



# Disinformation Narratives in Public Communication of Lithuanian Political Leaders during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, a large part of Lithuanian society was deprived of a direct contact and traditional means of communication and information sharing. The uninhibited publication and dissemination of any information provided by digital space had become a tool for some politicians not only to protect their constituents but also to seek transient popularity or other goals in manipulative ways. In a post-truth culture, such an approach based on ‘personal opinion’ or emotion has virtually become a substitute for scientifically proven facts and objective truth. The research on the phenomenon of disinformation draws upon analysis of individual narratives and the deconstruction of their structure and content. It involves the identification of the main false narratives developed by Lithuanian political leaders from January of 2020 onwards and the singling out those narratives that determined the politicians’ subsequent success or even the rise to popularity of some older or new social movements and political parties.

**Keywords:** disinformation, narratives, public communication, political leaders, pandemic, Covid-19.

## Dezinformacijos naratyvai viešojoje Lietuvos politikos lyderių komunikacijoje per COVID-19 pandemiją

**Santrauka.** Per COVID-19 pandemiją didelė dalis visuomenės neteko galimybės tiesiogiai bendrauti ir naudotis įprastomis komunikacijos ir dalinimosi informacija priemonėmis. Skaitmeninės erdvės galimybės nevaržomai skelbti ir skleisti bet kokią informaciją kai kuriems politikams tapo įrankiu ne tik apsaugoti rinkėjus, bet ir manipuliatyviais būdais siekti laikino populiarumo ar kitų tikslų. Posttiesos kultūroje toks „asmeninė nuomone“ ar emocijomis pagrįstas požiūris praktiškai tapo moksliskai įrodytų faktų ir objektyvios tiesos pakaitalu. Dezinformacijos reiškinių tyrimai remiasi konkrečių naratyvų analize ir jų struktūros bei turinio dekonstravimu. Tyrimo metu identifikuojami pagrindiniai melagingi naratyvai, nuo 2020 m. sausio buvę plėtoti Lietuvos politikos lyderių, ir įvardijami lėmusieji vėlesnę politikų sėkmę ar net kai kurių senesnių ar naujų visuomeninių judėjimų ir politinių partijų populiarumą.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** dezinformacija, naratyvai, viešoji komunikacija, politikos lyderiai, pandemija, COVID-19.

## Introduction

Democracy is about winning public support. Some politicians compete for public approval no matter collateral damage. The Covid-19 pandemic provided them with a perfect opportunity to raise public awareness and gather a considerable amount of public attention. Fear and uncertainty helped politicians

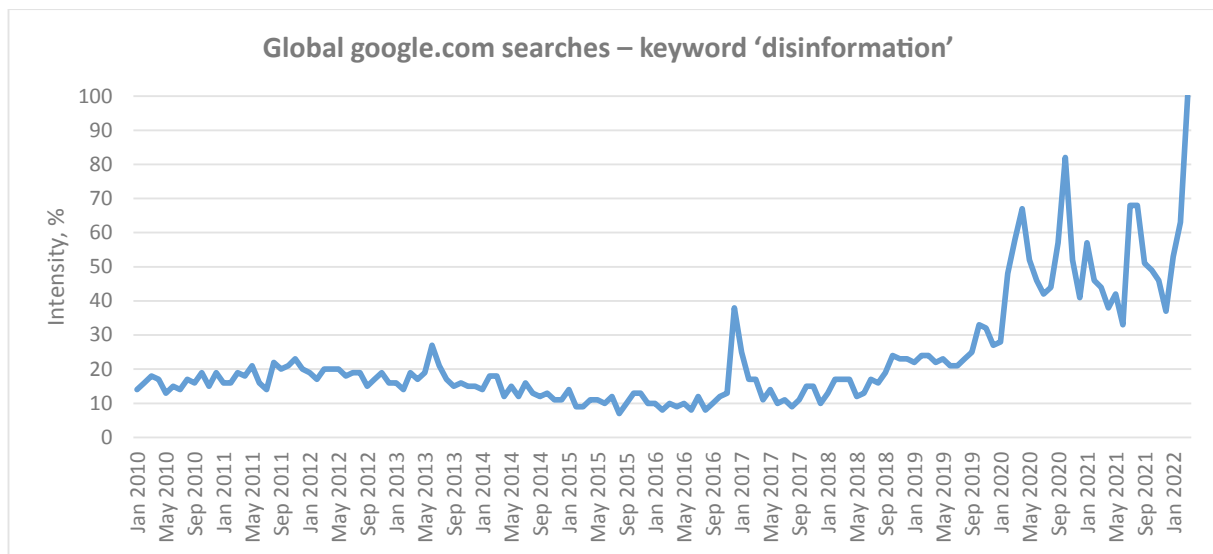
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to employ disinformation techniques to divide social unity and to become new leaders of rather small, but still substantial factions.

This article aims to test a hypothesis that the deliberate spreading of Covid-19 disinformation narratives helped such politicians in Lithuania (predominantly acting or former members of the Lithuanian and European Parliaments) to raise individual public awareness and get approval for their public agenda.

While the pandemic has helped everybody to notice the negative impact of widespread disinformation (see also Figure 1), it remains unclear if the mass audience has sufficient understanding and practical competencies to tackle the challenges of disinformation on a daily basis. Moreover, the invasion of the Russian Federation into the territory of Ukraine has raised the stakes, and it has become an essential asset for modern citizens to upgrade their critical thinking skills.



