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RELIGION AND GENDER POLITICS IN LITHUANIA

**THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S EFFORTS TO HINDER
THE RATIFICATION OF THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION**

by **Augusté Nalivaiké**

abstract

This paper seeks to understand how the Catholic Church manages its involvement in gender politics in Lithuania and exerts power. Lithuania signed the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the so-called Istanbul Convention) in 2013 but ratification efforts continue to date. The Convention has become a political "hot potato" and caused ideological confrontations. The Catholic Church is here a political actor, leveraging its influence across multiple levels and cycles of the political decision-making process. NGOs have initiated campaigns in attempt to counter the discourse of oppositional conservative and religious political actors. I utilize anonymous in-depth interviews with various relevant actors to gain a more accurate and nuanced picture of the Church's engagement in holding back the ratification efforts. Ultimately, this case study also enriches theoretical literature on institutional opportunity structures and informal institutions in relation to religious influence in morality policymaking.

KEYWORDS: Gender, religion, qualitative, morality policy.

Religious influences in policy making have remained prevalent despite theories of societal secularization and modernization.¹ Morality policies are of specific interest to religious organizations; therefore, most research on religious influence is based on examining this policy type. Religious bodies care about morality policies because they are connected to values and beliefs. Values are fundamental both to church doctrines and morality policies.²

Morality policies have recently received more academic attention.³ Morality policy has been conceptualized as a unique type of policy.⁴ In addition, some scholars attempted to narrow these policies down into categories,⁵ or explain their temporal changes.⁶ Reproductive rights, same-sex partnerships including marriages, in vitro fertilization, euthanasia, sexual exploitation, pornography, and regulation of drugs all come under the heading of morality policies because they are conceptualized by an established value system which may be challenged.⁷

Research on the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the so-called Istanbul Convention) can mainly be found in legal studies. It also appears in the contexts of the analysis of anti-gender ideology and anti-gender movements; however, I argue that the Istanbul Convention may also belong to the category of morality policies as its main ideas revolve around gender equality and the way societies value and treat women which proved to be a controversial topic to conservative and religious actors many times in the past. Gender roles and stereotypes are related to societal and religious values, which are threatened when policies endorsing gender equality and rejecting gender stereotypes are adopted and implemented. Therefore, it can be expected that in some states, churches will strongly oppose the signing and ratification of the Istanbul Convention while at the same time interfering in policy-making processes.

The Istanbul Convention was opened for signature on May 11, 2011 and signed by the Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2013 but ratification efforts continue to this day. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the extent to which the Lithuanian Catholic Church had a role in postponing the ratification process. The main interest is not the influence of various factors related to religion, for example, religiosity or religious freedoms, in politics, but how powerful the Catholic Church is in executing its political preferences in each democratic regime. While the hierarchs of the Catholic Church participated in creating certain public discourse about the Convention mainly using various media channels, similarly to the cases of Poland, Croatia or Bulgaria, this research analyses the degree to which the Church intervened in the ratification efforts on the political level.

Informal institutions and institutional opportunity structures

I argue that religious influence in politics can be explained using the delay in ratifying the Convention, can be explained using the concept of *informal institutions*. Informal institutions that sustain religious influence are part of deeper political culture and the way political decisions are understood and interpreted by most political actors. Informal rules and practices that govern state-church relations consequently construct institutional opportunity structures that are further exploited by the Catholic Church.

An institution is a rule or organized practice that has a certain meaning and is quite resistant to external changes or individual expectations.⁸ Institutions are "rules of the game" that modify relations among individuals in a system⁹, including the world of politics. In addition, institutions can be defined as models of behavior that help predict other people's actions.¹⁰ "Rules of the game" consist of formal rules, laws, social agreements, informal rules, and even common understanding of politics. In other words, institutions "are shared prescriptions about what actions are required, prohibited or permitted".¹¹

INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS have long remained in the shadows of neoinstitutionalist research. Scholars concentrated their research on formal institutions because it worked well with narrow concepts.¹² Consequently, informal institutions were not only underestimated but also lacked deeper theoretical conceptualization.¹³ Analysis of formal institutions only was not entirely successful at explaining complex processes of policymaking. Most "rules of the game" were the result of informal behaviors and agreements among various political actors which constrained their actions systematically and formally. Therefore, research of informal practices, networks and rules started to gain more scholarly attention.¹⁴

Informal institutions are different from formal, insufficient, or weak institutions.¹⁵ Helmke and Levitsky offer the following definition: "informal institutions are socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels."¹⁶ And on the contrary, "formal institutions are rules and procedures that are created,



The Vilnius Cathedral is the main Roman Catholic Cathedral of Lithuania.

