture of agreements" with a "weakly developed idea of the public good" and a sense of common mistrust in a context of constant change (Balčytienė 2013, 35). The IC caused quite a controversy in both countries after the signing and the failed ratification process. Still, examining how various individuals and groups were involved in the public debate could shed light on the differences and similarities of the discursive strategies (along with their goal of gaining influence on political decisions) used by religious organisations in the public sphere in both countries and models of the politicisation of religion in general. It can be noted that the relations between the state and religious organisations in both countries are regulated by their constitutions' guarantee of fundamental human rights. However, the formulations of the norm and their implicit meanings are slightly different – the Latvian Constitution declares the separation of state and church, but the Lithuanian states that there is no state religion and that the state officially recognises traditional churches and religious organizations in Lithuania (Ališauskienė 2011, 138-139).

This article aims to examine and compare media discourse on the IC in Lithuania and Latvia. It asks what arguments, strategies and tactics IC-opposers employ against what they describe as "gender ideology" entering the legal discourse and how this opposition implicates religion in politics.

There are three research questions: 1) What arguments, keywords and communication tactics do religious organisations and other actors use to oppose the IC through media discourse? 2) What are the analysed discourses' characteristics (actors, change, context), and how do they differ in Lithuania and Latvia? 3) How is the politicisation of religion in Lithuania and Latvia implemented, and what are the main differences, if any?

This study uses a media discourse analysis methodology with quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods. The selected media channels include secular and religious online news websites in Lithuania and Latvia. The selected articles were published over the period between 2011 and 2021.

GENDER, THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE PROCESS OF POLITICISING OF RELIGION

Contemporary public discussions on the rights and equality of women and men in society are entangled in a highly politicised sector of public communication, where actors use the very concept of "gender" as an element in their strategies of persuasion. The rise of conservative populism has reintroduced the term as a concise descriptor of all the dangers of liberal policies, as used by their opponents (Sosa 2021; Dietze & Roth 2020). Historian Andrea Petó describes gender as the symbolic glue of the nascent conservative opposition (Petó 2015,

⁴ Lietuvos statistikos departamentas. 2020. "Įregistruotos religinės organizacijos". <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/religines-bendruomenes-ir-narystes-organizacijos>. (Date of retrieval: 12 July 2023);

Lietuvos statistikos departamentas. 2021. "Gyventojų ir būstų surašymo pagrindiniai rezultatai". <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/informaciniai-pranesimai?eventId=288049>. (Date of retrieval: 12 December 2021)

⁵ Latvia's Central Bureau of Statistics does not provide statistics on religious affiliation.

127). To identify their ideological opponents, conservatives use the term “gender ideology” to indicate that the concept of gender is a significant part of the (allegedly false) belief system with strong political connotations. Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa use the term “gender ideology” when describing the position of the Anti-Gender Alliance (Hark & Villa 2015, 17-18). The term “Anti-Gender Alliance” or “Anti-Gender Movement” refers to conservative opposition to introducing the concept of gender into international law, first articulated at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, where arguments were made about the unpredictable consequences of the discourse of gender, which would destroy the meaning of “man” and “woman” and lead to more rights for LGBTQ+ minorities (Korolczuk 2016; Sosa 2021; Borba 2022). As Graff and Korolczuk note: “While keeping track of the many specific campaigns and the actors involved, we should not lose sight of the overarching meaning of ‘gender’ as a category used by these forces” (Graff & Korolczuk 2022, 20).

The first to use the same arguments in the discourse on the IC, even before it was opened for signature, was the Holy See (Case 2011; Graff 2014; Kuhar 2015; Balough 2020; Sosa 2021). It became evident that around the world, and especially in Central and Eastern Europe with its strong Catholic tradition, this agenda has an important impact on developments on the political scene, further emphasized in light of the historical role of Catholicism during socialism⁶ (Johnston 1993) and the legacy of its authority today (Sasunkevich 2021).

Although religion is not always regarded as an active actor in the public discourse on a wide range of state social and political decisions, in recent decades, many scholars have testified to a change in strategy in Europe, especially in relation to gender issues (Graff 2014; Graff & Korolczuk 2017; Korolczuk & Graff 2017; Kuhar & Paternotte 2017; Lilja & Johansson 2018; Villa 2017; Ackerly *et al* 2019; Ayhan 2019).

Katalin Fábíán identifies three triggers for the development of anti-gender discourse: “(1) an ambiguous relationship to globalisation, (2) the EU as a stand-in for feminism and liberalism, and (3) a transnational conservative people-to-people diplomacy” (2022, p. 297). The intention to reintroduce and protect particular (traditionalist) models of individual and family life in the mode of “going back” to values based on “our” roots, nature, nation (Hovhannisyan 2019; Mancini & Palazzo 2021; Wehrle 2019) and “common sense” (Weber 2016) is to be understood as an important imaginative part of the new conservatism. Pointing to the gap between educated, corrupted liberal elites defending the idea of gender and “ordinary folks” (Maďarová 2015) distinguishes anti-genderism from earlier misogynist, anti-feminist attitudes and shows it to be partly compatible with some models of feminism (Von Redecker 2016). Typical of anti-genderist arguments is the fear of transnational intrusion (Paternotte & Kuhar 2017; Borba 2022). This is where “gender ideology” is identified, for example, when German Catholic sociologist Gabriele Kuby speaks of “gender ideology” as “a totalitarian ideology more dangerous than fascism and communism” (quoted in Merdjanova 2022, 8; see also Graff & Korolczuk 2022, 4). To the term “gender ideology” is added the traumatic connotation born in semiotic

⁶ Few sources exist on the role of religious organisations during the Soviet/socialist period. Nevertheless, differences have been noted in the context of the (intellectual) opposition expressed in the movement for national independence in the republics of the former Soviet Union and other socialist countries. The influence of religion on public life (e.g. education) was less possible in Lithuania and Latvia than, for example, in Poland, where religion played a significant role in private emotional and cognitive development and – though less publicly visible – was still practised based on family tradition. However, there were even greater differences between predominantly Catholic Lithuania (where religion was more part of the national identity) and predominantly Lutheran Latvia (Johnston 1993). The Latvian Constitution (Satversme, Article 99) proclaims freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the separation of church and state. The Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, adopted in 1992, states that there is no state religion in Lithuania and that the state recognises nine traditional religious organisations in Lithuania. The Law on Religious Communities of the Republic of Lithuania clarifies that all registered religious communities have the right to conduct religious services, but the so-called nine traditional and other state-recognised religious communities are entitled to certain additional privileges.

