

# Lithuania.

# Sex education as a tool in anti-genderist propaganda

by **Akvilė Giniotaitė**

## abstract

Since 1994 anti-genderism has emerged as a new participant in the discourse on sex education. One of the biggest targets of anti-genderism is public schools, where it is claimed that pupils are being indoctrinated with “gender theory”. Anti-genderism obstructs the implementation of sex education in various countries in Europe. Anti-genderist rhetoric and its interface with sex education has been analyzed up till now either as a right-wing or as a Russian propaganda narrative, only sporadically mentioning their common traits. Applying deductive content analysis, this research examined how sex education is utilized by anti-genderism. Sex education is portrayed as a frontline discipline that holds immense power to either distort or protect “traditional values” and sovereignty. Parents are depicted as powerless against sex education. Insights about approaching sex education and radical positions related to it are addressed in the discussion section.

**KEYWORDS:** Anti-genderism, Russian propaganda, right-wing, sex education.

**S**ince 1994 anti-genderism has emerged as a new participant in the discourse of sex, gender, sexuality, and sex education. One of the biggest targets of anti-genderism is public schools and the educational process, as the anti-genderists claim that gender theory has “leaked” into public schools and that pupils are being sexualized and brainwashed by radical feminist ideology and homosexual propaganda.<sup>1</sup> According to the UN, soon after the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, joint Catholic Church and right-wing political party organizations started working on obstructing sex education worldwide.<sup>2</sup> In Europe it is already evidenced in Italy, France, Germany, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Portugal and Croatia.<sup>3</sup>

The discourse about sex education<sup>4</sup> and sexuality-related topics – especially those of homosexuality, feminism, pedophilia, and sexual violence<sup>5</sup> – has already been actively influenced by Russian propaganda in the former Soviet Union countries for a long period.<sup>6</sup> Russia seeks to maintain its influence in this territory by causing informational chaos with the aim of disuniting societies and leaving them without “moral and information landmarks”.<sup>7</sup> However, literature analysis has shown that almost no attention is given to discussing the sexuality-related propagandistic narratives within the Lithuanian context.

I argue that the advancement of sex education implementation within the context of Lithuania holds the potential not only to enhance the sexual health outcomes of the population but also to contribute to national security objectives. The aim of this paper is to analyze how sex education is being used in anti-genderist propaganda in Lithuania. Accordingly, the research question for this study is: How is sex education utilized by anti-genderism and what meanings are ascribed to sex education?

Although the history and mechanics of anti-genderism are receiving more and more attention,<sup>8</sup> we still know very little about how it functions and spreads,<sup>9</sup> how it conditions resistance to gender equality and human rights. Sex education, which includes teaching about reproductive rights, diversity, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender equality, and gender-based violence topics, is strongly interlinked with human rights<sup>10</sup> and democracy itself,<sup>11</sup> that are significant to Western values and principles.

**THIS STUDY CONTRIBUTES** to the field by linking Russian propaganda with right-wing anti-genderist rhetoric and emphasizing the position of sex education in anti-genderism. The study's interdisciplinary scope encompasses educational, political, and cultural domains, illustrating their interconnectedness. A clearer picture of how sex education themes are exploited by anti-genderism is needed so that we can mitigate its usage and better organize sex education and help to fulfil its goal: to make sure young people's right to knowledge about sexuality and sexual health is granted so they are enabled to take care of it responsibly and enjoy healthy, meaningful relationships and sexual experiences without coercion, discrimination, and violence.<sup>12</sup>

Kováts et al.<sup>13</sup> discusses counter strategies for anti-genderism and points out the need to develop educational programs that provide information about gender studies, to strengthen and unite the actors that support gender equality, and to initiate a dialogue in society. While it is recognized that sex education is frequently invoked in anti-genderist discourse, there remains a notable dearth of focused attention on this aspect. As emphasized by Ayoub and Stoeckl,<sup>14</sup> there is significant scholarly importance in comprehending the intersection and mutual influence of pro-rights and anti-rights discourses. Having more insights on how sex education is being utilized by anti-genderism increases the probability of countering some anti-genderist concerns.