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communicated and enforced through channels widely accepted as official".¹⁷

There is some academic discussion on what really constitutes informal institutions. Some scholars consider traditions, habits, religious and ideological beliefs, and path dependency effects to be informal institutions.¹⁸ In this case, informal institutions are analyzed as something that is a part of historical legacy, and in certain circumstances that may be true. Helmke and Levitsky disagree,¹⁹ however, I would like to argue that state-church relations in Lithuania seem to carry the importance of past events and roles that the Catholic Church had in state-forming years and the struggle for independence. Nonetheless, Helmke and Levitsky's conceptualization of informal rules is still applicable in my analysis.

THE CONCEPT OF institutional opportunity structures was used in same-sex partnership legislation research by Knill and Preidel who looked at the differences between Ireland and Italy regarding this policy.²⁰ Although more religious, Ireland adopted same-

sex marriage legislation sooner than Italy. The authors concluded that differences in institutional settings between the two countries resulted in differences in policy. Various actors within the policymaking processes were empowered or constrained in communicating and achieving their political preferences. Strong fragmentation of executive power and lack of leadership created institutional access for religious actors who in turn exploited this fragmentation to their benefit and postponed same-sex marriage legislation. The Catholic Church also utilized lobbying and close relationships between politicians and the church. Such political circumstances and access are called *institutional opportunity structures*.²¹ In some cases, *opportunity structures* for religious influence in politics come through formal institutional arrangements.²² Research suggests that more progressive morality policy reforms are usually delayed or even rejected when religious organizations utilize these institutional opportunity structures.²³

The concept of informal institutions has not previously been used to examine the relationship between religion and politics (to the best of my knowledge). Some scholars have admitted that

further understanding of informal political power and institutional access²⁸ and the informal relationship between state and church²⁹ is needed to better understand the dynamics of religious influence in policymaking.

In my opinion, Helmke and Levitsky's²⁸ definition of informal institutions is a proper conceptual tool to grasp the complexities of religious influence in morality politics in Lithuania. Identifying institutional opportunity structures and informal institutions that sustain the informal state-church relationship is also a novel approach which further develops scientific literature on religious influence in morality policymaking. Institutional access creates and maintains the culture of informality and vice versa. I also have an open mind about the relation between informal institutions and past circumstances or events. The relationship between informal institutions and the past requires more academic attention, especially when we analyze post-communist states.

The Catholic Church in Lithuania after 1990

The Catholic Church suffered greatly from state repressions after the Soviets occupied Lithuania in 1944. The regime wanted to eliminate patriotism and national culture which the church represented for many; therefore, in a sense, the Catholic Church became "enemy number one."³⁰ Churches and monasteries were closed, real estate was nationalized, and the Catholic community was controlled and repressed.³¹

The Catholic Church played an important role in the events that eventually resulted in Independence for Lithuania in 1990. The church mobilized many people and actively participated in the Independence movement.³² After the declaration of independence in 1990, the Catholic Church was re-established, regained its status in democratic Lithuania, and continued religious activities.³³ In addition, the Church also managed to take part in political processes and acquire a great deal of political power and privileges which continue to this day.³⁴ During the first decade of the democratic political regime in Lithuania, the Catholic Church secured formal institutional access which helped to communicate church's political preferences and in some cases even form the political agenda. The formal relationship between church and state in Lithuania is determined by the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania,³⁵ the Law on Religious Communities,³⁶ the Law on National Radio and Television,³⁷ the treaties between the Holy See and the Republic of Lithuania,³⁸ and the Law on Education.³⁹ The Constitution separates state and church in Article 43: "There shall be no state religion in Lithuania."³⁹ However, "constitutions alone are rather misleading and inaccurate guides to political reality."³⁹ Research of formal arrangements between the state and religious organizations does not fully explain the variations and dynamics of policymaking because the reality of religious influence is much more nuanced and complex. While state and church are officially separated in Lithuania, the Catholic Church is a *de facto* powerful actor that is often successful at shaping political processes and achieving its political preferences.³⁹ However, there is little research that examines the dynamics and nuances of religious

influence in politics on the micro level. I have previously attempted to explain the Church's influence in sexual education policymaking in Lithuania,⁴⁰ but otherwise the research is limited to media representations of such political participation.⁴¹