subversion – borrowing from, parodying and resignifying critical feminist discourses through repetition, inclusion in arguments and rhetoric, decontextualisation, intertextualisation up to the deployment of focused meaning and the addition of quite the opposite (Borba 2022; Gal 2018; Kováts 2018; on the use of "gender justice" by KADEM in Turkey, see also Ayhan 2019). There are certain parallels in the models and forms of argumentation between certain strands of modern feminism and anti-genderism (Honkasalo 2022).

In discussing the role of religion in the public discourse on gender issues, it is also essential to understand the basics of religion's role in the public sphere. According to Jürgen Habermas, in the 18th century, a social sphere was separated from the spheres of state, economy and family, where individuals, as private citizens, could discuss, debate and deliberate on various aspects of public life (2011, 15–30). Religion uses the public sphere and, as José Casanova argues, seeks to play an active role in stimulating public debates on moral principles. In other words, religious organisations refuse to limit themselves to the spiritual care of individual souls and continue to question the merging of private and public morality. One result of this ongoing contestation is the dual processes of the politicisation of religion and morality and the renormalisation of the public spheres of economics and politics (1994, 5-6). Although the forms of religious influence and role have changed, religion has found a way to actively participate in the public sphere (Calhoun 2011; Herbert 2011; Butler 2011), even to the extent of influencing political decisions. One of the ways of influencing the happenings of the secular world is through public speeches and certain direct or indirect actions. Various religious communities and movements make their messages, thoughts and opinions public through a variety of modern communication tools (Meyer & Moors 2006, 1-10).

Casanova further argues that the presence of religion in the public sphere can be regarded in different ways. A particular religion may enter the public sphere to protect not only its own religious freedom but also modern freedom in general, the democratic values promoted by civil society, which are opposed to an authoritarian system of government. Religion may also enter the public sphere to challenge the legitimate autonomy of secular spheres and their claims of organisation. Finally, a particular religion may enter the public sphere to protect its traditional worldview from state interference and regulation on administrative or legal grounds (1994, 57-58). The rights of religion to enter the public sphere, the specifics and conditions for doing so, are one of the points of ongoing contention (McIvor 2018; Sullivan 2005; Sullivan *et al* 2015; Hurd 2015; Szwed & Zielinska 2017).

Thus, these reasons for the "entry" of religion into the public sphere can lead to its involvement in the state's political affairs. The political influence of religion can be described as the desire of a religious organisation to participate in the political arena and to gain some power in public affairs. In other words, different religious communities, depending on their socio-cultural and even legal position, express a desire to inspire, change or interpret problems and solutions in various areas of public life, as well as to mobilise members of society for certain collective actions, shared social meanings or interpretations. In this case, Roland Robertson uses the notion of the politicisation of religion as a crucial concept that expresses two aspects of the political role of religion: 1) the increased concern of religious communities in the affairs of the state; 2) the increased interest of a variety of actors who have publicly declared their religious commitments, but who also wish to coordinate state affairs based on ideologically secular perspectives and programmes. The second approach precisely expresses the denial of the autonomy of religious commitment and the search for such processes that arise from religious motives and commitments. These can be various legal acts or programmes for the organisation of social life (1989, 11-12). Robertson's ideas are critical in the IC case study, as they give a name to the presence of religion in the public sphere and the ambition to influence political decisions. These statements also explain why religion, in certain contexts, can be seen

as a political power and social movement (Syarif 2017), fighting for religious values and de-secularisation processes (Ivekovic 2002).

In sum, as Steve Bruce argues, religion will continue to play an active role in political processes so long as social, economic and political circumstances influence the political choices and actions of religious believers (2003; from Furseth & Repstad 2006, 98). Religion can be said to have a set of moral, ideological and organisational characteristics that can legitimise and sustain various forms of moral and political engagement (Brubaker 2015). And in this situation, the media play a vital role where religious communities can seek to participate in the public debate (Meyer & Moors 2006, 1–10).

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

The study analysed news media articles in order to understand the role of religion in the construction of public discourse on gender ideology. The study applied the methodology of critical discourse analysis and quantitative and qualitative content analysis as the best way to investigate the particularities of discourse construction. Critical discourse analysis is interested in forms and strategies of argumentation, the logic and composition of texts, the cues, metaphors, symbols, vocabulary, discourse actors and sources of information (Wodak & Meyer 2009, 28). It seeks to understand how discourse legitimises, reproduces, confirms or criticises power structures in society (van Dijk 2001, 353-354). This methodology is useful for studying media discourse because the news media is usually seen as a space of power and conflict (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999; from Wodak & Meyer 2009, 12).

The discourse studied in this paper is understood as the arguments, statements and debates about the IC expressed in the secular and religious news media by various religious figures and political public actors who use arguments relevant to their religious views. Thus, in this case, discourse analysis is employed to investigate what the media coverage of the IC reveals about the role of religion in shaping perceptions of gender equality, in (not) supporting gender ideology and in influencing political decision-making.

Fairclough (1989, 25) proposed a three-dimensional discourse analysis format: context, interaction and text. In the same vein, this study follows a three-dimensional approach to the analysis of media discourse: 1) micro-level, the analysis of media texts; 2) meso-level, the exploration of interactions and interpretations of how texts written in a particular way collectively produce socially constructed meanings; 3) macro-level, discovering the social meanings of the texts, the dominant ideology, values and norms and the interpretation of how these meanings represent and produce the social structure of a particular society.

