

# The Christian Right in Contemporary Lithuania

## Key Actors and Their Agendas

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### Introduction

Religion has returned to the public life of many European countries, and the northern European country Lithuania is no exception. Politics is one of the areas in Western societies where this return has been evident. The electoral success of far-right parties, their use of religious references, and their self-presentation as defenders of Christian values are among the indicators of this return. The return of religion to public life has also been manifesting in civil society activities. In this article, based on observations, a literature analysis, and various social research data analysis, we investigate the Christian-Right phenomenon, including its key actors, agendas, and relations with religious organizations in contemporary Lithuania. We argue that the Christian Right in Lithuania covers both parliamentary and non-parliamentary political parties, sustains close relationships with the dominant Roman Catholic Church, tends to politicize religion, and focuses on preserving *traditional* values in the spheres of intimacy and family life. In the last decade, the Christian Right in Lithuania has been publicly supporting anti-genderism ideas, resisting ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), and fighting against the legislation of same-sex partnerships and the introduction of sexual education in public schools. Our discussion of these themes is divided into five parts. The first two parts introduce Lithuania's political and religious

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1 This publication was produced as part of the project Religion and Gender Equality: Baltic and Nordic Developments. The project has received funding from EEA Grants/Norway Grants 2014–2021. The project contract number with the Research Council of Lithuania is S-BMT-21-4 (LT08-2LMT-K-01-036).

landscapes, followed by a discussion of the religious influence in politics and the Roman Catholic Church's politicization process and its consequences.

## Lithuania's political landscape

According to the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, Lithuania is a democratic parliamentary republic with elements of a semi-presidential regime. State powers are divided into three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial powers. Legislative and executive powers are combined and executed under the leadership of the Lithuanian Parliament. An independent judiciary system executes judicial power. Lithuania is considered a semi-presidential republic because the President of Lithuania is elected by universal suffrage and provided with flexible powers over the state's foreign and domestic policies.

Lithuania's political landscape is characterized by a multi-party system. Today, Lithuanian politics is dominated by a center-right government. This is formed by a coalition of the liberal conservative party *Tėvynės sąjunga—Lietuvos krikščionys demokratai* (the Homeland Union—Lithuanian Christian Democrats; with 35.5% of the seats in Parliament), the liberal parties *Liberālų sąjūdis* (the Liberal Movement; with 9.2% of the seats) and *Laisvės partija* (the Freedom Party; with 7.8% of the seats), and right-wing President Gitanas Nausėda (*The Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania n.d.*). However, since the parliamentary elections of 2020, Lithuanian politics has been defined by a tension between these two poles of power. This tension has arisen due to multiple factors, including the Istanbul Convention and same-sex civil partnership legislation. While the government supported the adoption of both legal acts, President Gitanas Nausėda took a more socially conservative stance and expressed sympathy for the opposing positions taken by the Catholic Church (Platūkytė 2021). Political polarization at the highest levels of state leadership in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to the polarization of society and reinforced the influence of the Christian Right.

## Lithuania's religious landscape

Constitutionally, Lithuania is a secular state. However, the Roman Catholic Church holds an important role in Lithuania's public life. This can be attributed

to the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has significantly contributed to the development of Lithuanian national identity. In 1864, when imperial Russia's authorities banned all publications in the Lithuanian language in the Latin alphabet, the Roman Catholic Church helped organize underground schools to preserve the Lithuanian language. During the Soviet occupation, the Roman Catholic Church emerged as a powerful actor in the anti-Soviet dissident movement and became a protector of civil society. Over the centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has transformed in the public eye from a military threat to pre-Christian societies to a guardian of Lithuanian culture and national traditions. Due to these historical circumstances, the Catholic Church has always spoken out against what it perceives to be a threat to Lithuanian national identity. Since 2000, there have been a number of legislative initiatives that have been perceived as threatening and that therefore advanced the politicization of the Roman Catholic Church (Ališauskienė and Kuznecovienė 2012).

The important role of the Roman Catholic Church was also verified by signing three agreements between the Holy See and the Republic of Lithuania in 2000. These agreements acknowledge the cooperation between the Roman Catholic Church and the state of Lithuania and focus on areas such as education, culture, and pastoral care of Catholics serving in the army. It is important to mention that the Roman Catholic Church becomes politically proactive when outside values are perceived as threatening its religious teachings and values, potentially producing a religious cleavage. In these cases, the Roman Catholic Church becomes active in the Lithuanian news media and seeks to present its views and opinions on a wide range of social and political issues (Ališauskienė and Kuznecovienė 2012; Pocė 2020).