**Figure 1.** Google Trends data on the global search for the keyword ‘disinformation.’

Meanwhile the paradigm of ‘disinformation’ is not new in the academic discussion. Numerous publications elaborate on the subject. It has even attracted a systematic research such as presented by a team from International Hellenic University, which suggests a unified disinformation taxonomy combining the insights from ten different false information taxonomies.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, the academic consensus on the characteristics of disinformation is rather uniform. It was thoroughly explained by Don Fallis in 2015. He defines three major areas: (a) type of information; (b) misleading information; and (c) non-accidentally misleading information.<sup>2</sup> The same characteristics are included into a concise definition presented by the Merriam-Webster dictionary<sup>3</sup>: disinformation is ‘false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumours) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.’

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only raised public awareness of disinformation but has become an area of widespread politically motivated disinformation content. Although the academic discussion on major Covid-19 disinformation narratives is ongoing, several publications are especially worth mentioning here.

<sup>1</sup> See more Kapantai, E.; Christopoulou, A.; Berberidis, Ch.; Peristeras, V. A Systematic Literature Review on Disinformation: Toward a Unified Taxonomical Framework. *New Media & Society*, 2020, Vol. 23, No. 5, p. 1301-1326, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820959296>.

<sup>2</sup> Fallis, D. What Is Disinformation? *Library Trends*, 2015, Vol. 63, No. 3, p. 401-426, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0014>.

<sup>3</sup> More details at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disinformation>.

Firstly, a joint team effort led by Brian Hughes that suggested a codebook of online anti-vaccination rhetoric.<sup>4</sup> Their research presents twenty-two narrative tropes, among which four key common narrative tropes were ‘Vaccine Injury,’ ‘Corrupt Elite,’ ‘Heroes and Freedom Fighters,’ and ‘Sinister Motives.’ All narratives were organized by primary antagonists: Government/Establishment and Elites (8 narratives), Society at Large (4 narratives), Shadowy Villain (2 narratives), the Vaccine Itself (5 narratives), and without clear antagonist (3 narratives).

Secondly, a special mention should be given to the team from the University of Southern California, which tried to categorize misinformation campaigns on Twitter. Although their research is available only on-line and arXiv articles are not peer-reviewed, nevertheless, the summary of characteristics provided by this team is a good starting point for further analysis. The authors define seven misinformation topic clusters: scientific facts, side effects, effectiveness, deaths, vaccine refusal, rollout, and dehumanization.<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly, various public fact-checking organizations have amassed a massive number of fakes being spread in public. These studies are not scientifically reviewed, however, their insights might be used in a qualitative research, setting aside the quantitative aspects due to validity issues. Therefore such reports as those presented by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism should also be considered.<sup>6</sup> From their point of view, the types of misinformation claims could be categorized into nine groups: public authority action; community spread; general medical; prominent actors; conspiracy theories; how virus transmits; virus origins; public preparedness; and vaccine development.

In the context of populist political communication, all these Covid-19 disinformation narratives could be called a low-hanging fruit. Politicians do react and take the opportunity to employ them, resulting in an increase of public support, as Carl C. Berning, Marcel Lubbers and Elmar Schlueter from the Netherlands have showed in their longitudinal study on populist communication.<sup>7</sup> The attention of politicians to and the exploitation of wedge issues are well explained by James Stanyer, Susana Salgado and Jesper Stromback, who have stated that a key feature of populist political communication is the antagonistic relationship between ‘we, the people’ and the elites and out-groups, which are seen as threats against ‘us, the people’ or as those responsible for the problems that affect ‘us, the people’.<sup>8</sup> This insight fits perfectly into the narratives mentioned earlier, where the ‘government,’ the ‘establishment’ and the ‘elites’ are the major targets of disinformation actors.

A similar trend had been proven by Peter Lurie, Jordan Adams, Mark Lynas, Karen Stockert, Robyn Correll Carlyle, Amy Pisani and Sarah Davidson Evanega, who presented a retrospective cohort study of a large database of online articles in English-language news media from July 2020 to June 2021. 41,718 articles (3.2% of all articles on COVID-19 vaccine) contained at least one of the vaccine misinformation themes.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, B.; Miller-Idriss, C.; Piltch-Loeb, R.; Goldberg, B.; White, K.; Criezis, M.; Savoia, E. Development of a Codebook of Online Anti-Vaccination Rhetoric to Manage COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2021, Vol. 18, No. 14, 7556 p. 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18147556>.

<sup>5</sup> See more Sharma, K.; Zhang, Y.; Liu Y. COVID-19 Vaccines: Characterizing Misinformation Campaigns and Vaccine Hesitancy on Twitter. *ArXiv Prepr*, June 15, 2021, p. 1-14. Retrieved from <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2106.08423v1.pdf> [accessed 15/11/2022].