The most popular secular media news websites in Lithuania and Latvia and the most prominent religious websites with an active news stream were selected for the research. In Lithuania, our study included three secular online news websites (*delfi.lt*; *lrytas.lt*; *lrt.lt*) and three religious news websites, two of which are related to Christianity (*bernardinai.lt*; *propatria.lt*) and one that promotes Lithuanian and Baltic ethnic culture (*alkas.lt*). In Latvia, our study included four secular online news websites (*delfi.lv*; *tvnet.lv*; *lsm.lv*; *apollo.lv*) and the websites of the most important secular newspapers (*la.lv*; *diena.lv*; *nra.lv*) as well as seven religious news media sites. These included the newspaper of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia (“*Svētdienas Rīts*”), the Roman Catholic website (*katolis.lv*), the Russian Orthodox paper (“*Виноградная лоза*”), the Baptist Newsletter (“*Baptistu Vēstnesis*”), a Latvian traditional pagan religion’s newsletter (“*Dievturu Vēstnesis*” [God’s Keepers’]) and all-Christian websites, such as *tuvumā.lv* and *lkr.lv* (the latter is the website of Latvian Christian Radio). We decided to analyse more news websites in Latvia than in Lithuania to collect

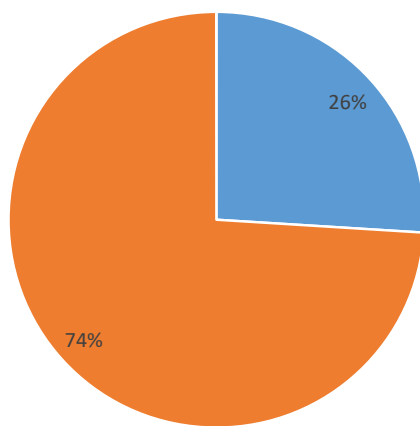
enough articles.⁷ The analysis of secular media discourse grants insight into how different religious actors are involved in shaping public discourse and what arguments are presented to the public. The analysis of religious media (online news sites created and/or managed by various religious figures or with a strong religious angle) provides an opportunity to discover directly published messages about the IC and gender ideology.

The study sample consisted of media articles in which representatives of different religious communities and organisations expressed their opinions on the IC. The study also analysed those articles presenting the opinions and arguments of politicians, representatives of various organisations, institutions and professionals (e.g. doctors, lawyers, experts) on the IC in relation to religious beliefs. Multiple combinations of the term *Istanbul Convention* were used to search for articles in the selected media channels. Additionally, the period 2011-2021 was chosen to understand the ideas, arguments and actors involved in the discourse from the time of the release of the IC to the current context. The study selected 305 articles from Lithuanian news media and 256 from Latvian media.

RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA TEXTS

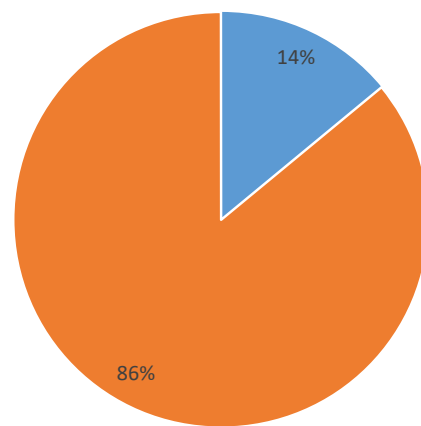
Quantitative Analysis of Media Coverage on the Ratification of the IC

According to the data, most Lithuanian and Latvian articles came from the secular media; fewer were from the religious media (see Figures 1a and 1b). The largest number of articles on the IC in both countries were published on the most popular news portals, which became a platform for the exchange of opinions.



■ Religious media ■ Secular media

Figure 1a. Distribution of articles by media types (Lithuania).



■ Religious media ■ Secular media

Figure 1b. Distribution of articles by media types (Latvia).

Figure 2a shows that the interest of religious communities in the IC has been gradual in Lithuania, with the most significant interest and media coverage taking place in 2013, 2018 and 2021. According to the results, 18 articles appeared in 2013, the year of the adoption of the IC. Many articles appeared in 2018, as that was the year when the then-President of

⁷ For a ranking of the most popular news channels, see: Gemius. 9 April 2021. "Gemius publicē martā apmeklētāko vietņu" TOP 20. <https://www.gemius.lv/interneta-mediji-zinas/gemius-publice-marta-apmeklatakovienu-top-20.html> (Date of retrieval: 10 April 2021); Gemius. 20 April 2020. "Kovo mėnesio apžvalga". <https://www.gemius.lt/interneto-ziniasklaidos-naujienos/kovo-menesio-apzvalga-5432.html> (Date of retrieval: 10 March 2021) (in the case of Lithuania, 15min.lt was not analysed due to the absence of an article search archive).

Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaitė, submitted the IC to the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania for ratification. Also in that year, the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference published an appeal on the IC. In addition, a declaration signed by 76 members of the Seimas was published, supporting the fight against violence but pointing out that all the provisions of the IC aimed at protecting women from violence have already become part of Lithuanian national law. Public discourse on the IC intensified in 2021. Nineteen human rights organisations appealed to the government and the Seimas to ratify the IC. And this, according to the research findings, has triggered an intense public debate and led to the more substantial role of representatives of religious organisations in the public sphere on the issues of the IC. Thus, in 2021, the leaders of Lithuania's six traditional Christian communities signed a joint appeal expressing their opposition to the IC. Furthermore, the same year, Evangelical Christian communities sent an official letter to the Seimas and the President of the Republic of Lithuania expressing a critical view of the IC.