However, the Roman Catholic Church is not the only religious organization in Lithuania. According to the 2011 Population and Housing Census, the population at the time was affiliated to 59 religious organizations (Ambrozaitienė et al. 2013, 152). Nine religious organizations are recognized as *traditional* by the state and thus “part of Lithuania’s historical, spiritual and social heritage: Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, Judaist, Sunni Muslim and Karaites” (The Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania 1995). Traditional religious organizations are favored by the state and receive governmental subsidies. Non-traditional religions are referred to as *other* religious communities in the law and may be granted the status of state recognition after 25 years of registration. The three-tier system of regulation of religious organizations in Lithuania has cre-

ated inequality for and social ostracism toward non-traditional groups within society (Ališauskienė 2023).

Despite the existing religious diversity, the religious landscape has always been stable, with Roman Catholicism being the dominant religious organization in Lithuania (Schröder 2012). According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census, 74% of Lithuanian society identified themselves as Roman Catholics, while 4% of the population identified as Russian Orthodox, and approximately 2% of the population identified with other religious communities. Approximately 6% of the Lithuanian population did not identify with any religion, and 14% did not answer the question at all (Lietuvos statistikos departamentas 2021). However, it is important to note that the Roman Catholic community in Lithuania is not homogenous. While the majority of Lithuanians define themselves as Roman Catholics, only about one quarter are practicing Catholics. Others can be described as *cultural Catholics*, to whom being Catholic is a matter of ancestry or culture rather than everyday religion (Žiliukaitė et al. 2016; Kuznecovienė et. al. 2016).

## Influence of religion on politics

The Roman Catholic Church is a powerful actor in Lithuanian politics, as it regularly interacts with politicians, political parties, and state institutions in three major areas: education policy, biopolitics, and other moral issues.

The political influence of the Roman Catholic Church can be described as both direct and indirect. Its direct influence encompasses the Roman Catholic Church publicly entering the political sphere. The majority of its direct political engagements are executed by the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference, the official meeting of the bishops and the main organizational body of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania. This regularly issues official statements on various political issues that are perceived as being against the Catholic Church's teachings and values.

The Roman Catholic Church's indirect influence refers to its influence through individual politicians, political parties, and religious non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As a majority of politicians affiliate themselves with Roman Catholicism, the Church's indirect influence is inevitable when individual politicians vote according to their religious beliefs. However, political parties such as Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija—Krikščioniškų šeimų sąjunga (Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance),

which gathered 4.8% of the votes in the parliamentary elections in 2020, Krikščionių sąjunga (the Christian Union), which gathered 0.75% of the votes, and Nacionalinis susivienijimas (the National Alliance), which gathered 2.14% of the votes, are known to incorporate the Catholic Church's social teachings directly in their political programs (The Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania n.d.). Often, they also represent the positions and views of the Roman Catholic Church in public debates. Example of such representation would be the anti-abortion efforts by Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance, the political party claiming to represent the Polish minority in Lithuania, which, on several occasions, has served in governing coalitions. In 2017, it initiated the Law on Protection of Prenatal Life to ban abortion, but this was opposed by the Ministry of Health (Lrytas 2017). The aforementioned political parties are also known to support anti-LGBTIQA+ efforts and present themselves as defenders of national traditions and Christian values. The involvement of individual priests and the use of religious services to mobilize the voters are among the strategies of these political parties (Delfi 2020; Bendžius 2020). Representatives of these right-wing political parties also maintain relations with the Lithuanian Roman Catholic Church through informal communications and interpersonal relations (Jackevičius 2016). However, none of these parties with the exception of Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance have received sufficient electoral support, and their influence in politics has been limited. Nevertheless, these political parties represent the political wing of the new wave of the Christian Right and have become more prominent in recent years.

A significant role in strengthening the Roman Catholic Church's position in the political arena of Lithuania is played by religious NGOs, such as Laisvos visuomenės institutas (Free Society Institute), Krikščioniškosios kultūros institutas (Christian Culture Institute), the youth movement Pro Patria, Nacionalinė šeimų ir tėvų asociacija (the National Family and Parent Association), Vakarų Lietuvos tėvų forumas (Western Lithuanian Parents' Forum), and Krizinio nėštumo centras (Crisis Pregnancy Center). Such NGOs have been visible in the Lithuanian public sphere since the year 2000, as public discourse analysis research has shown (Ališauskienė and Kuznecovienė 2012). These organizations help the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania to increase its influence and public support. They also actively lobby to preserve some religious values in Lithuania's legal system and oppose any legislation that is perceived as threatening to so-called traditional values. For example, the Free Society Institute often participates in public discussions on educational and