HOW CAN RESEARCHERS understand this influence and political power? Some suggested that the Catholic Church in Lithuania is a religious hegemony which has no competition with other religions. Most conflict in determining societal values comes from the confrontation between Catholic and secular organizations.⁴² The concept of *moral authority*⁴³ is also useful in the analysis of religious influence in policymaking. State-church relations in many post-communist states can be better understood if the respect that churches have in the eyes of politicians is considered. In other words, churches are moral authorities regarding many policies, especially those involving morality questions.

This moral authority is related to historical legacies⁴⁴ which in case of post-communist states is related to fusion of religious and national identities.⁴⁵ Moral authority was gained when churches successfully combined national and religious identities. Furthermore, moral authority creates institutional access and opportunities to have power over political decisions.⁴⁶ I argue that moral authority creates both formal and informal access to institutional opportunity structures. In case of Lithuania, national and religious identities fused to some extent. While this does not apply to all citizens, the older generation which was repressed by the Soviet regime also tends to be more religious and conservative. National identity and protection of the Lithuanian language has been associated with the Catholic Church and Catholicism for most of modern Lithuanian history.⁴⁷ The Catholic Church in Poland is historically believed to have had very similar role and it expresses a great deal of political power as well.⁴⁸

To conclude, in Lithuania religious influence in policymaking can be examined as follows: The Catholic Church is treated as a moral authority by many politicians which in turn created and still creates both formal and informal institutional access and institutional opportunity structures. These are sustained by informal institutions that shape political actors' behavior that favors the political preferences of the Church because of existing "rules of the game".

Ratification efforts in other Central-Eastern European states

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence or the Istanbul Convention became valid in August 2014. The most important goals of the Convention are to eliminate all forms of violence covered by its extent and require that states practice due diligence to prevent domestic violence. In addition, states are required to protect people who have already suffered from violence, ensure smooth recovery, and return to normal lives. Therefore, the Convention has great potential to combat gender-based violence. It defines violence extensively and distinguishes domestic violence and violence against women while emphasizing that the former affects women disproportionately.



Protest against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Zagreb, Croatia, March 24, 2018.

PHOTO: BRANKO DOKIĆ/NOVIK/VIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The Convention in Poland was signed in 2012, ratified in 2015 after serious political struggles and now may be even terminated. Szocik and Sozja theorize that the delay of ratification had to do with the prevalence and persistence of the Catholic Church's cultural policy which is advocated and implemented by various political actors.⁴⁹

AFTER TREMENDOUS anti-gender discourse and campaigns, Bulgaria failed to ratify the Convention in 2018. A well organized campaign against the Convention coordinated by ultra-conservative civic society organizations was joined by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The powerful anti-gender discourse in public created enough political pressure for the Constitutional Court of Bulgaria to declare the Convention unconstitutional.

A very clear trend in relation to the resistance to the Convention is present. One on hand, there are various conservative religious civic society groups, that in some cases may be what are called churches' satellite civil society organizations; on the other hand, there are churches and religious leaders. Finally, they are joined by conservative and often populist politicians. Together these three groups of actors with the help of various media create a powerful anti-gender discourse which affects

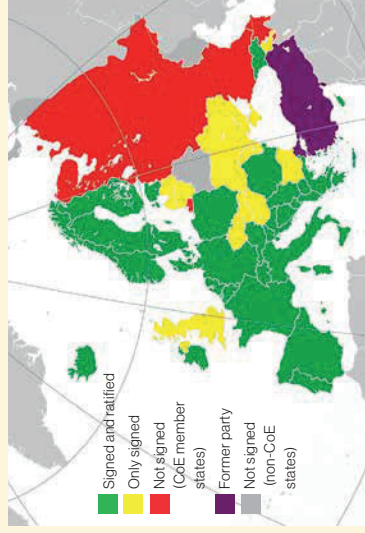
and influences more vulnerable societies that are not familiar with the terms like "gender" or "gender equality" and are therefore easily manipulated into refusing the Convention. Religious fundamentalism and interpretation of problematic biblical texts supporting the arguments of "natural law" have become a powerful way to sensationalize and criticize the Convention in more conservative societies. The arguments against the Convention are almost identical in Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the

tionately. Despite the fact that this Convention was designed specifically to prevent and eliminate violence against women, the opponents of the Convention were mostly concerned with the term gender and its implications in the context of gender roles and stereotypes.