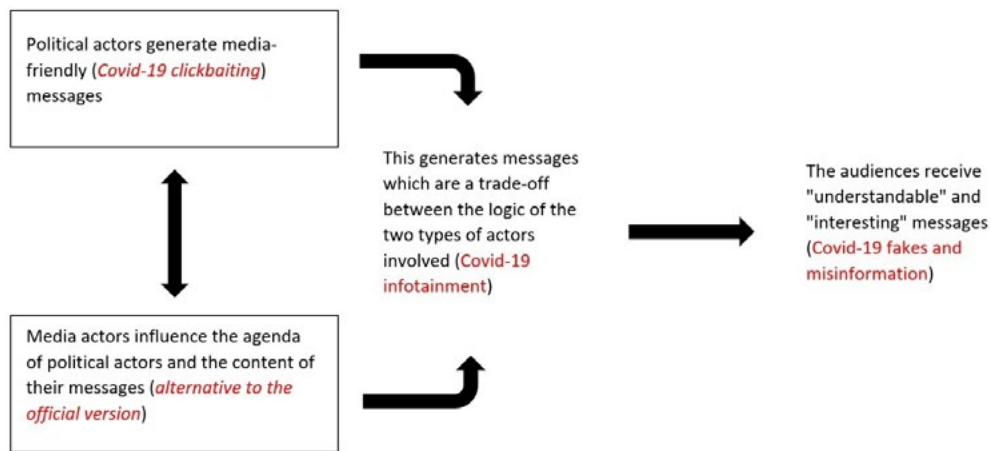
<sup>6</sup> See Brennen, S.J.; Simon, F.; Howard, P.N.; Nielsen, R.K. Types, Sources, and Claims of COVID-19 Misinformation. *A Report Published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, University of Oxford, 7 April 2020, p. 1-13. Retrieved from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-04/Brennen%20-%20COVID%2019%20Misinformation%20FINAL%20%283%29.pdf> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>7</sup> Berning, C.C.; Lubbers, M.; Schlueter, E. Media Attention and Radical Right-Wing Populist Party Sympathy: Longitudinal Evidence from the Netherlands. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 2019, Vol. 31, No. 1, p. 93-120, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edy001>.

<sup>8</sup> Stanyer, J.; Salgado, S.; Strömbäck, J. Populist Actors as Communicators or Political Actors as Populist Communicators: Cross-National Findings and Perspectives. In: *Populist Political Communication in Europe* / Eds. T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Stromback, C.H. de Vreese. New York: Routledge, 2017. p. 361, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315623016>.

<sup>9</sup> See Lurie, P.; Adams, J.; Lynas, M.; Stockert, K.; Carlyle, R.C.; Pisani, A.; Evanega, S.D. COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation in English-Language News Media: Retrospective Cohort Study. *BMJ Open*, 2022; Vol. 12, No. 6: e058956, p. 1-9 <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-058956>.

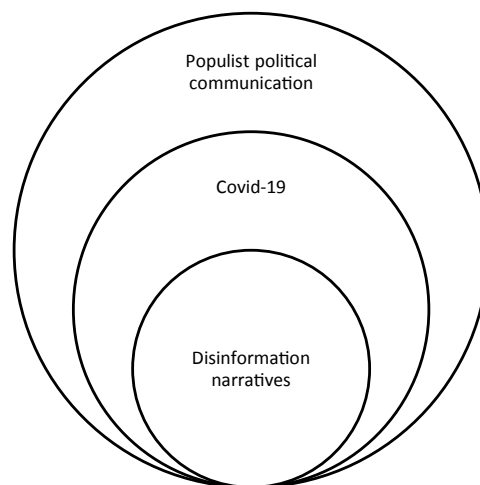
A huge opportunity that presented itself for populist communication during the Covid-19 pandemic was even more important due to the lack of timely and well-prepared governmental response. The vacuum in the public sphere has provided populist politicians with a perfect chance to react as described in the model of the mediatization of politics by Luca Manucci<sup>10</sup> (see also Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** 'Mediatization of politics' model as presented by Luca Manucci and updated by the author of this article.

The theoretical background of our research builds upon the theoretical taxonomy of populist disinformation as provided by Michael Hameleers. According to his Concept-indicator-model, disinformation in populist discourse can be categorized as (a) scapegoating the media; (b) prioritizing common sense and the people's truth; and (c) populist disinformation.<sup>11</sup> It is evident, that such approach requires elaborating on the paradigm of Covid-19 disinformation narratives in populist political communication.

Populist communication uses various topics, Covid-19 being only one of many. Moreover, not all populism in Covid-19 content is disinformation; therefore, we will employ a specific model (see Figure 3) of populist political communication using Covid-19 disinformation narratives.



**Figure 3.** The model of populist political communication using Covid-19 disinformation narratives designed by the author of this article.

<sup>10</sup> Manucci, L. Populism and the Media. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* / Eds. C.R. Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, P. Ostiguy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 470, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.17>.

<sup>11</sup> See more Hameleers, M. Populist Disinformation: Exploring Intersections between Online Populism and Disinformation in the US and the Netherlands. *Politics and Governance*, 2020, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 146-157, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i1.2478>.

The model does not take into account the fact that there is political communication on Covid-19, which is not populist. At the same time, there are Covid-19 disinformation narratives, which are disseminated by politicians but are not considered populist. That is where we conclude that populist political communication is object- and not actor-related. Moreover, that is the reason why populist content should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. The 'labelling' of some politicians as 'populist' is very risky because such a characteristic might be dynamic and ever-changing.

## 1. The Theoretical Background and Research Methodology

Public political communication is a complex phenomenon. It cannot be studied without a substantial narrowing of data and making presumptions about the interconnections between the objects in question.

The research focuses on two questions:

- (1) Did political actors use/were associated with Covid-19 misinformation narratives distribution during the pandemic?
- (2) Did such activity make a substantial impact on their public image?

We do not analyse other related questions, such as political communication topics, and do not scrutinize the potential impact of those activities. We make a presumption that during the pandemic, the misinformation narratives themselves constituted a major and decisive part of public political communication. Therefore, the changes that occurred on the level of public support can be related to these major parts of political actors' communication.