biopolitical issues. It expressed support for Poland's near total ban of abortion in 2020 and claimed that "there is no (human) right to abortion in international law, European law or national law" (Černiauskas, Krancevičiūtė, and Lenkauskaitė 2020). Meanwhile, the Christian Culture Institute has actively worked against the organizers of Baltic Pride 2018. Journalistic investigation showed that both of these NGOs are known to maintain relations with the Polish anti-LGBTIQ+, anti-abortion, and anti-divorce organization *Ordo Iuris* (Černiauskas and Krancevičiūtė 2021). The youth movement *Pro Patria* is also active in public discussions on various issues and is closely affiliated with the Christian Cultural Institute.

The Roman Catholic Church, political parties, and religious NGOs often share close relations that influence the policy-making process in Lithuania. These relations are conducted through various interpersonal and organizational links and informal communications. They manifest through the adoption of identical positions on various social issues, which contributes to creating the illusion that these organizations represent the majority opinion. In March 2022, members of the Parliament introduced a legal amendment according to which women seeking abortion would be provided with information about *crisis pregnancy* and have the opportunity for a consultation (The Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania 2022). The only organizations in Lithuania providing such assistance are the Crisis Pregnancy Center in Vilnius and the Crisis Pregnancy Program in the Family Center of the Archdiocese of Kaunas. Crisis pregnancy centers are a worldwide phenomenon that are often associated with Christian churches and are characterized by anti-abortion philosophy (Provost and Archer 2020). Similar conclusions about the intense relations between actors in the above-mentioned organizations, as well as with diverse political parties, have been reached by a research study carried out by an NGO supporting LGBTIQ+ rights (JARMO 2021).

## Politicization of the Catholic Church

In 1996, the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania declared its intention to abstain from any direct participation in the political process (Subačius 2015). However, the Catholic Church's engagement in the public sphere often follows a pattern of religious politicization. Robertson described religious politicization as the increasing concern of religious organizations with governmental issues (1989, 11). One example of the politicization of the Roman Catholic

Church in Lithuania relates to the introduction of the State Family Policy Concept, which was adopted by the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania in 2008. This concept introduced a narrow definition of the family, with a marital relationship between a man and a woman as the main criterion. The Concept received wide support from the Catholic Church and its satellite NGOs for reflecting Catholic values and “providing the state with guidelines for its further development” (LVK 2008). In 2011, the Constitutional Court ruled that the definition of family as being based on a marital relationship is too narrow and discriminatory, as it discriminates against other forms of families and therefore cannot be used as a guideline in the state’s political process. Thus, the State Family Policy Concept was declared unconstitutional (15min 2011).

Another example of the politicization process of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania has been the resistance of some priests to vaccination against COVID-19. The main arguments used by some priests against vaccination are based on conspiracy theories, religious presumptions, or personal beliefs about the vaccine’s alleged harm. Most of these cases were seen in regions where religious observance is higher compared to urban areas. Vilnius Archbishop Gintaras Grušas, President of the Lithuanian Bishops’ Conference, called these tendencies “dangerous” and said that “Catholic priests who urge not to get vaccinated for reasons other than medical do not reflect the Roman Catholic Church’s principled provisions” (Kupetytė 2021). However, individual priests continued to discourage their parishioners from getting vaccinated, and some even claimed that the vaccines were the “mark of the beast” from the New Testament’s Book of Revelation (Delfi 2021).

Public debates about same-sex civil partnership legislation illustrate another example of the Roman Catholic Church’s politicization process in Lithuania. Same-sex civil partnership in Lithuania is not legalized yet, and thus the country is one of the last among EU members where same-sex civil partnerships are not recognized. In December 2020, the Lithuanian Bishops’ Conference called on the government not to equate same-sex partnership with a family, as “equating various other forms of cohabitation with the family by ignoring the natural complementarity of the sexes inevitably negates the nature of the family and erases it as the constitutional basis of society and the state” (BNS 2020). In March 2021, the Roman Catholic Church again expressed its opposition to the legislation in a joint statement with other Christian religious communities, claiming that it would “change the natural concept of the family” (BNS 2021a). The attempt in May 2021 to introduce a same-sex civil partnership bill in the Lithuanian Parliament failed due to insufficient support from Par-

liament members and, arguably, due to the Roman Catholic Church's indirect influence.