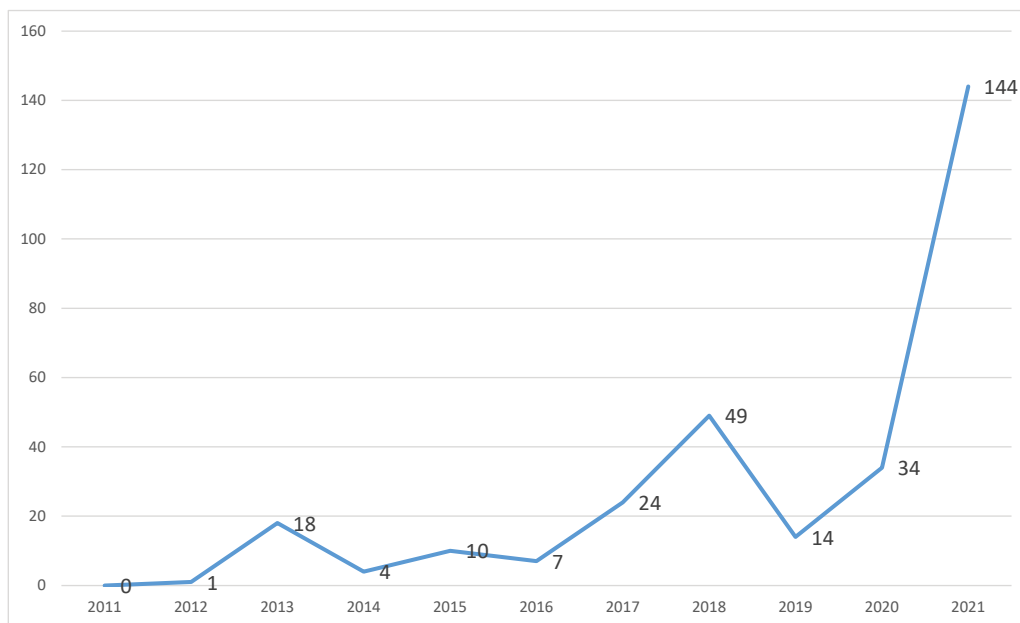


Figure 2a. Distribution of articles by publication year (Lithuania).

The analysis of the dynamics of publications on the IC in Latvia shows that there were two major peaks of publications on the topics in both secular and religious media – in 2016, when the IC was signed by the Minister of Welfare, opposed by the Minister of Justice and religious leaders formulated their arguments in an Open Letter, and in 2018, when the process of ratification was stopped. This is the outcome of the involvement of religious media in the campaign against the ratification of the IC in the year it was prepared for ratification in the government, when different social groups were involved in discussing the risks and needs related to the IC publicly. Figure 2b shows that the discussions in Latvian media did not cease in recent years, especially in 2021, when the number of articles with IC-related topics in secular media was even higher than in 2018.

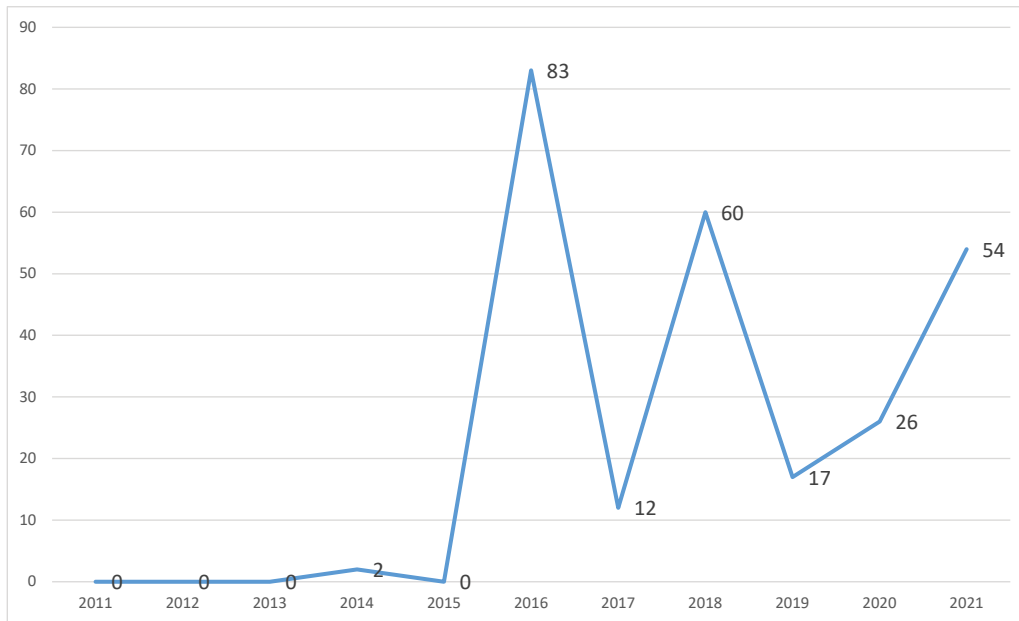


Figure 2b. Distribution of articles by publication year (Latvia).

These results show that, in both countries, any political action related to the IC encourages religious figures to step into public debates and express their points of view, which attracts considerable media attention. Therefore, the media can be seen as an accessible tool for religious actors in Lithuania and Latvia to express their opinions to the public on various issues, including the IC.

Figures 3a and 3b show that, in both countries, it is not only religious leaders (41% in Lithuanian and 13% in Latvian articles) but also politicians and public figures who use religion-related arguments about the IC in media discourse. However, Latvian politicians were more active than Lithuanians in the IC discourse. This shows that not only do official representatives of religious organisations defend their religious values, but so do other actors who support said religious values, take part in the discourse and seek the same goals as religious organisations.