We also do not examine the political situation and successes or failures of the leading coalition parties, although this basic political activity could play an important part in the change of public support for certain politicians.

At the same time, we do not explore the structural composition of political communication processes, i.e., politicians, media, and audiences. It is possible that specific public communication is not a result of politicians' activity, but is rather an output, resulting from regular media activities and/or because of a public push to provide 'easy' and 'convenient' answers to complex questions.<sup>12</sup> Such possibilities are described in the above-mentioned 'mediatization of politics' model by Luca Manuci. We take this as our research limitation, which could be a focus of further research.

Moreover, in this research we do not analyse the specific motives of the shortlisted politicians. Their subjective decisions would require an in-depth and critical evaluation, since very few populist politicians would be open and sincere about their political communication strategy and tactics. Again, that could be a task for further research and analysis.

The research does not examine samples in regard to the politicians who were for vaccination or those who took a neutral stance, because such data should be evaluated in respect to complex political agenda issues. It would not be achievable without in-depth data analysis, which is neither available nor is covered in this research. Nevertheless, it might be accomplished in further research.

The main target of this research is to examine a rather specific and at the same time a very special and limited issue of political populism using Covid-19 misinformation narratives. The opportunity to criticise ill-preparedness for pandemic management, disseminate fake stories and become leaders of new political movements was unique and rather rare for populist politicians.

The main hypothesis of this research is the idea that there is a direct link between the motivation of the populist political actors and the use of Covid-19 disinformation narratives during the pandemic. We

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Jonutis, K. Populism and Conspiracy Theories: The Case of the Lithuanian Family Movement. *Aktualu rytoj / Relevant Tomorrow*, 2021, Vol. 1, No. 20, p. 93-107, <https://doi.org/10.51740/RT.1.20.5>.

collected empirical data about individual communication of political leaders and compared it to public approval ratings, presented by trusted social research companies. If the public approval ratings showed a boost after active dissemination of the Covid-19 disinformation narrative, our hypothesis would be proven. It would lead to the conclusion that populist political communication has been at least partially driven by public approval and not scientific and factual information.

The research does not cover the analysis of specific content of political communication. It builds upon misinformation taxonomy presented by other scholars, applying it to data observed in Lithuanian political communication. The data collection did not aim for full coverage of political actors. On the contrary, it sufficed with individual cases when the dissemination of misinformation narratives was noticed. Moreover, the chronological sequence was not considered when making a presumption that a single case identified was a sign of regular activity. From this perspective, the research could be criticized as soon as at least a single case of shortlisted politicians is presented with data about their misinformation activities. At the time being, there is no such contradicting data. Further analysis would require the evaluation of outreach that a particular content has achieved and the coverage of specific target audiences.

The specific examples of public political communication were collected and documented by the author of this article throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. During the final phase of the research, the initial data were double-checked and amended where the new data were available. Nevertheless, the research does not aim to provide a full overview of the public political Covid-19 misinformation communication. It might be a subject of further research, providing a better understanding of populist political communication.

Therefore, the main added value of our research is the cross-checking of two unrelated datasets. We gathered social research data (polling) and public communication examples from the leading politicians. After conducting a critical evaluation of primary data, we used comparative methods in order to identify potential chronological correlations between different datasets.

Special attention should be paid to data collection and chronological limits. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) outbreak a pandemic.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the initial signs of rapidly spreading disease were reported in January 2020 with some reports dated as early as late 2019. The final date for data collection for this research was October 2021. Therefore, the initial timeframe for data collection was January 2020–October 2021.

Lithuanian parliamentary elections were held in 2020 with primary and secondary voting taking place on October 11 and 25, respectively.<sup>14</sup> A new coalition agreement was signed on November 11, 2020<sup>15</sup> and the full set of the Cabinet was approved by the President on December 7, 2020.<sup>16</sup>

Political campaigns during the parliamentary elections and the exaggerated media attention before the new coalition is formed have a significant external impact on the public approval level. Therefore, all data from the start of the pandemic up to December 9, 2020 should be excluded from the evaluation as they would be heavily biased.

A further notice should be made that the second quarantine, which lasted for eight consecutive months, was officially ended on June 28, 2021.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> WHO Director-General's Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing on COVID-19–11 March, 2020. *World Health Organization*, March 11, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>14</sup> Parliamentary elections 2020. *The Central Electoral Commission of the Republic of Lithuania*. Retrieved from <https://www.vrk.lt/en/2020-seimo> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>15</sup> See Gudavičius, S. Koalicijos sutartis pasirašyta – partnerės imasi portfelių dalybų. *Verslo žinios.lt*, November 9, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.vz.lt/verslo-aplinka/2020/11/09/koalicijos-sutartis-pasirasyta-partneres-imasi-portfeliu-dalybu> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>16</sup> See Voveriūnaitė, S. Nausėda patvirtino Šimonytės ministrų sąrašą. *Delfi.lt*, December 7, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/nauseda-patvirtino-simonytes-ministru-sarasa.d?id=85930541> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>17</sup> See Gudavičius, S. Karantinas baigiamas, dalis ribojimų lieka. *Verslo žinios.lt*, June 28, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.vz.lt/verslo-aplinka/2021/06/28/karantinasbaigiamas-dalis-ribojimu-lieka> [accessed 15/11/2022].