Paternotte<sup>15</sup> and Leimgruber<sup>16</sup> have researched anti-genderist thought development in the Catholic church and its connection to the right wing. Korolczuk and Graff<sup>17</sup> have contributed a very important study about the complexity of anti-genderist illiberal populism in the EU, providing the global context of this movement. Kováts et al.<sup>18</sup> have shown that in anti-genderist rhetoric, the sex education thread is exploited heavily. Focusing on Russia's case, Riabova and Riabov,<sup>19</sup> Moss,<sup>20</sup> and Romanets<sup>21</sup> have analyzed sexuality and gender-based Russian rhetoric. Cushman and Avramov<sup>22</sup> have conducted a thorough and critically important analysis of Russia's sexualized propagandistic mechanism aimed at the EU or EU candidates. Gradskova<sup>23</sup> and Edenborg<sup>24</sup> have contributed an analysis of "traditional values" discourse domestically, within Russia, and internationally.

Two studies were found that have a particular focus on sex education and anti-genderism: a paper by Jarkovska,<sup>25</sup> who

has researched the anti-genderist portrayal of sex education in pro-Russian websites in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and a paper by Venegas,<sup>26</sup> who has focused on anti-genderist political and parental influences on educational practices in Spain. Kuhar and Zobec<sup>27</sup> analyzed anti-genderist attempts to influence educational processes in Europe and its effect on democracy and human rights.

Scholars such as Norocel and Paternotte<sup>28</sup> advocate for a more comprehensive analysis of the Eastern European context to elucidate the nuanced landscape of anti-genderist mobilization. Notably, within the specific context of Lithuania, the scholarly discourse is sparse, with only one known contribution by Buschmann<sup>29</sup>, which examines the phenomenon of anti-genderism in Lithuania. She asserts that in Lithuania, certain factions equate *genderism* with the malevolence of communism, often associating it with "gender equality policies, gender studies, or gender mainstreaming".<sup>30</sup> I propose to expand the list by incorporating sex education as another domain where anti-genderist rhetoric is extensively utilized.

## The situation (of sex education) in Lithuania

In Lithuania, gender-related domains are characterized by insufficient attention and development: same-sex partnerships lack legal recognition, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence) is pending, gender equality measures are poor, and the presence of gender studies remains notably limited. The topics enumerated are deemed significant in anti-genderist analyses,<sup>31</sup> where the inadequacies observed in sex education serve as merely symptomatic of a

broader issue.

In 2016 Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (Ministry of Education) prepared a new "Health education, sex education and education for family life" curriculum (sex education curriculum) that was to be integrated into the Lithuanian education system. However, scarce research data in the field show that teachers do not feel confident and competent to integrate sex education into their pedagogical practice.<sup>32</sup>

There are several reasons for that. One

of them is that higher education programs in Lithuania that prepare teachers do not provide any compulsory and systematic courses on psychosexual development, sex, gender, and sexuality. Also, the Ministry of Education does not certify any consistent training for teachers that would be aimed at raising qualifications in the sex education field.

Another reason why sex education is not successfully integrated is that there is no solid agreement on what kind of sex education there should be in schools in Lithuania.<sup>33</sup> The curriculum prepared in 2016 was described in the media as a "halfway" curriculum,<sup>34</sup> as the Ministry of Education formed a workgroup and was seeking to achieve an agreement between two conflict-

**"IN LITHUANIA, GENDER-RELATED DOMAINS ARE CHARACTERIZED BY INSUFFICIENT ATTENTION AND DEVELOPMENT."**



ing sides: “secular reproductive health and sex education activists” that sought to follow UNESCO guidelines for sex education and “religious civil society organizations as well as the Lithuanian Catholic Church” that maintained a conservative approach to sex education.<sup>35</sup> Because of this setting, the sex education curriculum does not have clearly defined objectives or detailed methodology advising how to implement it. The preparation of the curriculum was covered by the media, hence conflicting parties clashed in the media as well.<sup>36</sup> In this way, society as a whole has also taken sides in this ideological conflict.

**POLARIZATION OVER** the sex education curriculum has deep cultural origins.<sup>37</sup> Since the first attempts to integrate sex education in schools, there has always been an ongoing debate whether sex education should provide young people with accurate knowledge that empowers them to foster sexual and reproductive health, or promote abstinence.<sup>38</sup> In this regard, Lithuania is no exception. In Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union “churches were free to attack school-based sex instruction”.<sup>39</sup> The Vatican has rapidly entered the discourse, condemning comprehensive sex education and propagating the “Catholic view” of sex education.<sup>40</sup> After a while, UNESCO and its projects aimed at improving sexual health by promoting comprehensive sex education entered the discourse. This divide used to be titled as a part of “culture wars”.<sup>41</sup> However, as Kuhar and Zobec argue, anti-genderist resistance to sex education is “shaped by new forms of organization, new types of mobilization and new discourses that seek to address wider audiences and not only traditional circles of conservative groups”.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, there has not yet been consistent sex education in the whole country. Sexuality topics are not critically discussed in different media outlets and the sexual literacy of the general population is low.