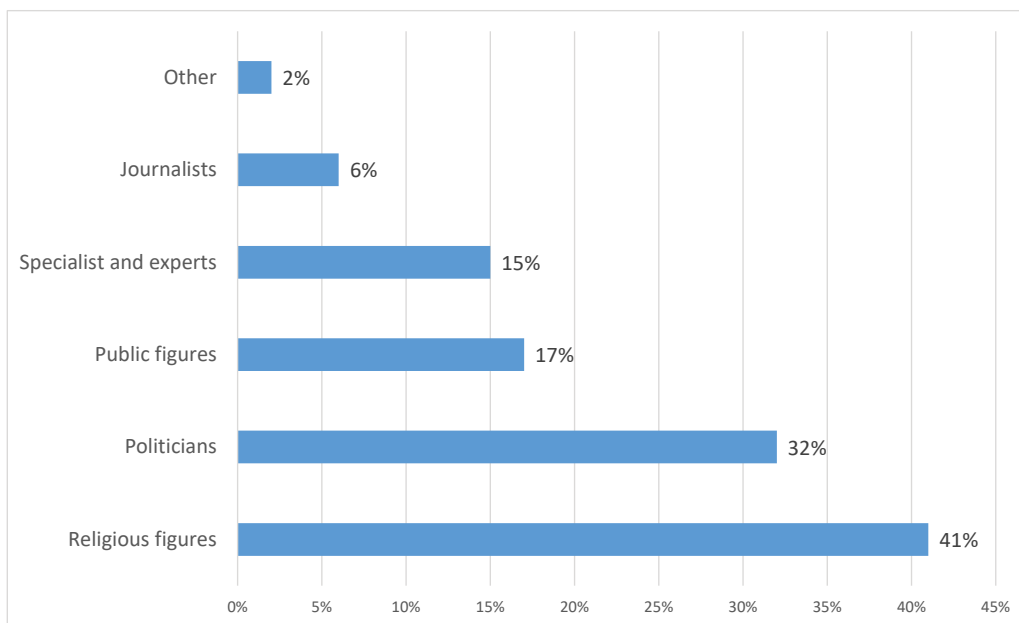


Figure 3a. Distribution of articles by resource (Lithuania).

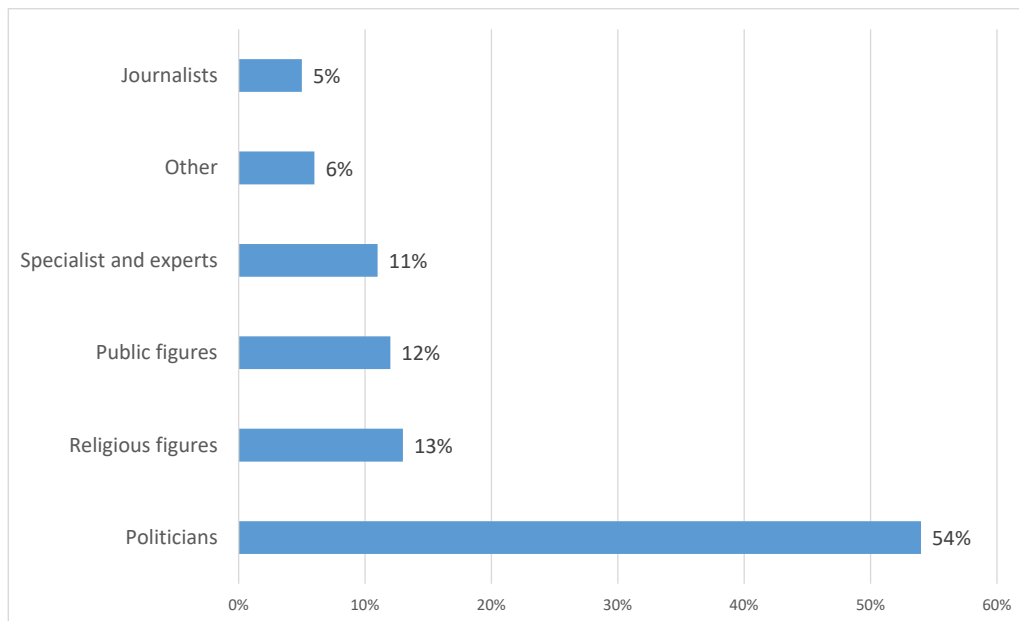


Figure 3b. Distribution of articles by resource (Latvia).

It is worth mentioning that the Lithuanian articles mainly present opinions related to Catholic values (78%). The reason for this could be that the Catholic Church, as the dominant religious community in Lithuania, is also seen as an essential part of the history and culture of the society and nation, closely linked to Lithuanian identity, tradition and the process of gaining independence (Ališauskienė & Glodenis 2013, 24; Glodenis 2012a, 9, 11-13). This role and influence of the Lithuanian Catholic Church is also clearly visible in the public life of Lithuanian society. In cases where various social, political and civic issues trigger specific religious values, the Lithuanian Catholic Church becomes an active participant in Lithuanian public life, especially in the media (Ališauskienė & Kuznecovienė 2012; Pocė 2020). Only a few articles present arguments from figures from other religious communities (Orthodox Christians, Old Believers, Evangelical Lutherans, Evangelical Reformed and Greek Catholics). Some articles do not name a specific religious community but generally argue for Christian values (16% of all analysed articles). In Latvia, four publications in “God’s Keeper Newsletter” that express pagan perspectives on the IC were identified. The vast majority of articles do not refer to one particular (Christian) religion or value system.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA COVERAGE ON THE RATIFICATION OF THE IC

Textual (Micro) Level of Discourse⁸

An essential part of this analysis was also to investigate how religious actors and politicians who defend Christian values discuss the IC and what arguments and strategies they use to justify their views. The research shows that the majority of articles from Lithuanian secular and religious news media present a negative view of the IC. Typical of both countries is the wording used to describe the IC case. Central to the discourse is the problem of the term “gender” itself, or more precisely, a discussion of the term in the context of the IC. In both countries, religious actors see the adoption of the concept of gender as a major threat, which they believe will create legal preconditions for treating gender as a social construct. This threat is followed by ideas that the IC will break the autonomy of families, “destroy” traditional

⁸ Language editor’s note: all quotations have been unofficially translated into English and, therefore, in order to preserve their most proximate meaning, no modifications have been made to them.

family values, neutralize the relationship between men and women and create an environment for promoting LGBTQ+ rights.

The analysis at the textual level highlights several features characteristic of both Lithuanian and Latvian media coverage of the IC. For example, communicators often use future and infinitive verb forms to project their and their opponent's goals into a possible future for society – with the main dangers being LGBTQ+ marriages and distorted families. This is how they express the need to act immediately and proactively. Common to both countries is also the strategic use of nouns like “family, nation, protection, safeness, tradition” and the pronoun “we.” For example, in the declaration of the “Great March for the Family 2021,” it is stated:

“We will defend our families, children, young people, kindergartens and schools from the propaganda of invented [terms like] gender that is being forcibly imposed.”⁹

This is opposed by “them” – the supporters of the IC in Lithuanian and Latvian society, but especially forces outside the country. The Latvian singer and Christian activist with ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, Kaspars Dimiteris, puts it in very radical terms:

“I am begging God for Russian military to enter Latvia at first opportunity to kick off those satanists kept in safety by NATO – before our children and children of children are forced to choose to become sexual cripples.”¹⁰

Communicators often use lexical units that denote hidden or expressed semantic opposition. For example, the IC is described as “imposed” (from outside the country, by force), thus supposing that the nation or society and especially its less protected subgroups, such as children, young people and families, are “exposed” and must be protected.