The attempts to ratify the Istanbul Convention in Croatia were met with hostility which is a part of a broader anti-gender equality context. The Catholic Church authorities and conservative religious civic society groups have succeeded in introducing "a war on gender ideology" not only to public discourse but also in political processes. In 2017 Croatian Bishop's Conference stated that the contents of the Convention oppose traditional gender roles, "natural law" and go against national traditions. The Convention was signed in 2013 and finally ratified in 2018 with a special interpretative statement that the Convention does not contain an obligation for the state to introduce gender ideology. Public discourse about gender equality and the Convention was mainly distorted by the Catholic Church and conservative groups. Therefore, the ratification was postponed for five years for ideological reasons even though the word gender already existed in the Croatian legal system.

Latvia signed the Convention in 2016 but failed to ratify it in 2018. The ratification in the Latvian Parliament failed because the religious actors have joined the anti-gender ideology discourse in various media. Sensationalism and generating public restlessness were the main tools employed to confuse the public about the word gender and increase public distrust in the Convention. What is more, after the petition against ratification collected 10,000 signatures, the church authorities went to the Parliament and persuaded the majority of MPs to reject the Convention.

"THE ATTEMPTS TO RATIFY THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION IN CROATIA WERE MET WITH HOSTILITY WHICH IS A PART OF A BROADER ANTI-GENDER EQUALITY CONTEXT."



Czech Republic, or Poland and probably in other countries that faced hostility and criticism towards the Convention.

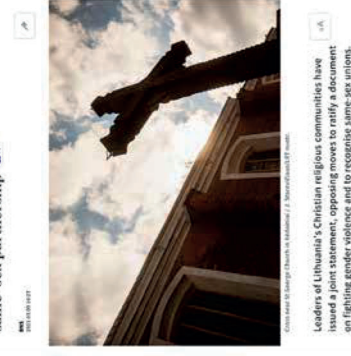
Most studies investigate the public discourse that is being created, maintained, and used by the opponents of the Convention in attempts to delay or even eliminate the ratification. In some cases, these attempts succeeded on the political level. Therefore, we need to better understand the cases when the discourse translates into political reaction, and consequently, action.

The efforts to ratify the Istanbul Convention in Lithuania

The Convention was signed in 2013 by the minister of Foreign Affairs, Linas Linkevičius. Before that, in 2011, a working group was formed by the Ministry of Social Affairs to analyze the provisions of the Convention. No documents for the ratification were drafted or submitted for ratification by the Government or President of Lithuania until 2017. Then women's rights activists started several campaigns and public discussions to raise awareness to this issue. A women's rights organization based in Kaunas designed a poster with a hashtag #RatifyIstanbulConvention and asked celebrities and politicians to take photographs while holding the poster. In summer 2016 several members of Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union visited that organization as a part of their political campaign before the parliamentary election which took place few months later, and had their photographs taken with that poster, giving hope to activists that this was a political promise. One person in that photograph later became Prime Minister of Lithuania, and the other took a position as Speaker of the Seimas (The Parliament of Lithuania).

After long political discussions, the responsibility of preparing the documents was transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in September 2017. A month later the draft of ratification documents was prepared and submitted to other

Lithuania's religious leaders voice opposition to Istanbul Convention and same-sex partnership



NGOs Urge Lithuania to Ratify the Istanbul Convention

On average, Lithuania sees one woman killed in a family context each month; furthermore, one in four women experience domestic violence. In order to more effectively tackle violence against women...



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19 public organizations are asking the Seimas to ratify the Istanbul Convention

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Headlines from various news media regarding the ratification question.

the messages from both sides, creating chaotic and destructive discourse.

The ratification process should have taken place in parliament's Spring Session in 2019; however, the vote did not take place. The Convention has still not been ratified, and while activists voice their concerns in media and create communication campaigns on a regular basis, they have not been successful. As of October 2020, Lithuania has elected a new majority in Seimas, which comprises one conservative and two liberal parties, and the ratification of the Convention was anticipated by many women's rights organizations, especially since the leaders of these parties are women who had previously expressed their support for the Convention. However, when talks about the possibility of ratifying the Convention during parliament's spring session have started, a huge anti-Convention campaign was organized on various media platforms by the same conservative, religious non-governmental organizations that created these campaigns in the past to confuse society and politicians about the Convention once again. After several weeks of intense debate and discussion by opponents of the Convention, various public figures, women's rights activists and, finally, public involvement in those various media channels, the Coalition had made the decision to postpone the ratification of the Convention at least until the autumn parliamentary session.

