

## How It All Started. Discussion of Istanbul Convention in Latvian Daily Newspapers in 2016

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**Abstract.** The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence provoked very similar negative reactions in different countries. In Latvia, too, ratification of the Istanbul Convention is pending (second half of 2023) and is strongly opposed by several political forces, opinion leaders and non-governmental organisations. The opponents of the Convention have been and continue to be actively engaged in public opinion building activities in support of their position. Media attitudes and actions have played and still retain a key role in this process. The aim of this article is to examine the discourse on the Istanbul Convention in the daily newspapers published in Latvia at the beginning of the negotiations.

**Keywords:** gender, anti-gender, media, discourse, gender-based violence

### Introduction

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, or the Istanbul Convention has been the subject of political and public debate since 2016. During these seven years, misinformation and lies have spread around the Istanbul Convention. It should be stressed that the debate on the ratification of the Convention has been marked by disinformation since its inception. The aim of this article is to analyse the media coverage of the Istanbul Convention. The analysis was carried out in the Latvian dailies “*Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze*” (Independent Morning Newspaper), “*Lauku Avīze*” (Rural Newspaper), “*Diena*” (Day) and “*Vesti segodnya*” (News Today, a Russian-language newspaper published in Latvia), with the selected period from February 2016 to June 2016. The framework of the analysis was chosen because the first articles on the Istanbul Convention appeared in the press in February, in particular “Discussion: The Istanbul Convention will not be a panacea. Concerns

MARITA ZITMANE. How It All Started. Discussion of Istanbul Convention in Latvian Daily ..



Figure 1. Eye on the Istanbul Convention discussion

and Myths Live...” ([S. n.] 2016a), while on 18 May the Minister of Welfare, Jānis Reirs, signed the Istanbul Convention on behalf of the government (ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the Saeima had not yet taken place in the second half of 2023).

The widespread public debate and backlash against the Istanbul Convention is not unique to Latvia. Similar processes are taking place in other European countries and especially in Eastern Europe (Köttig, Blum 2017, 4). The “war on gender”, as Polish scholar Magdalena Grabowska points out, is therefore not just a local phenomenon (Grabowska 2015, 64).

Gender studies researcher Elżbieta Korolczuk stresses that the “war on gender” needs to be interpreted as a specific stage in a long-term process, not as a disconnected new phenomenon. She proposes to rethink the notion of “backlash”. The revised notion of “backlash” could be used as an explanatory framework for the backlash against gender equality initiatives, especially in post-Soviet societies (Korolczuk 2015, 44). In the view of “traditional values” (tradition over equality) advocates, gender equality is interpreted as an ideology in which socially constructed gender is lumped together with biological sex, and in which the proponents of gender equality argue for the right to abortion and same-sex marriage – thus preaching an “ideology of death”. The advocates of “traditional values” include the idea of the family, which is made up of homosexual couples, in the concept of “gender” (Juhász 2015, 29).

The negative reaction of “traditional values” advocates to the Istanbul Convention can be largely explained by the fact that the Convention defines gender (the Latvian translation of the Convention uses the term “social gender”) as a socially constructed category. Thus, the supporters of traditional values claim that the Istanbul Convention promotes a “gender ideology”. According to the interpretation of opponents, “gender ideology” is also understood in the hypersexualised culture of liberal capitalism, while sex education, such as health education, promotes paedophilia within the framework of these views. Marxism, feminism, and queer theories are pointed to as the basis of “gender ideology” (Maďarová 2015, 39). The link between feminism, queer theory, and Marxism, or even fascism and Nazism, is a popular technique of “defenders of traditional values”. Marxism, Nazism and now feminism are positioned as a new form of totalitarianism (Maďarová 2015, 40).

The mass media have contributed to spreading the myth of “gender ideology”. The media, at the beginning of the Istanbul Convention debate, provided a surprisingly uneven coverage of gender equality issues, which often favoured populist traditionalism over gender equality and LGBTI rights. For example, the idea that “gender ideology” was anti-family, pro-homosexuality and anti-life, spread much faster in Hungarian public discourse than the information about the nature of gender equality (Juhász 2015, 28). The role of the mass media is crucial for shaping public opinion and awareness, knowledge about the nature of gender, gender equality, as well as regarding specific gender equality initiatives, such as the Istanbul Convention.

## Methodology

Linguist Ruth Wodak uses historical discourse analysis as a method of analysis when studying right-wing populist texts. The historical discourse analysis is based on the five discursive strategies found in ideological messages: naming, asserting, arguing, perspectivization, reinforcing/reducing, defining, and explaining (Reisigl, Wodak 2009, 93–94). Wodak’s analysis of *right-wing* populist texts uses two discursive strategies – naming (how events/objects/people are labelled), and arguing (what properties are attributed to events/objects/people) (Wodak 2015, 50–51).

## Results

The dynamics of the discussion of the topic in the newspapers considered differ. The most materials of different genres have been published in the newspaper “*Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze*” – 21 publications, “*Lauku Avīze*” – 5 publications, while the newspapers “*Diena*” and “*Vesti segodnya*” have published significantly fewer materials, 3 and 2 articles respectively. It is the newspaper “*Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze*” that has maintained the most extensive discussion of the Istanbul Convention. It should be noted that the newspapers published a small number of analytical articles on the topic, dominated by news and opinion pieces: 12 commentaries, 3 analytical articles, 8 news pieces, 6 interviews, 2 discussions. Analysing the material, several discourses can be identified: Conspiracy scenarios; Threats to the traditional world view; The phantom of the Soviets.