The participation of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuanian politics is controversial, with some seeing it as a potential violation of the principle of separation of religion and state. The Church has interfered in Lithuanian politics on numerous occasions in the past, the most prominent being the sexual education policy formulation process of 2015–2016. In 2016, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports of the Republic of Lithuania adopted a family and abstinence-oriented sexual education program that clearly favors Catholic religious values.

The Roman Catholic Church remains an important and powerful institution that executes its political engagements decisively, and its efforts are often successful in Lithuania. Due to its position as the moral authority of the nation, and thanks to the high level of religious affiliation within society, the Church's discourse frequently becomes part of the background for the formation of policy.

It is important to underline that various non-Church actors contribute to manifesting and enhancing the relationship between religion and state. Religious news media channels, such as *Bernardinai.lt*, *Alkas.lt*, and *Propatria.lt*, publish daily news and commentaries on current affairs from the Catholic Church's perspective to a wide range of readers. In addition, the previously mentioned religious political parties and religious individual politicians contribute to maintaining a close relationship between religion and state. Moreover, in 2021, activists established *Krikščionių darbuotojų profesinė sąjunga* (Lithuanian Union of Christian Workers) (BNS 2021b). This was established due to alleged Christianophobia within Lithuanian society. The founders argued that Christians are forced to act against their faith and values and that Christian workers were facing mobbing and psychological pressure. Among its founders were members of the Free Society Institute and members of the Catholic clergy. Together, these actors are contributing to the advancement of the Catholic Church's role within politics and helping maintain the relationship between religion and state.

## Effects of the convergence

Despite the evident convergence of religion and politics in Lithuania, political parties that align themselves with the Roman Catholic Church and follow

its teachings have not succeeded in gaining sufficient electoral support in any elections. The only exceptions are the parliamentary mandates that have been obtained in single-seat constituencies in the Vilnius District. This can be attributed to the fact that this has a predominantly ethnic Polish electorate with a tendency to vote for Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance. Past elections have shown that only moderate political parties are able to facilitate sufficient support and gain enough mandates to influence politics in Lithuania in a decisive way. Religious political parties often adopt far-right, nationalistic, Eurosceptic, and anti-globalist views and support closer relations with Russia. These positions are not popular with the majority of the voters, and they usually fail to mobilize votes. This demonstrates that Lithuanian voters are not in favor of a religious far-right government.

Nevertheless, the convergence of religion and politics in Lithuania is manifesting in two major ways. First, the Roman Catholic Church is allowed to play a legitimate role in the policy-making process. In the early 1990s, the Church gained and maintained substantial access to the policy-making process, mainly due to its prestigious status as the moral authority of the nation and its ability to work behind the scenes. In addition, religious NGOs often represent the same positions as the Church. As a result, the Church, by direct and indirect means, is playing a significant role in the policy-making process in Lithuania.

Second, the participation of the Roman Catholic Church in the policy-making process contributes to tendencies toward the religious radicalization of society and the rise of the Christian Right. This became noticeable during the COVID-19 pandemic and the presidency of right-wing President Gitanas Nausėda. People's frustration with COVID-19 restrictions and vaccination efforts caused nationalistic rhetoric to erupt over almost everything, and nationalism in Lithuania is fused with Roman Catholicism (Vardys 1997). Religious arguments are also occasionally used to reject vaccination against COVID-19. Examples of such arguments include claims that the science behind the development of vaccines is inherently immoral. Supporters of such rhetoric feel emboldened due to the presidency of President Gitanas Nausėda, who is known to maintain a close relationship with the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy. As a result, the Church has become more prominent in public life, and Lithuania has experienced an increased religious radicalization of society.

## Generalizations

This chapter has aimed to define the Christian Right, its main actors, and its agenda in contemporary Lithuania. The Christian Right in Lithuania covers both parliamentary and non-parliamentary political parties, sustains close relationships with the dominant Roman Catholic Church and religious NGOs, tends to politicize religion, and focuses on preserving traditional values in the spheres of intimacy and family life. In the last decade, the Christian Right in Lithuania has been publicly supporting anti-genderism ideas, resisting ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, and fighting against the legislation of same-sex partnership and the introduction of sexual education in public schools. The Christian Right in Lithuania generally refers to the Roman Catholic Church's participation in state politics and the incorporation of its teachings into official policies. This is achieved through the execution of the Roman Catholic Church's direct and indirect influence on Lithuanian politics. Direct influence refers to the Roman Catholic Church elites' direct participation in the political sphere, while indirect influence refers to the religious influence executed by religious politicians, religious political parties, and religious NGOs. The Roman Catholic Church's direct and indirect influence on state politics was especially intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, largely due to pandemic restrictions and vaccination efforts, contributing to the rise of the Christian Right.

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