In an Open Letter, the leaders of the four biggest Latvian churches – Evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox and Baptist – express this fear:

“In general one may notice that the Convention is not calling to fight with the real causes of violence, but opens up the opportunity to impose on Latvia a project of transformation of society based on social sex [gender] ideology, which would be contrary to the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia.”¹¹

The same formulation is contained in the position of the Lithuanian Catholic Church about the IC, which was published for public appeal in 2018 by the bishops. The letter says that the IC's reference to gender imposes a distorted view of sex in society:

“In the noble aim of preventing violence against women, ideological attitudes incompatible with the natural concept of human rights are imposed on society, and an attempt is made to construct an artificial view of women and men.”¹²

⁹ Vaiškūnas, Jonas. 15 May 2021. “Visuomenė duos atkirtį šeimos griovėjams”. *alkas.lt*. <https://alkas.lt/2021/03/28/visuomene-duos-atkirti-seimos-griovejams-video/>. (Date of retrieval: 06 January 2022).

¹⁰ La.lv. 13 May 2016. “Dimiteris gaida Krievijas karaspēku, DP atgādina par vārda brīvību”. <https://www.la.lv/dimiteris-gaida-krievijas-karaspeku>. (Date of retrieval: 08 February 2022).

¹¹ Stankevičs, Zbignevs, Janis Vanags, Aleksandrs Kudrjašovs, and Peteris Sproģis. 2016. “Latvijas kristīgo baznīcu vadītāju atklātā vēstule par Stambulas konvenciju”. *Katolis.lv*. <https://katolis.lv/2016/05/latvijas-kristigo-baznicu-vaditaju-atklata-vestule-par-stambulas-konvenciju/>. (Date of retrieval: 17 September 2022).

¹² LRT.lt. 13 June 2018. “Vyskupai: Stambulo konvencijos ratifikavimas nepadėtų sumažinti smurto prieš moteris”. <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/215959/vyskupai-stambulo-konvencijos-ratifikavimas-nepadetu-sumazinti-smurto-pries-moteris>. (Date of retrieval: 02 March 2023).

“Natural” versus “artificial” is another typical opposition used to underline that the IC is imposing a social pressure oriented to the distortion of nature. Sexes are “natural,” and “genders” are artificial constructs (borrowing the idea of construction from the feminist discourse) and, as such, redundant. The different social roles of men and women are “natural,” and this is what the discourse of equal rights must not “artificially” neglect. The emphasis on “nature” as the basis for argumentation in the normative discourse on human rights, through the persistent use of the lexeme, is typical of the conservative, populist, fundamentalist political communication to which the discourse on the IC refers. The need to protect is also often expressed in words. However, the reference to the social level of reasoning (to defend social groups, values, our culture and traditions) in combination with the mention of “nature” and the “biological” expresses a perspective on the protection of life (another reference to the political discourse of conservatives and organisations like “Pro-life”). It must be noted that, in both countries, the term “ideology” refers to supporters of the IC and their position (i.e. accepting the social construction of gender). This word has a negative connotation of “falseness” and is often used in conservative discourse on various issues connected to the IC and gender equality in general. The same “falseness” is potentially included in the very treatment of the English term “gender” and its translation into national languages through rather clumsy constructions (“social sex”). Gender, as espoused in the opponents’ arguments, is an artificial concept with no reference and no adequate linguistic means of expression.

The Latvian pagan community’s perspectives on this issue came relatively later, but generally, they formulate their official opinion in the same way the Christians do, but instead tend to use the opposition of “balanced, harmonic” and “unbalanced, disharmonic.”

“The thoughtless introduction of legal norms that could distort the ancient heritage by changing the content of concepts is not allowed. Likewise, disrespectful treatment of those who share traditions and calling their opinion a ‘homophobic’ attitude towards those who seek to subordinate the value system of the rest of society to their own unbalanced sexual desire is not allowed. It is also unacceptable to question Latvia’s right to self-determination by threatening with sanctions from foreign institutions.”¹³

However, there were also arguments supporting the IC. In Latvia, these arguments express the ideas that the IC needs to be ratified so that Latvian society can modernise (in the European context) and that the text of the IC neither contradicts the Latvian Constitution nor Christian values. In Lithuania’s case, positive reactions to the IC come mainly from politicians claiming the Convention is perfectly compatible with Catholic values, hence why it has been ratified by other Catholic countries, such as Poland, Ireland, Italy and Malta. Though these are important exceptions, there were very few positive comments in both countries, hence why this paper focuses more on the negative arguments.

Interactional (Meso) Level of Discourse

To understand the discourse on the IC in Latvian and Lithuanian media, one must consider the specifics of these countries’ small post-socialist media systems and the dynamics of contemporary media ecology. Researchers have criticised commercialisation and marketisation, as well as clientelism, as typical tendencies in these countries’ media (see, for example, Balčytienė 2013; Kōuts-Klemm *et al* 2022). This might explain two important characteristics of this discourse. First, how and why the media tend to stage the differences and exchange of opinions between social groups as a battle (or conspiracies) and why media discourse on the IC often includes emotionally appealing expressions by opponents. Second, why, especially in the Latvian sample, politicians are often the only source of information that formulates the discourse on the IC, and they are doing it in light of their future political prospects. In other

¹³ Dievturu Vēstnesis. 2021. “Latvijas Dievturu sadraudzes viedoklis par ģimeni”. Nr.37 (12021#1), 1887.

words, these tendencies determine why and how political actors express opinions harmonised with the official opinion of religious organisations and why and how religious actors are involved in politicising the IC's discourse.