### **The origins of anti-genderism and anti-genderist Russian propaganda narratives**

The term “gender ideology” or “gender theory” was created by the Catholic Church in response to the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995.<sup>43</sup> The Vatican has condemned some of the Conference documents that discussed sexual and reproductive health, claiming they were against the institution of family. The phrases such as “genderism”, “gender agenda”, and “gender feminists” were used to oppose women and LGBT rights activism, and discredit science that does not follow a simplistic and naturalistic approach to sex, gender, and sexuality.

Various right-wing parties or organizations actively deny that the field of gender studies is scientific, describe it as ideological

and unreliable, and portray its theorists as having an agenda.<sup>44</sup> Building upon this argument, I posit the notion that it is likely that in anti-genderism sex educators are linked with gender studies and encounter similar challenges to prove their professionalism and gain trust.

Some theorists claim that Russian anti-genderist rhetoric started to form around the year 2000;<sup>45</sup> however it was only noticed and described as propaganda, directed against Western countries, after Russia’s aggressive actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014.<sup>46</sup> Scholars specializing in the post-Soviet

domain raise a pertinent question: “What was it we had not seen?” This inquiry arises particularly in light of Russia’s seemingly abrupt influence on the discourse surrounding traditional values on a global scale.<sup>47</sup> The Russian disinformation campaign is directed at the EU or aspiring EU members, and the usage of sexuality topics is a cheap “cognitive weapon”<sup>48</sup> as it helps to mobilize the masses.<sup>49</sup> Amidst the ongoing geopolitical tensions, particularly with Russia’s conflict in Ukraine and Lithuania’s border proximity to Russia and Belarus, dis-

ussions surrounding national security dominate public and political debates. However, there is a notable absence of attention given to anti-genderist propaganda within this discourse.

Russian oligarchs are funding such conservative organizations as WCF, CitizenGo, far-right parties etc.<sup>50</sup> It is evident that the Vatican, US Christian fundamentalists, and European nationalists are significantly related to Putin’s Russia.<sup>51</sup> Russia is showing leadership in the discourse of “traditional values”, which are not clearly defined; however, they are positioned as opposing Western, liberal values and cultural norms.<sup>52</sup> Russia also had a critically important role in organizing the first World Congress of Families (WCF).<sup>53</sup>

WCF empowers a very important fraction in anti-genderist mobilization – parental organizations that present themselves as concerned parents. They are a “new political identity”,<sup>54</sup> that places an exceptional focus on sex education and demands that its provision be halted, often claiming that it “challenges their moral, ideological or religious convictions”.<sup>55</sup> In Lithuania there are several very active conservative parental organizations that seem to focus on the political discourse rather than the merely private – familial – educational one. This way “parents’ rights” not only threaten children’s rights to education and knowledge about their bodies but also challenge pluralistic worldview principles of democratic society.<sup>56</sup> In the aftermath, such active parental participation intimidates teachers<sup>57</sup> and makes them tense when approaching sexuality topics in everyday classroom activities.

**IN THE BIGGER PICTURE** of the worldview drawn by propagandistic narratives, especially aimed at Eastern European and EU-aspir-

**“IN LITHUANIA THERE ARE SEVERAL VERY ACTIVE CONSERVATIVE PARENTAL ORGANIZATIONS THAT SEEM TO FOCUS ON THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE RATHER THAN THE MERELY PRIVATE.”**



The Big Family Defence March (Didysis šeimos gynimo maršas) 2021.



ing countries, Europe is a perishing power. A parallel with Sodom and Gomorrah is suggested by creating and spreading words such as “eurosodoma” that attempt to explain the radical liberalism in the light of which the EU is soaked with perverted morality, communities are forced to propagate LGBT, sexual deviation is widespread, pedophilia is protected, postmodern feminism is seeking to destroy men or on the contrary to eliminate gender differences, “traditional values” are despised and there is a historical tragedy taking place in the EU as the Christian civilization of Europe is being destroyed.<sup>58</sup>