In the context of disinformation narratives and their dissemination, it is essential to identify the most significant political events that took place in Lithuania at that time. A new semi-political movement ‘Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis’ (The Lithuanian Family Movement) was formed around April 2020. It was one of the leading institutional players pushing forward anti-governmental agenda, demanding to lift mask requirements, change regulations against the non-vaccinated citizens etc. A major public event ‘Didysis šeimų maršas’ (The Great March of Families) was organized in the capital city of Vilnius on June 15. A rally against Covid-passports was held on August 10, which culminated in the riots in the evening.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore the period of April-August 2020 could be characterized as an institutionalization of the anti-vaccination movement, which created political agenda, raised populist leaders and gained substantial public support. It was reversed after the riots, when the radical nature of the movement became evident for the majority of its supporters.

In order to compare populist political actors, we need a *trusted source of social research data*. During the period of January 2020-October 2021, several national social research companies were conducting polling: Vilmorus, Spinter tyrimai and Baltijos tyrimai. Occasional data were also published by Nortal. The substantial weakness of Spinter tyrimai and Baltijos tyrimai data was the fact that they were carried out using CAWI methodology, meaning no direct live contact, with data collected through distant means, such as online questionnaires and/or phone calls. Therefore, a decision was made to use raw data from Vilmorus omnibus polls.

It is important to note that none of the companies carried on polling during the quarantine period from November 2020 to April 2021. It is an important factor, which should be taken into account. Therefore, the real impact can be evaluated only after April 2021. Keeping in mind the national parliamentary elections of October 2020, all data from January 2020 until the elections are only indicative of the general political context and will not be used for the formulation of conclusions.

## 2. Shortlisted National Politicians Disseminating Covid-19 Disinformation Narratives

### 2.1. High Profile Examples

During the selected period of January 2020-October 2021, Vilmorus had conducted omnibus surveys eleven times.

Vilmorus national omnibus polls
January 10-18, 2020 <sup>19</sup>
February 7-13, 2020 <sup>20</sup>
March 6-13, 2020 <sup>21</sup>
<b>no polls (the first quarantine)</b>
June 5-13, 2020 <sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See the detailed account in Jonutis, K. *Populism and Conspiracy Theories: The Case of the Lithuanian Family Movement*, p. 93-107.

<sup>19</sup> Naujaisi reitingai: kol S. Skvernelio populiarumas degė, G. Nausėda šovė į viršų, *Lrytas.lt*, January 25, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvsdiena/aktualijos/2020/01/25/news/naujaisi-reitingai-kol-s-skvernelio-populiarumas-dege-g-nauseda-sove-i-virsu-13387232/> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>20</sup> Reitingai: pirmūnai – tie patys, o į dugną nugrimzdusių gretose yra naujų veidų. *Lrytas.lt*, February 22, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvsdiena/aktualijos/2020/02/22/news/reitingai-pirmunai-tie-patys-o-i-dugna-nugrimzdusiu-gretose-yra-nauju-veidu-13741663/> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>21</sup> Pavasariinių reitingų sūpynės judina ir pasaulį stingdanti užkrato šmėkla. *Lrytas.lt*, March 21, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvsdiena/aktualijos/2020/03/21/news/pavasariiniu-reitingu-supynes-judina-ir-pasauli-stingdanti-uzkrato-smekla-14126980/> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>22</sup> Ilgą karantiną turėję išverti šalies žmonės atpirkimo ožiu pasirinko prezidentą G. Nausėdą. *Lrytas.lt*, June 20, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvsdiena/aktualijos/2020/06/20/news/ilga-karantina-tureje-istverti-salies-zmones-atpirkimo-oziu-pasirinko-prezidenta-g-nauseda-15336890/> [accessed 15/11/2022].

July 10-18, 2020 <sup>23</sup>
September 4-12, 2020 <sup>24</sup>
<b>no polls (the second quarantine)</b>
April 8-17, 2021 <sup>25</sup>
May 11-21, 2021 <sup>26</sup>
June 9-18, 2021 <sup>27</sup>
July 29-August 5, 2021 <sup>28</sup>
September 9-16, 2021 <sup>29</sup>
October 15-22, 2021 <sup>30</sup>

Individual-level ratings were made public for fifty politicians: Valdas Adamkus, Arvydas Anušauskas, Aušrinė Armonaitė, Agnė Bilotaitė, Vilija Blinkevičiūtė, Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen, Rimantas Dagys, Evelina Dobrovolska, Arūnas Dulkys, Simonas Gentvilas, Gintaras Grušas, Elvinas Jankevičius, Simonas Kairys, Ramūnas Karbauskis, Raimundas Karoblis, Gediminas Kirkilas, Dainius Kreivys, Linas Kukuraitis, Mindaugas Kvietkauskas, Gabrielius Landsbergis, Vytautas Landsbergis, Linas Linkevičius, Visvaldas Matijošaitis, Kęstutis Mažeika, Arvydas Monkevičius, Jaroslavas Narkevičius, Gitanas Nausėda, Kęstutis Navickas, Monika Navickienė, Andrius Palionis, Gintautas Paluckas, Jonas Pinskus, Viktoras Pranckietis, Naglis Puteikis, Rimantas Sinkevičius, Mindaugas Sinkevičius, Gintarė Skaistė, Marius Skuodis, Saulius Skvernelis, Vilius Šapoka, Remigijus Šimašius, Ingrida Šimonytė, Jurgita Šiugždinienė, Rita Tamašunienė, Andrius Tapinas, Valdemar Tomaševskij, Viktor Uspaskich, Žygmantas Vaičiūnas, Aurelijus Veryga and Remigijus Žemaitaitis.