### 1. Conspiracy scenarios

One of the strategies Wodak identifies in the rhetoric of the far-right is the construction of threat scenarios – “they” are threatening us. They are different and conspiring against us. Conspiracies are part of the discursive tactics to create fear. The far-right (*right-wing*) upholds traditional conservative values and morals (family values, traditional gender roles) and wants to maintain the *status quo* (Wodak 2015, 50–51). Conspiracies often require dramatized and exaggerated, unrealistic scenarios in which perpetrators set the order of things (Wodak 2015, 67–69).

The discursive strategies of assertion and argumentation are used to construct the discourse of conspiracy scenarios. In the discourse of conspiracy scenarios, the feminism proponents and the advocates of gender equality are pointed out as perpetrators. The discourse creates a conspiracy theory that “evil forces” – feminists, gender studies scholars – have conspired to change people’s gender. This discourse uses the discursive strategy of argumentation to draw false conclusions about the nature of gender or social sex. In these arguments, biological sex is conflated with socially constructed gender, thereby inferring that people will be “free to choose” their gender, or that an external force – the aforementioned

evil forces – may do so (Veidemane 2016c; Veidemane 2016e; [S. n.] 2016a). The discursive strategy of assertion has also been used to construct a discourse of conspiracy. Comparisons that emphasise the evil nature of conspiracies, the hidden intentions of the conspirators are used. The Istanbul Convention is even compared to the intentions of Satan (Veidemane 2016e).

To sum up, the discourse of conspiracy creates fear of a threat to traditional values, to the world order. This threat includes the nature-defying forms of gender, catering to the whims of sexual choice. The discourse of conspiracy points to the evil forces behind such changes. Changes in society's views on gender roles do not arise spontaneously but are brought about by evil intentions.

## 2. A threat to the traditional world view

This discourse is expressed in the positioning of the threat to traditional gender roles as a threat to the national idea, national culture, traditions, and everything “natural”. As Wodak points out, this discourse is expressed in the rhetoric of the far right. The far-right (*right-wing*) defends the heteronormative family, thus emphasising family values (Wodak 2015, 174).

Newspaper publications make claims about the possible consequences of the Istanbul Convention for Latvian society. The binary opposition “natural versus artificial” is used as an argument for such an impact, where the “natural” denotes the traditional gender roles, whereas the “artificial” is used to designate the very concept of “social gender” which is employed in the Istanbul Convention (Veidemane 2016d; Veidemane 2016b). In the Convention, references to the socially constructed nature of gender are interpreted not as the result of naturally occurring discursive agreements in society, but as a conscious and deliberate activity (Veidemane 2016e).

Another strategy used in the discourse of the threat to the traditional world-view is to point out the Istanbul Convention's ostensible goal of eliminating gender (actually referring to the biological sex, not gender) differences. A frightening future scenario is constructed, in which same-sex beings rule the world (Veidemane 2016b; Veidemane 2016c; Latkovskis 2016). Employing the discursive strategy of argumentation, it is falsely concluded that the Istanbul Convention has a competence and influence to bring about such a fundamental change in society – to equalise the biological sex of humans ([S. n.] 2016b). The reader is presented with distorted and misleading information, both by attributing to the Istanbul Convention a legal force that such a legal instrument does not possess, and by referring to topics that the Convention does not touch upon.

## 3. The “Phantom of the Soviets”

This discourse uses various discursive strategies to construct fear by linking the Soviet experience with the Istanbul Convention. By creating fear,

the communicator constructs an image of danger, something that the receiver of the communication should fear (Mađarová 2015, 37). Within this discourse, several strategies can be distinguished that construct fear through various degrees of reference to totalitarianism and the Soviet past, ranging from indirect references and allusions to direct comparisons with totalitarianism and Stalinism. The first level of fear construction emphasises the coercive and imposed nature of the “genderist ideology” with which the Istanbul Convention is equated. The discursive strategy of naming contributes to constructing (in a discursive manner) the convention as an inevitable and imposed, consequently – an unwanted phenomenon. For example, “The Convention envisages the imposition of “social sex” or “gender” on states” (Veidemane 2016c) and “The notorious Istanbul Convention, which will be a brazen imposition of genderist ideology on Latvia” (Veidemane 2016a). Discursive links are made with the Soviet past and communism as an unwanted but imposed ideology.

The discursive strategy of affirmation is used to explicitly link convention and the fears of the Soviet past. Ensuring that Latvian legislation complies with the Convention is compared to totalitarianism (Veidemane 2016b). Using erroneous conclusions about gender (it should be stressed that gender is in its essence a term, not an ideology or social movement), it is equated with Marxist ideology and the implementation of Marxism in practice, or the Soviet system.

## Conclusions

The discourses analysed in the current study confirm the entrenchment of “anti-gender” views in Latvian public. They are also in line with the rhetoric of the far-right (*right-wing*) as defined by Wodak. The discourses constructed in the media use many unfounded, absurd statements, making unfounded and misleading judgements, the main goal of which is to discredit both the Istanbul Convention and the idea of gender equality in general. The aim of the convention, the fight against domestic violence, is not mentioned in the discourses. The publications remain silent about the real aim of the Convention – countering violence against women and domestic violence. In 2023, it can be argued that the Istanbul Convention has highly polarised the society. Various political forces, public actors, have used this issue to increase their popularity, deliberately spreading lies, distorting information and increasing hatred, purposefully politicising it in order to build their political capital. Unfortunately, the disinformation campaign against the Istanbul Convention has negatively coloured the idea of gender equality and the respective initiatives in general. It is likely that, following the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, gender equality initiatives will be similarly utilised for building political capital.

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MARITA ZITMANE. How It All Started. Discussion of Istanbul Convention in Latvian Daily ..

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