Russia has ascribed a nationalistic connotation to sex education.<sup>59</sup> As a result, sex education can be national – if it follows the Russian “tradition” – or threaten the nation’s sovereignty if it follows the Western “tradition”. The latter sex education is pictured as a depraved Western tradition which destroys morality. Jarkovska, who studied pro-Russian website discourses in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, found that sex education is an actively exploited theme there as the relationship between sexuality and childhood is, in general, an “explosive in itself”.<sup>60</sup>

### Sex education as a wicked problem

Wicked problems are extremely multilayered and they form when there is a clash of different understandings of what a common good is. Gun control, climate emergency, abortion rights, sex education etc. are examples of wicked problems. Science here does not have a decisive voice because people tend to discuss the matter from different premises of what a common good is.<sup>61</sup> As the wicked problem is often oversimplified, it is important to have in mind that wicked problems can only be resolved over and over again.<sup>62</sup> In other words, it is crucial for policymakers, communication specialists, and professionals in education to learn how to also live with the paradox of the wicked problem instead of merely pushing their own concept of the common good.

In the heated discussions of wicked problems, the position of “the other side” is often misinterpreted and the attack on it becomes irrelevant because nobody even holds that position.<sup>63</sup>

Therefore, contemplated communication and attention to the way messages are formed are of utmost importance.<sup>64</sup> If looking for ways to live with the paradox, it is necessary to engage in a discussion that seeks to understand “the other side” and look for meeting points, as opposed to parting points. For instance, in the analysis of comprehensive sexuality education and abstinence-only narratives Kramer identified that the topics of self-efficacy, future orientation, and independence from peers<sup>65</sup> are the points where conflicting sides meet.

### Method

In the planning phase of the empirical part, on my personal Facebook news feed, I encountered a post by right-wing Lithuanian parliamentarian Mindaugas Puidokas promoting a YouTube video that as per the politician “explains essential threats of the convention” (i.e. Istanbul Convention). The Facebook post reached me as it was sponsored by its author. The promoted video focused on sex education in Lithuanian schools and discussed dystopian scenarios being caused by the alleged distortion of gender. Soon after, another post by the same politician found me where he mentioned the possibility of leaving the EU to protect ourselves from “gender ideology”. The posts and the video went viral. The video was embraced by many conservative organizations, including one of the best-known local conservative parents’ organizations, Lithuanian Parents’ Forum, which actively participates in the sex education discourse and also participated in the creation of a national sex education curriculum in 2016.<sup>66</sup> I find it important to mention that my social media accounts are ascetic, I avoid following other people or organizations. Normally, Facebook generates my feed from advertisements or posts from people that I am friends with. The above-described posts and their appearance in my feed seemed atypical; algorithms involved me in this discussion against my own will. However, as I was researching propaganda and anti-genderism traits and looking for a way to study it in the context of Lithuania, I decided that this could be suitable material for research.



Image from the Youtube video 7 facts 'Why we cannot ratify the Istanbul Convention', posted by the politician Mindaugas Puidokas on his Facebook page.

The data reached me online without my intentional involvement to look for information. This is precisely how propaganda might reach people – it is dissolved “in mass communication media content, actively and intensively spreading simplified deceptive information about events, persons (physical and juridical), actions”.<sup>67</sup> Media companies and social networks also have an important role in spreading misinformation. Echo chambers, filter bubbles, and algorithms of social networks help to spread information due to its popularity, regardless of its factuality.<sup>68</sup> These posts and the video represent the wider anti-genderist discussion in Lithuania as the elected politician engages in anti-genderist discussions routinely with his supporters and the Youtuber’s created content has become the voice of the like-minded. It is important to point out that I am a sex educator with approximately 10 years’ experience in the field. This background enhances my capacity to discern whether the data selected for analysis accurately reflects the ongoing discourse surrounding anti-genderism in the context of sex education.

The analyzed data was collected on February 26 – March 12, 2021, during the second quarantine of Covid-19 in Lithuania, when society was exhausted and on edge. Crisis periods and a general (dis)satisfaction of society are very fruitful ground for propagandistic messages to spread.<sup>69</sup> The research sample was two Facebook posts and one YouTube video. All three data points were originally in Lithuanian language. I have translated them into English, and I transcribed the video for the purpose of the analysis.

The local news agency *Delfi* gave the information on April 8, 2023, that the politician is confirmed by the Ethics committee in Parliament to be spreading Russia’s propaganda narratives; thus the rhetoric he uses is favorable to Russia’s disinformation campaign and political goals to make people question the ideals of EU.