In general, religious leaders and actors representing religious organisations were successful in formulating their opinions publicly through the media. Political actors and other opponents of the ratification of the IC use their conceptual models and formulations, which present the IC as a hidden instrument for social change, to consolidate their rather scattered emotional and cognitive response to the concept of gender and the treatment of gender roles in the formulations of the IC. However, there are differences between the two countries in terms of strategies and models of involvement for religious actors in public (and politicised) spaces. In Lithuania, religious leaders and persons representing religious organisations (e.g. clergy and church administration) are more directly involved in the mediated discourse on the IC, formulating their views and positions. In Latvia, religious leaders from the biggest churches developed their position (the IC is a hidden instrument of social transformation based on gender ideology, incompatible with the Constitution) quite strictly in the Open Letter distributed through several channels, both religious and secular, as early as 2016 (the year of the IC's signing). Their position is later echoed in the statements of political actors from national, conservative and right-wing parties and other actors involved in the public debate. They also tended to quote politicians after reported conversations with church leaders instead of involving the church representatives themselves. These differences may be linked to the different ways in which the relationship between religion and the state is formulated in both countries – if Lithuanian law refers to the status of traditional religious communities, in Latvia, all religious organisations are seen as separate from the state and therefore their access to the public sphere and discussions there are more problematic. The explanation may also be based on differences between religious cultures and traditions: Latvia is a predominantly Evangelical Lutheran country, while Lithuania is Roman Catholic (Johnston 1993). According to Weber's account of Protestant ethics (Weber [1930] 1950, 106), this difference may be related to a more individualistic, rational and less emotional approach to public debate.

Socio-Cultural (Macro) Level of Discourse

The analysis of the arguments used, as well as the textual and interactional analysis, shows that for participants with religious points of view, the focus of the discussion was not on the IC itself or on measures against violence against women, but it was on the very outlook of the IC: a changing (liberalising) socio-cultural environment. As in many countries, the use of the term "gender" in the IC "signifies the chaos of modern life, the ultimate danger" for political rights; thus, in public debates, it was used "instrumentally in order to moralise political conflict and demonise political opponents" (Graff & Korolczuk 2022, 20). This type of argument also allowed the mobilisation of conservative forces in both Baltic countries and kept representatives of religious organisations within the circle of IC communicators. The "culture of agreements" (Balčytienė 2013, 37) was a background of discursive legitimation and naturalisation of this presence (even if it required slightly different tactics by religious actors in both countries). According to the Inglehart-Welzel World Values Map, Lithuania and Latvia are countries with a slight tendency towards both rational-secular values (on the traditional-secular scale) and survival values (as opposed to self-expression values) (Haerpher *et al* 2022). This means that the social groups and political forces arguing for both – more traditional and more survival/safety-oriented – are interested in politicising social issues in the public discourse in a way that allows them to point to hidden dangers or external forces involved in changing the (traditional) equilibrium and peace. This is why both countries' religious actors (those linked directly to religious organisations and to actors from conservative political and social backgrounds) speak of foreign sources of power trying to take over. They also use similar arguments to any other value-connected discussion (especially involving children

and families) and use the term “gender ideology” to show that the IC and similar initiatives should be understood not legally or philosophically but in a political – politicised – way. In the context of rising populism and the constant flux in configurations and alliances of political forces, the discourse on the IC allows expressive language to become competitive in political rallies. Gender-related issues thus become a highly politicised battlefield between political liberals and political conservatives, including religious actors. Typically, gender serves as a “symbolic glue” (Petó 2015, 127) for the new conservative politics. This “glue” is an instrument of politicisation used by religious organisations to maintain their place in power relations and access more power in society. However, especially in Latvia, the post-Soviet legacy and the relative importance of the Russian Orthodox Church (with its proximity to the Russian regime) adds an ambiguous aspect to the discourse on the IC tailored by religious voices.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of Lithuanian and Latvian media texts on the IC reveals that the active role of Christian actors and politicians supporting Christian values in public debates on the IC and gender ideology enhances the politicisation of religion. Despite differences between the countries, the Lithuanian and Latvian news media presented statements on the IC by representatives and supporters of the largest and most influential religious communities in these countries. This can be explained by the idea that major religious communities played a significant role in the political, cultural and social processes leading up to regaining independence. In the Lithuanian news media, it was possible to find the opinions of mainly Christian organisations, the most active of which was the largest and most dominant religious community, the Lithuanian Catholic Church. In Latvia, official leaders from the Christian churches (including the Catholics) crafted a united public statement against the IC that received spectacular coverage in the media and was later elaborated on by different religious actors who were also, though differently, positioned against the IC. Even if there was a diversity of opinions within and between religious organizations, this diversity of opinions had no significant impact on media discourse, and smaller religious organizations, particularly non-Christian ones, were rarely, if ever, covered. There are several possible explanations for this: either smaller religious communities do not see a problem with the IC and do not see it as incompatible with their religious values, and therefore, are not attractive to the media, who want to stage the IC as a conflict between conservative religious and progressive secular individuals and organisations (this is why the Open Letter in support of the IC published by progressive representatives of Christian organisations¹⁴ did not really change the discourse); or they see the incompatibilities but do not want to express their views in public. The third option: they see the incompatibilities and wish to express their opinions publicly but do not have “access” to secular media channels (because these are more attuned to representing the conflict between bigger social groups than to representing moderate deliberation on the issue). This is the case of the “Dievturi” voice in the Latvian sample. They were publicly invisible but took a position against the IC in their periodical. Thus, this result confirms other studies highlighting the strong Christian (especially Catholic) voice in the debates on the IC and gender ideology in different European countries (Maye & Sauer 2017; Bracke, Dupont & Petternote 2017).