Public communication of these longlisted politicians was analysed by collecting data from (a) national online news portals, (b) individual social media accounts, and (c) represented political organization social media accounts.

After taking into account the taxonomy of Covid-19 disinformation narratives, at least partially positive results were achieved for eight politicians: Blinkevičiūtė, Karbauskis, Nausėda, Paluckas, Puteikis, Tomaševskij, Uspaskich and Žemaitaitis.

<sup>23</sup> Černiauskaitė, Agnė. To nebuvo jau pusantrų metų: artėjant rinkimams – nauji lyderiai partijų reitingų lentelėje. *Lrytas.lt*, July 25, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvsodiena/aktualijos/2020/07/25/news/to-nebuvo-jau-pusantru-metu-arte-jant-rinkimams-nauji-lyderiai-partiju-reitingu-lenteleje-15730119/> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>24</sup> Naujaisi reitingai: piliečiai šnairuoja ir į nepasireiškusias partijas, ir į pernelyg aktyvų A. Verygą. *Lrytas.lt*, September 19, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvsodiena/aktualijos/2020/09/19/news/naujaisi-reitingai-pilieciai-snairuoja-ir-i-nepasireiskusias-partijas-ir-i-pernelyg-aktyvu-a-veryga-16389765/> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>25</sup> Naujaisi reitingai: ryškus G. Nausėdos kryptis ir rinkėjų signalai ministrų kabinetui. *Lrytas.lt*, April 24, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvsodiena/aktualijos/2021/04/24/news/reitingai-ryskus-g-nausedos-kryptis-ir-rinkeju-signalai-ministru-kabinetu-19128393/> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>26</sup> Naujajai socialdemokratų vedlei – netikėtai dosnus piliečių avansas: atsilieka tik nuo G. Nausėdos. *Lrytas.lt*, May 29, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvsodiena/aktualijos/2021/05/29/news/naujajai-socialdemokratu-vedlei-netiketai-dosnus-pilieciu-avansas-atsilieka-tik-nuo-g-nausedos-19546184/> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>27</sup> Naureckaitė, Indrė. Sociologas V. Gaidys apie naujausius partijų reitingus: net nepamenu, kada buvo toks rezultatas. *Lrytas.lt*, June 26, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvsodiena/aktualijos/2021/06/26/news/sociologas-v-gaidys-apie-naujau-sius-partiju-reitingus-net-nepamenu-kada-butu-toks-rezultatas-19873921/> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>28</sup> Vyriausybė – duobeje, visi ministrų kabineto nariai – su minuso ženklų. *Lrytas.lt*, August 14, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvsodiena/aktualijos/2021/08/14/news/vyriausybe-duobeje-visi-ministru-kabineto-nariai-su-minuso-zenklu-20422905/> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>29</sup> Liubertaitė, Agnė. G. Nausėdą reitingų viršūnėje laikantys tautiečiai baudžia ne visus: kas krito, o kieno situacija pagerėjo? *Lrytas.lt*, September 25, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvsodiena/aktualijos/2021/09/25/news/g-nauseda-reitingu-virsune-je-laikantys-tautieciai-baudzia-ne-visus-kas-krito-o-kieno-situacija-pagerejo--20855993/> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>30</sup> Naujaisi reitingai: kai kam – niūrus ruduo, o socialdemokratams – bobų vasara. *Lrytas.lt*, October 30, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvsodiena/aktualijos/2021/10/30/news/reitingai-kai-kam-niurus-ruduo-o-socialdemokratams-bobu-vasara-21238366/> [accessed 15/11/2022].



Taxonomy of Covid-19 disinformation narratives	Blinkevičiūtė Vilija	Karbauskis Ramūnas	Nausėda Gitanas	Paluckas Gintautas	Puteikis Naglis	Tomaševskij Valdemar	Uspaskich Viktor	Žemaitaitis Remigijus
Corrupt Elites					✓ <sup>31</sup>			
Vaccine Injury							✓ <sup>32</sup>	✓ <sup>33</sup>
Sinister Origins							✓ <sup>34</sup>	
Freedom under Siege	✓ <sup>35</sup>	✓ <sup>36</sup>		✓ <sup>37 38</sup>	✓ <sup>39</sup>	✓ <sup>40</sup>		
Health Freedom	✓ <sup>41</sup>	✓ <sup>42</sup>	✓ <sup>43</sup>					
Think of the Children!			✓ <sup>44</sup>				✓ <sup>45</sup>	
Do Your Own Research							✓ <sup>46</sup>	
Speaking Truth to Power								
Panic Button								