**THE DEDUCTIVE CONTENT** analysis method was employed to conduct data analysis. Following this method, pre-existing theory

and its concepts or categories are studied in a new context.<sup>70</sup> Four coding categories were generated drawing on synthesized anti-genderist narratives found in prior research: Western sex education is a threat; “Traditional values” are under attack; “Concerned parents”; panic regarding sexual risks to children. These coding categories helped to check if the analyzed data from the Lithuanian context matches the previously identified anti-genderist narratives. Having confirmed this, I proceeded with the analysis where the transcripts were read multiple times to familiarize myself with the data. I then applied the predetermined codes and looked for themes that emerged in each category. The following questions were used to guide the analysis and stay in line with the research question: what is being said about sex education? How is it presented? What meanings are ascribed to sex education? How is it contextualized? What is it associated with? Who are the actors associated with sex education? What is their role? The final step of the analysis was to synthesize the results and prepare an integrated report. To retain accuracy, I kept coming back to the transcripts and the video. Multiple viewings of the video facilitated the verification of whether the transcript accurately reflects the content of the video. This practice prompted me to incorporate images into the analysis to illustrate how anti-genderist propagandistic messages are formulated.

While developing codes, I did not detect any notable disparities in the analyzed data within the Lithuanian context. However, a prominent theme emerged regarding the perceived threat posed by sexual education, not only to the concept of the “traditional family” but also to the nation itself, which may stem from the comparison of *genderism* to communism. Additionally, during the analysis of the video, I identified a link to the phenomenon of the Manosphere, a connection that was absent in the existing literature review.

The usage of predetermined codes is perceived as an in-

formed bias because predetermined codes guide the analysis. This carries the risk of not noticing additional significant information.<sup>71</sup> A possible personal bias that I believe is worth mentioning is that the independence of Lithuania from the Soviet Union (or contemporary Russia) is important to me. I consider myself and Lithuania as rightful part of the EU. Though I did not consciously intend to, this nonetheless might have had an impact on how the data was interpreted.

This is a small-scale analysis, which can be described as “lurking”<sup>72</sup> in an online community prone to anti-genderist narratives. The small amount of data analyzed is a limitation of this study. Given the under-researched nature of anti-genderist rhetoric in Lithuania, it is my aspiration that this paper will spark interest and inspire subsequent investigations into this pressing topic.

### **An analysis of usage of sex education in the anti-genderist narratives in Lithuania**

On March 12, 2021, Lithuanian right-wing parliamentarian Mindaugas Puidokas posted on his Facebook account a message<sup>73</sup> where he invites readers to ponder if “unacceptable LGBTQ+ gender ideology values” align with what we see as local and ultimately as being in accordance with the Lithuanian identity. He pictured teaching about sexuality as something that is causing a threat not only to children but also to the survival of the nation itself. He claimed that the EU “plants” these values “by force” and our “gene pool” should be preserved and children should be protected from “the negative information being shoved at schools”. He compared this with being occupied by USSR and invites readers to consider the idea of leaving the EU if fighting the EU “to respect the right of countries to decide freely how to live and how to teach children!” did not succeed. By disseminating anti-genderist and propagandistic narratives, Russia is provoking polarization inside the country and is encouraging certain parts of society to ponder whether “we” belong with the EU and its “perverted morality” or are “we” after all closer to Russia as it is protecting “traditional values”. Lithuania is portrayed as trapped or even occupied by the EU. Education is given a symbolic value and pictured as a battleground where resistance to EU rule could take place. Even though the politician throws a negative light on the USSR, the content of his message is contradictory because it is favorable to Russia’s objectives in foreign affairs. Turning the sexuality theme into a political tool, taking advantage of the conflicting sexuality field and using an identity crisis of post-Soviet countries,<sup>74</sup> Russia is increasing the uncertainty of national identity in Lithuania.

**SEX EDUCATION** is linked to meanings of nationalism and – although it is very vague what information precisely is being “shoved” to children in schools – it causes strong negative emotions: fear, hostility, anger, disorder and disgust. Exploit-

ing emotions is in general an important propaganda tool which helps persuade and make people act in the desired way.<sup>75</sup> As this post caused great engagement, it is probable that a wide circle of society is confused about sex education and what is being taught to children in schools. When society lacks educative discussions and knowledge about sexuality-related topics, propagandist material has a fertile ground to cause “communication noise”, which overshadows accurate, unbiased information, which is backed up with “objective data”.<sup>76</sup> The confusion regarding sex education and the consequent anxiety experienced by parents and other adults has to be taken into account seriously and carefully addressed when organizing sex education.