“POPULIST AND RADICAL POLITICIANS CLAIMED THAT THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY AND ORDER WOULD PERISH IF CONVENTION WERE RATIFIED.”

The anti-gender discourse visible in the public sphere and media is particularly identical to discourses created and sustained in Latvia, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Poland. The groups participating in this discourse also belong to the same ideological affiliations and are joined by churches and populist politicians, conse-

quently strengthening the impact and presence of anti-gender ideology and religious influence in countries mentioned.

Methodology: In-depth elite and expert interviews

Religious influence in policymaking is a complicated phenomenon to examine, especially when the analysis moves away from formal state-church arrangements. Informal institutions and practices are usually systematically covert and not easily acknowledged or revealed by the actors involved. How does a researcher study processes, rules and practices that are informal and not observable quantitatively? How to analyze the informal side of politics?

I am interested in the dynamics and informality surrounding religious influence in morally policymaking; therefore, a qualitative approach was selected. The purpose of the interviews was to learn about the informal institutions in relation to ratification of the Convention, as well as identifying institutional opportunities and access that the Catholic Church utilizes to stifle ratification efforts. In-depth elite and expert interviews were conducted with relevant actors. Qualitative interviews allow scholars to examine and better understand complex political events that usually happen behind closed doors.⁵² Some researchers are concerned with the difficulties related to elite interviewing,⁵³ while others claim that the difficulty of gaining access, for example, has been exaggerated.⁵⁴

The interviewees were carefully chosen to make sure they possess relative knowledge and expertise in relation to the nuances of the Istanbul Convention ratification delay in

Lithuania. I have compiled a list of women's rights activists and politicians who were the most outspoken about or involved in the ratification efforts and most visible in various Lithuanian media. I used the "snowball effect" to identify other potential interviewees. The informants' opinion whether Lithuania should ratify the Convention was not considered before contacting and choosing them as interviewees.

The analysis that follows draws on anonymous open-ended and semi-structured interviews that were conducted with ten individuals in 2018–2020. Some of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, some were conducted using Zoom platform, and one was a telephone interview. Several interviewees refused to be recorded, citing the sensitive nature of the research. Notes were taken during all interviews. The topics covered in the interviews were designed in accordance with the theoretical approach. The informants were asked to share their experience and knowledge regarding the ratification efforts, involvement of the Catholic Church and informal "rules of the game" in morality policymaking.

Results: Religious influence in the delay of the ratification process

I anticipated initially that the interview data would be strengthened by the analysis of official documents like ministries and parliamentary committees' reports in relation to the Convention, but many of those documents are almost impossible to locate online. In addition, special permission is needed to access most of the reports. Therefore, interview data is the main source of information about religious influence in the delay of ratification process.

A high-level politician said that in general there is a tendency to discuss various political questions with the Catholic Church, or in other words, to consult with the hierarchs of the Church on the regular basis. According to this interviewee, the Catholic Church is a very powerful organization not only in Lithuania, but also globally, with vast resources and influence on many matters. There have been attempts to communicate the Catholic Church's position on the Istanbul Convention at the very highest political level. There have also been meetings between high-level politicians and church hierarchs regarding the Convention. It is obvious that the Church did not only communicate its political preferences via official channels. There have been formal attempts like e-mailing or calling representatives of various ministries, and expressing concerns in the media, but most communication happened during informal meetings and through personal networks.⁵³ It appears that in this case the Catholic Church is regarded as a moral authority to be consulted with in relation to the Convention.