<sup>31</sup> Puteikis, N. Facebook post from Naglis Puteikis. *Facebook*, April 11, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/puteikis/posts/pfbid0ZnapKTnWmed834YPanTbz18WVWLcznuwoCKXpB1ktDT2KGLTCdCXgkoArUYKU6QBl> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>32</sup> Uspaskich, V. Facebook post from Viktoras Uspaskich. *Facebook*, October 6, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/viktorasuspaskich/videos/1518731285158139> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>33</sup> Jurčenkaitė, I. COVID-19 vakcinosis gali sukelti šalutinį poveikį: kas atlygins žalą? *15min.lt*, December 9, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/covid-19-vakcinosis-gali-sukelti-salutini-poveiki-kas-atlygins-zala-56-1421440> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>34</sup> Uspaskich, V. Facebook post from Viktoras Uspaskich. *Facebook*, January 5, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/viktorasuspaskich/posts/pfbid0ZjXya53QwGKTomuLXmd4wGLCAxZcVu52qUoP14M25L1BpUG5qdyNptSj8Wh1hjsKSl> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>35</sup> Jaruševičiūtė, G. Blinkevičiūtė pritaria Nausėdai: skatinant gyventojus skiepytis buvo perlenkta lazda. *LRT.lt*, August 20, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1472541/blinkeviciute-pritaria-nausedai-skatinant-gyventojus-skiepytis-buvo-perlenkta-lazda> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>36</sup> Banytė, Ž. Karbauskis užstoja Kepenį dėl jo minčių apie pandemiją: nuomonių įvairovė yra stipriose organizacijose. *LRT.lt*, April 16, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1388939/karbauskis-uzstoja-kepeni-del-jo-minciu-apie-pandemija-nuomoni-ivairove-yra-stipriose-organizacijose> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>37</sup> Černiauskaitė, A. Lemiamame balsavime dėl privalomų skiepų socialdemokratams pasipustė padus. *Lrytas.lt*, January 20, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.lrytas.lt/lietuvsdiena/aktualijos/2022/01/20/news/lemiamame-balsavime-del-privalomu-skiepu-socialdemokratams-pasipuste-padus-22119876> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>38</sup> Bieliavskas, J. Siūlo atsisakyti judėjimo kontrolės: šis ribojimas – juokingas ir neveikiantis. *Diena.lt*, January 4, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.diena.lt/naujienos/lietuva/politika/siulo-atsisakyti-judejimo-kontroles-sis-ribojimas-juokingas-ir-neveikiantis-1006832> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>39</sup> Paulauskaitė, U. Vilniuje – protestas prieš karantiną, privalomus Covid-19 tyrimus: reikalauja seimūnams atlikti IQ testus. *TV3.lt*, March 24, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.tv3.lt/naujiena/lietuva/vilniuje-protestas-pries-karantina-privalomus-covid-19-tyrimus-reikalauja-seimunams-atlikti-iq-testus-n1087871> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>40</sup> Bieliavskas, J.V. Tomaševskis apie galimybių pasą: jis jau nebeaktualus. *Kauno diena.lt*, February 1, 2022. Retrieved from <https://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/lietuva/politika/v-tomasevskis-apie-galimybiu-pasa-jis-jau-nebeaktualus-1062117> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>41</sup> V. Blinkevičiūtė: vien botago nepakanka, o rugsėjį galimos naujos reakcijos į A. Lukašenkos veiksmus. *Lietuvos socialdemokratų partija*, August 20, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.lsdpl.lt/v-blinkeviciute-vien-botago-nepakanka-o-rugseji-galimos-naujos-reakcijos-i-a-lukasenos-veiksmus/> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>42</sup> LVŽS ragina valdančiuosius nustoti diskriminuoti Lietuvos žmones. *Lvzs.lt*, August 10, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.lvzs.lt/lt/lvzsnaujienos/lv%C5%BEs-ragina-valdan%C4%8Diuosius-nustoti-diskriminuoti-lietuvs-%C5%BEmones> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>43</sup> Prezidento veto: kovokime su nesiskiepijimo priežastimis, didinkime žmonių sąmoningumą. *Lietuvos Respublikos prezidentas*, November 3, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.lrp.lt/lt/ziniasklaidos-centras/naujienos/36915> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>44</sup> Šeimų maršo metu sveikinimą išplatino Nausėda: šeimų labai mes vis dar padarėme per mažai. *LRT.lt*, May 15, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1410398/seimu-marso-metu-sveikinima-isplatino-nauseda-seimu-labai-mes-vis-dar-padareme-per-mazai> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>45</sup> Uspaskich, V. Facebook post from Viktoras Uspaskich. *Facebook*, July 3, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/viktorasuspaskich/posts/pfbid0zARE9Bqu2wd6pAynKR4w2k4D7a2RyS8PrUQu3xe7k6cKpqZb9RoSvjyYTSH6PmYhl> [accessed 15/11/2022].

<sup>46</sup> Uspaskich, V. Facebook post from Viktoras Uspaskich. *Facebook*, December 27, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/viktorasuspaskich/videos/1532156003841819/> [accessed 15/11/2022].

It is interesting to mention that no disinformation content was found in the political communication of the ruling coalition politicians, except for Karbauskis, who was a parliamentary coalition leader until the parliamentary elections in October 2020, and Nausėda, acting as the President of the Republic of Lithuania since July 2019. Both Karbauskis's and Nausėda's public communication containing Covid-19 disinformation narratives were identified in 2021. At that time Karbauskis was only a leader of a minority political group, whereas Nausėda was only a formal state leader; the state executive power was concentrated in the hands of Government.