Sexually illiterate parents, teachers or other society members might genuinely trust the “whistleblower” to be concerned about the education of children; however, the actual aim of the messenger is different. Condemning LGBT and linking it to “gender ideology” helps the politician paint LGBT as something that comes from the outside, that does not exist within the nation itself. As Stambolis-Ruhstorfer<sup>77</sup> has indicated, deviant sexuality is being used as a tool to separate strangers – those that supposedly come from outside – from locals. Following this logic, if an occurrence is external – it is not relevant locally and threatens the national identity. Emphasizing the LGBT theme, sex education is narrowed down to teaching about LGBT. This way, it becomes a synonym of forced teaching about LGBT.

**WHILE LGBT** is considered to be an external threat, LGBT students continue to attend schools and experience a hostile environment through bullying, violence, and physical as well as emotional abuse. According to the position announced on November

25, 2014, by the Lithuanian Psychological Association on their webpage, sexual orientation and negative attitudes towards it are important factors in self-harm rates and even suicide among underage youth, especially boys.

In another post on FB<sup>78</sup> the politician Mindaugas Puidokas has shared a local Youtuber’s video *7 facts ‘Why we cannot ratify the Istanbul Convention,’* arguing that it “explains threats of the convention very well”. The politician

also encouraged his readers to sign a petition against the convention to protect families and “our children from harmful teaching”. The petition was organized by a local conservative parents’ organization, National Families and Parents Association, which participated in the WCF in Milan, in 2019.<sup>79</sup> Anti-genderism is a transnational strategy, however, resistance to “genderism” is depicted as local.<sup>80</sup>

The Istanbul Convention is a deeply polarizing topic in many societies in Eastern Europe. Former Commissioner for Human Rights in the Council of Europe Nils Muižnieks<sup>81</sup> has noted that “Even though a document does not say anything about LGBT rights, many think that it is not about violence against women and domestic violence but LGBT rights”. Cushman and Avra-

**“BY DISSEMINATING ANTI-GENDERIST AND PROPAGANDISTIC NARRATIVES, RUSSIA IS PROVOKING POLARIZATION INSIDE THE COUNTRY.”**

mon<sup>82</sup> have found a substantial propagandistic narrative line, in which Clinton and/or Soros are accused of having conspirational goals to dominate the world by disseminating liberal globalist ideas by making countries ratify Istanbul Convention, which, according to Russian propaganda, promotes LGBT rights. The politician, manipulating the Istanbul Convention theme, activates parents' feeling of entitlement to decide what values they want to teach their children. This way, parents and other concerned parties are encouraged to participate in organizing sex education in schools. As sex education is depicted as perverse, parents are activated to participate in a heroic mission to fight the "big evil", that threatens not only children but also the whole nation and its cornerstones – traditions. In my line of work as sex educator I have witnessed numerous times when sex education was stopped from being implemented because of two to three "active parents" in the classroom who mobilized the rest of the community. Obstruction of implementation of sex education is rather a side effect of anti-genderism than actual interest in the quality of education. The decried sex education is not replaced by a different kind of sex education. In parallel distrust multiplies, local communities become estranged, and the threat of radicalization increases.

The analyzed video begins with the YouTuber asking viewers to imagine they are six years old. He then shows a phone to the camera while scrolling through a book, purportedly intended for six-year-old children, without providing any context about the book's origin or its intended message. The viewers can only see realistically drawn naked man and women depicted in the pose of making love.

**WITHOUT THE CONTEXTUAL** guidance of sex education professionals who can elucidate the principles, aims, content, and methods of sex education tailored to minors of varying age groups, this episode remains a potent catalyst for discussion. It initiates a discourse about the Istanbul Convention by seeking to unsettle adults with depictions of sexualization through exposure to inappropriate content. The illustration prompts contemplation on whether anti-genderism is solely rhetorical or also invokes visceral responses such as disgust, distress, anxiety, fear, and so forth.

After this intro the YouTuber starts naming the threats of Istanbul Convention, primarily presenting it as a threat to the independence of Lithuania. It is argued that the ratification of the convention will possibly make us change our constitution and this is a sign of losing a country's sovereignty. It is explained in the video that external influences will change the national sexual identity by threatening traditional gender roles and the "traditional family" model:

'men will become women', 'the aim is to abolish father and mother stereotypes, [...] and this would literally

dismantle the meaning of the family in the education system.'