Moreover, as our study shows, the politicisation of religion takes place with the support of politicians, political parties and the representatives of various organisations who clearly declare their Christian values and join forces to fight against the IC. This support helps religious actors enter political debates, gain public notoriety and achieve their anti-genderist agenda (via this politicisation process). And it is also changing the political map, with the emergence of new forces whose political agendas strongly emphasise Christian values. This aspect shows that

¹⁴ Delfi.lv. “Atklāta vēstule par Stambulas konvencijas parakstīšanu Latvijā”. <https://www.delfi.lv/898102/versijas/47428113/atklata-vestule-par-stambulas-konvencijas-parakstisanu-latvija>. (Date of retrieval: 23 September 2023).

in Lithuania and Latvia, according to Robertson's explanation of the politicisation of religion, there is not only an increased interest of religious communities in the political affairs of the state but also the active voices of a variety of political actors who, while technically representing and operating within the secular sphere, are simultaneously promoting the preservation of religious values in political affairs.

The most important aspect of this study is the argumentation styles used by religious actors and supporters in the debates on the IC. The Lithuanian and Latvian media text analysis showed that religious actors use similar themes, keywords and argumentation strategies. Most religious actors or politicians and other actors promulgating so-called Christian values claim they are fighting to protect tradition, family, children, morality and the state. Also, they claim to be fighting for the right to be a woman or a man, which is given by nature. In most of the articles, religious organisations appear to defend what they see as the fundamental values of society, tradition and culture and to promote their preferred moral and social education. The arguments of religious figures make little reference to the Bible. Instead, they appeal to the idea that religion is the custodian of society's moral education, responsible for preserving tradition and people's inherent ("God-given") rights. There is more of a focus on gains and losses in the political power-play. As Altinordu (2010, 542) puts it: "<...> Politicization does not follow directly from religion-specific doctrines or regional political traditions but from the interaction of religious activism with established social elites and state power." Even in Latvia, with its more divided religious landscape and the media's focus on the political agenda, the case of the IC shows that this interaction has come to the fore. This result also confirms Köhrsen's ideas about religious communication. He argues that all modern public communication by religious communities is primarily concerned with discussing secular events, symbols and opinions through a religious guise but has very little to do with the transcendent qualities of religion (Köhrsen 2012, 272-283).

Furthermore, many arguments against the IC are based on the possibility that the concept of gender therein not only enables questions related to sexual orientation and identity, but is a step in a supposedly dangerous direction: toward LGBTQ+ rights, abortion access protections, sexual reproduction laws and changes in the education curricula of their children, such as teaching about "non-stereotypical gender roles." These are all understood by religious actors as threats to society, tradition and morality. One might say that a critical basis for anti-genderist arguments, which also explains their attitudes toward the IC, is the broad concern of protecting the family (as it is traditionally viewed). It seems evident that the legal and cultural initiatives in recent years have not only indicated changes in the concept of the family but have also opened the concept up to more liberal modelling and conceived of it as a subject of rights (Sosa 2021).

Finally, it is pertinent to point out that religious actors tend to justify their participation in public debates on the IC, which is not a part of the religious world (at first glance). In the Latvian case, religious leaders have publicly declared their views on the dangers and risks associated with the IC, but to avoid controversies, they choose the tactic of speaking directly to politicians and members of their communities – it is in this way that their expressions and actions are later reported by the media and thus enter the public discourse. However, in the Lithuanian case, religious leaders and political representatives opposing the Convention argue that expression and public debate are necessary for democratic societies and that the Christian voice is crucial in the public debate on the IC because religion is responsible for the moral education of society, the preservation and promotion of tradition, culture and customs. The Lithuanian Catholic Church has played a strong role in national political, cultural and social life and traditions since independence, and the use of news media is widely available to this religious community. Other studies show similar results. For example, an analysis of media texts on the debate on the IC and IVF in Poland indicates that the Catholic Church

presents itself as the “defender of the family” and “protector of the entire society” (Szwed & Zielinska 2017, 123). This shows that in similar but different societies, the dominant religious community affirms its presence in the public sphere by using similar keywords of affirmation. This confirms J. Casanova's (1994) idea that religion does not limit itself to individual spiritual matters and justifies its presence in the public sphere by claiming its duty to defend the democratic values promoted by civil society. Yet, it is necessary to point out that this kind of justification for being in the public space – in other words, the presence of religious freedom and freedom of opinion – can ultimately undermine the freedoms of others and lead to social tensions (Hurd 2015).

Lithuania and Latvia are not the only European countries to have experienced situations like this around the ratification of the IC and the perception of gender more broadly. Other Christian and Christian-majority countries are facing similar issues when dealing with the Convention's ratification. For example, in Bulgaria, the Constitutional Court held consultations with the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church and representatives of other religious organisations before deciding that gender can only be understood on a biological basis per the Bulgarian Constitution since the Orthodox Church is part of the national and cultural identity, so there cannot be developments that contradict its moral values (Merdjanova 2022, 8). The results of this study certainly seem to be typical of the new developments related to religious participation in public spaces around the world. The analysis of media discourse on the IC in the two Baltic countries shows the similarity and repetition of arguments, words and facts that are also known from international research, which is a clear sign of national anti-genderist discourses becoming a part of a more global anti-genderist movement that aims to frame the perception and cognition of particular political problems in the public space. It could be argued that the politicisation of religion is a means for religious actors to achieve their anti-genderist agenda.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of public debates on the IC in Lithuanian and Latvian media has revealed the active role of Christian actors, whose opposing arguments were formulated directly based on a conservative value system and the narratives that encode these values, which is characteristic of opposition to the IC by conservatives on the political spectrum in other countries as well (see, for example, Hovhannisyan 2019; Mancini & Palazzo 2021; Wehrle 2019). Religious actors can publicly express their views on public issues in a democratic society, but it is the support of politicians and various organisations, the possibility of direct and indirect communication with government leaders and the possibility of publishing opinions in the media, among other things, that allows religion to influence political decisions. Thus, the presence of these confirms the development of the politicisation of religion.

Overall, despite differences in the discourses – in Lithuania, representatives of religious organisations are more openly involved in the public anti-genderist discourse than in Latvia, where the ideas of religious actors were voiced by politicians, NGOs, activists and lawyers – the analysis has shown that in both countries the public discourse on the IC was used as a showcase for political poles and alliances. These alliances represent conservative forces mobilising in anti-genderist articulations, conservative parties utilising the authority of religious organisations and religious actors exercising their influence in the public sphere in a more (Lithuania) or less (Latvia) direct way.

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