Another politician expressed disappointment in both the

government and Seimas regarding the delay in ratification of the Convention. The conversation turned to the state's inability to protect women's rights and work on the prevention of gender-based violence. According to the interviewees, the state should be able to resist religious influence, and the fact that it does not reveals that the state is weak. The interviewee also claimed that "if the Catholic Church had not expressed any interest in the Convention, it would have been ratified long time ago."⁵⁴ This individual was more concerned with state's inability to protect women's rights and reject religious authority in human rights issues but agreed that the Catholic Church may have played a role in hindering ratification efforts. Similar concerns were voiced by women's rights activists who said that state officials are to be blamed for delaying ratification.⁵⁷

Another activist working with women's rights in Lithuania revealed that a call from the leader of Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union party was received several days after this party got most votes in 2016 Seimas election. During the conversation, the caller said that the Istanbul Convention was not going to be ratified during the term of this Seimas.⁵⁹ This information reveals that the leader of the party which formed the government was personally against the Convention. Several interviewees also mentioned that the ruling party was very much against the Convention, and will probably delay ratification or even try to eliminate the question from political discourse altogether.⁵⁸ The Catholic Church gained a powerful ally whose political preferences regarding the Convention aligned with its own. In addition, some party members had close personal relationships with church's representatives. The Church in this case was able to utilize institutional opportunity structures via shared values and personal connections.

An activist who followed the political processes revolving around the Convention closely said that she felt like "a detective while trying to understand all the political activity and religious influence in relation to the Convention."⁶⁰ There was a lot of confusion because at times it seemed that ratification was moments away; however, the government appeared to change its mind. The interviewee speculated that this happened because "someone talked to the Church."⁶¹ According to this interviewee, the presence of the Catholic Church in politics regarding the Convention was felt but the ways in which religious influence manifested were difficult to identify.

TWO OTHER POLITICIANS and women's rights activists similarly concluded that the Catholic Church was behind the delay of the Convention, but they were not able to identify a more precise mechanism of religious influence in this case. They were able, however, to identify institutional access that the Church usually utilizes to make sure their political preferences are heard during

policymaking process. Both interviewees claimed that hearings in parliamentary committees are places where you can often meet church's representatives, most often lawyers and priests who communicate the Catholic message during those hearings.⁶²

In this case, the Catholic Church uses direct institutional access. All interested parties can participate in committee hearings, but it appears that the Catholic Church has a privilege of knowledge when certain discussion takes place, according to another interviewee.⁶³ Interpret this privilege of information as part of informal "rules of the game", because the representatives of the Church are often invited or are aware of these discussions, while other interested parties, most often individuals from human rights organizations, are not. When an issue of morality policy is brought up at any stage of policymaking, there is no level playing field, because the Church is seen as moral authority and has more institutional opportunities to achieve its political goals.

I had expected to learn more about informal institutions sustaining state-church relations and religious influence in morality policymaking in Lithuania, but they seem to be elusive even to those directly participating in the process. Interview data revealed that the Catholic Church participated not only in creating and maintaining the public discourse against the Convention but also had a more substantial role on the high political level.

Unfortunately, interviewees did not know what exactly was said and done both from the Church's and politicians' sides. All interviewees agreed that the Catholic Church is a powerful and influential organization which can affect political decisions. When it came to ratification of the Convention, the church's preferences coincided with the ruling party's preferences in the 2016–2020 term which helped maintain the status quo. The Convention was sidelined and excluded from the political discourse. The Church utilized institutional opportunity structures, informal "rules of the game", and moral authority to sustain its political influence.

Conclusion

I have attempted to examine the Catholic Church's involvement and role in the delay of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. I have identified certain trends that need further empirical analysis. It appears that the Church has played a role in the efforts to stall the ratification but the mechanisms behind this influence cannot be easily identified because so much communication and practices happen outside of the official channels, thus confirming the existence of informal institutions. Socially shared, yet informal, rules in the case of religious influence comprise the fact that the Catholic Church is the moral authority and should be consulted with, especially when matters revolve around morality policies.

In addition, I argue that religious influence in morality policymaking, including the ratification of the Convention, in Lithuania is related to the informal political culture which sustains certain informal rules and practices associated with the Catholic Church's role and status in politics, regardless of the Parliamentary majority or changes in government. I believe that Esquível offers an adequate argument that describes the relationship between religion and state in Lithuania well: "While freedom of

conscience and absence of discrimination are fully guaranteed, this is not the case regarding the autonomy or neutrality of the state, which exhibits some weakness in relation to religious organizations."⁶⁴

I also agree with Korolczuk and Graff's that we should interpret anti-gender ideology as a political rather than religious movement which, given the current backlash against gender equality in many states around the world, needs to meet resistance not only from feminist scholars on the academic level but also from members of wider society. **X**

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