The Istanbul Convention does mention education as one of the means that should be used for reducing violence against women. It does not suggest any particular kind of education that should be employed. However, as is common in propaganda mechanisms, even though there is a factual base in the message, the content of the message includes errors.<sup>83</sup>

In this video it is explained that the EU-imposed sex education in Lithuania propagates moral, sexual downfall and that it would force families and students in Lithuania to become a part of the LGBT community:

[...] sex education will be mandatory and it will teach your children to make love, masturbate, how to change sex, why sex at a young age is good and how to use contraception. [...] In kindergartens it will be limited to dressing boys as girls and fairytales about two princes, who love each other. These European experts [...] will have all the means to take away from a family weirdly acting children, who are possibly being taught wrongly in the family. So if your son says he does not want to dress as a girl as he is a boy, it will mean that his parents are homophobes and cannot nurture the child properly.

The future, as the YouTuber presents it, will be so radically liberal that the children (age is not specified) will be encouraged to have sexual practices, and starting at kindergarten children will be taught to change their gender and experiment with homosexuality. Sex education is where "genderism" takes place and sex education is ascribed a role of opening gates to many cultural, societal and moral tragedies. It is important to note that male transgression of traditional gender roles is exploited far more. The video presents sex education as a discipline that seeks to indoctrinate children about certain ways of sexual behavior. It is claimed that the parents' right to raise children in accordance with their values will be overruled by EU institutions. This might lead to taking away children from parents altogether. Meanwhile, the European Court of Human Rights concluded that teaching sex education should go in line with objectivity, pluralism and criticality and that such educational principles do not impede parents' rights.<sup>84</sup>

The YouTuber claims that the Convention presents a woman as if she was "discriminated by society, spent all of her time in the kitchen, was not able to have a career" and a man as a "grizzly bear with no self-control who only knows how to fight, make money, and ridicule poetry" and asks if these images are similar to the images prevailing in Lithuanian "reality". His answer is

**"SEX EDUCATION IS WHERE 'GENDERISM' TAKES PLACE AND SEX EDUCATION IS ASCRIBED A ROLE OF OPENING GATES TO MANY CULTURAL, SOCIETAL AND MORAL TRAGEDIES."**



that women are no slaves as they might be in the East and this statement is illustrated by an image of a woman in hijab. He argues that in Lithuania women are fully active participants in societal matters and rather inconsistently shows pictures of women politicians who support ratification of Istanbul Convention and hold progressive and EU affirming attitudes. The Youtuber continues that:

**if we want an image of a man as an abuser to take root in our society, let's sign the convention [...] I guarantee then that in a few years such scenes will be everyday life.**

This claim is illustrated with a short clip of another woman in hijab frantically screaming in English: “you have no right to be here”. No context for the clip is given. Finally, he makes a concluding point that if we ratify the Convention “men will start to commit suicide or will become women”. Although it is quite difficult to untangle the logic of this argument, several layers should be noted here. First, it includes an Islamophobic propagandistic narrative which claims that the EU does not manage to deal with the destructive invasion of Muslims because of too much tolerance and multiculturalism<sup>85</sup>. As Lithuanian society is rather homogeneous, imagery of Muslims seems incongruous, yet effective to ignite fear of diminishing homogeneity. Traditional gender roles are consistently equated with national identity questions.

**THE YOUTUBER** tries to convince viewers that Istanbul Convention and sex education that follows it would cause a threat to the emancipation of women. Whilst he exploits images of progressive women politicians, he rejects gender equality problems as irrelevant to Lithuania. When talking about men, transphobia is activated and although not explicit, the denial of problematics of violence against women and domestic violence is present. Also, the threat of men starting to commit suicide is not a probability as presented since Lithuania is already leading in suicide rates on a global scale.<sup>86</sup> Like with the rest of the social issues mentioned in the video, the severity of the problem is downplayed. Such high rates of suicides are a very complex phenomenon as there are many different factors contributing to this and the stereotypical perception of masculinity can influence an increased risk of experiencing suicidal thoughts.<sup>87</sup> However, the video unsettlingly roots the problematics of suicides in the project of gender equality. This finding invites the viewer to question and explore how anti-genderism is related to the manosphere, where masculinity is perceived to be marginalized, feminism is condemned, hegemonic masculinity is propagated and in some parts suicide is intensely discussed as an option to stop feeling mistreated by the society.<sup>88</sup>

## Implementation of sex education curriculum in schools

The book *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* by Korolczuk and Graff<sup>89</sup> shows that anti-genderism is a new transnational political configuration which started to form and spread in Eu-

rope around the year 2010. Anti-genderist narratives are deeply ingrained and the immediate question, of how to counter their damage to liberal democracy and the gender equality project, remains.

Although there is no quick remedy for tackling anti-genderist mobilization, it is obvious that we – the supposed “genderists” – have to reconsider the ways we communicate our ideas so it not only reflects the complexity but also the experience of those who oppose “genderist” positions. Agreeing with the work of Kováts et al.,<sup>90</sup> dialogue and education are key in attempting to weaken the spread of anti-genderism. Thus, sex education could be instrumentalized to counter anti-genderism.

It is crucially important to pay attention to whether and how parents and other adults are being educated about sex education. The sense of lack of power fuels radicalization.<sup>91</sup> Parents feel a lot of anxiety regarding sex education and this must be respected in order to establish trust and dialogue. This has a twofold effect: it improves the quality of instruction as school and parents convey similar messages to children; when parents are familiar with materials, their anxiety over certain sexuality-related topics diminishes.<sup>92</sup> As education about sex education becomes increasingly accepted among adults, it might also empower them to feel more in control of the education of their children. It might work as a preventive measure against adopting the identity of “concerned parents”.

When organizing educational events or materials, be it formal or informal, be it for pupils or adults, it is important to pay attention to how the attitudes they hold and experiences they have are being approached. The empathic and open position is advised because the sense of attacking or judging might simply provoke defensive reactions or backfire altogether by making radicalized people retreat to an even deeper radical realm.<sup>93</sup> Being empathic and understanding does not mean justifying the positions. Instead, it is the core of non-violent and emotionally literate communication – not denying the position of the other person but using it as a starting point in the discussion.

In dealing with the wicked problem, certain parties will always remain discontented<sup>94</sup> and this must be addressed empathically, recognizing their point of view instead of writing it off as the wrong point of view. Silencing, denying, shaming and ridiculing does not invite to dialogue; in fact, it often is counter-productive because “to those who already feel unheard, they confirm the disdain they experience, not only from politicians but also from the wider ‘liberal’ elite”.<sup>95</sup>

Radical positions are strengthened by notions of “one truth” and “other” – they lead to dualisms that encourage one to choose one of the two options and sign everything it proposes without much questioning. Education here could have a role of introducing different stories and narratives that could “give many-sided views, and ensure comfort with ambiguity and flexibility in thinking”.<sup>96</sup> As Davies<sup>97</sup> indicated, “the ever present possibility that one might be wrong” is the major contributor to security.

Finally, as teachers and schools experience pressure from various actors within society, teachers need not only epistemic

support but also moral support to successfully implement sex education. Hence a combination of psychological and emotional support channels via interventions, supervisions and support groups should be arranged for professionals working with controversial topics to avoid demotivation or worse – burnout.

## Conclusion

Anti-genderism is an active although under-researched strain in the discourse of sex education. The low sexual literacy and identity crisis in post-Soviet countries create an extremely fruitful ground for the spread and fermentation of anti-genderist narratives and disbalancing societies. Sex education is narrowed down to teaching about LGBT, which is presented as not relevant locally and, thus, forced on children and families. The severity of gender-related social issues such as gender equality, gender-based violence, and male suicide rates is downplayed. Instead, sex education is framed as one of the factors causing the possible decrease of emancipation of women and the increase of (self-) destructive behavior in men. Sex education is presented as a symbol of weakening national sovereignty and portrayed as a frontline discipline, which holds immense power to either distort or protect “traditional values”. Education becomes a battleground where resistance to EU rule could take place. Obstruction of sex education is a side effect of anti-genderism and actual interest in education is lacking. Parents are depicted as powerless against sex education and they are activated to participate in a “heroic mission” to defend children and the whole nation. Meanwhile, children are not given any agency at all.

Sex education as an educational tool has the potency to increase the sexual literacy of society needed to combat manipulative anti-genderist influence. Parents’ confusion and anxiety towards sex education should be respected and addressed in order to prevent radicalization. An empathic approach to differing attitudes and looking for attitudinal meeting points should be encouraged. Teachers need emotional and methodological support as they are likely to experience pressure and tension working in the sex education field. ✖

Akvilė Giniotaitė, PhD student at Vilnius University.

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