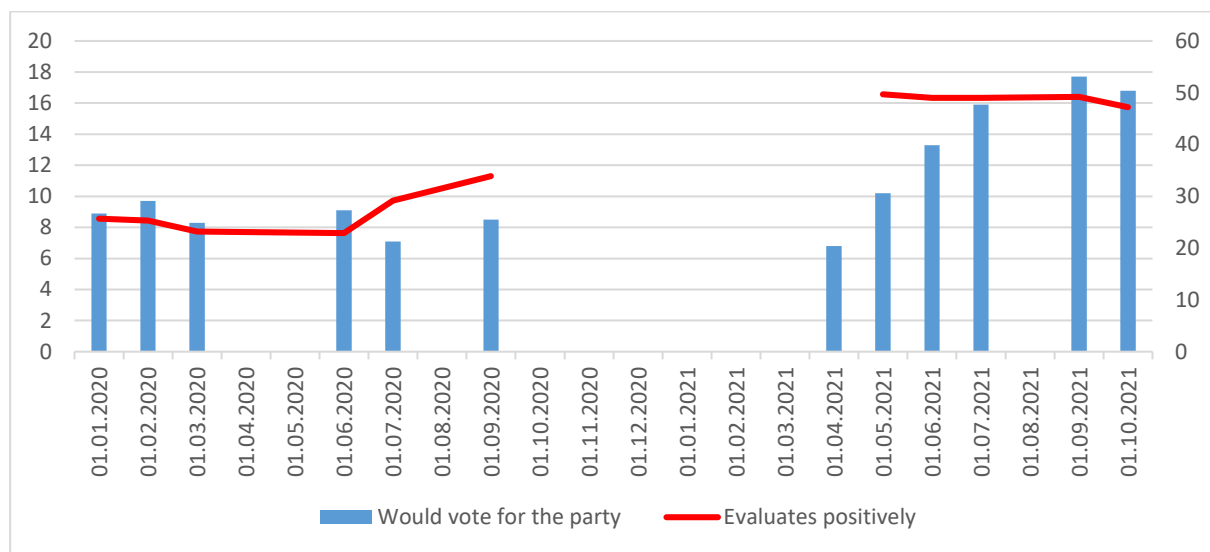
Keeping in mind the final timeframe of November 2020 and October 2021, an additional comparison was made. It showed that two politicians could not be evaluated only partially due to the low acceptance in public (Puteikis and Žemaitaitis). Therefore, the final selected shortlist for the analysis included Blinkevičiūtė (together with Paluckas), Karbauskis, Nausėda, Tomaševskij and Uspaskich.

We will analyse their data in alphabetical order.

Paluckas was the chairman of the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party, but he resigned after his party failed the parliamentary elections. On May 9th, 2021 Blinkevičiūtė was elected as the new chairwoman.

The change of leadership had a positive impact on the public support of the party. But it made a minimum positive change in the individual evaluation of Blinkevičiūtė. It is especially important that during August-October 2021, she made several attempts to go public with semi-disinformation messages such as 'no to segregation, yes to education.' Blinkevičiūtė's attempts to play down the importance of the masks and the need for widespread vaccination etc. did not make a substantial impact on the ratings (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Blinkevičiūtė (together with Paluckas) and the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party.



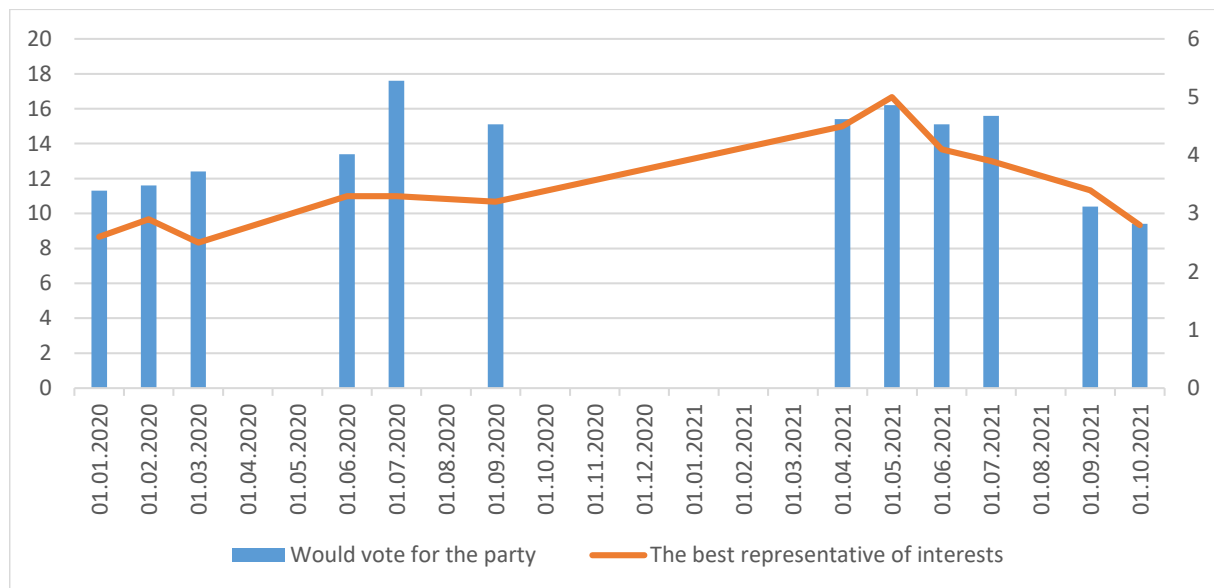
Polling date	Support the party	Choose the best political representative	Positive evaluation	Negative evaluation	Don't know
10-01-2020	8.9	2.1	25.7	23.2	51.1
07-02-2020	9.7	2.3	25.3	22.7	52
06-03-2020	8.3	1.9	23.2	24.6	52.2
05-06-2020	9.1	2,3	22.9	22.7	54.4
10-07-2020	7.1	1.7	29.2	19	51.8
04-09-2020	8.5	2	33.9	21.5	44.6
08-04-2021	6.8	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
11-05-2021	10.2	6.6	49.7	17.6	32.7

Polling date	Support the party	Choose the best political representative	Positive evaluation	Negative evaluation	Don't know
09-06-2021	13.3	7.2	49	20.1	30.9
29-07-2021	15.9	8.7	49	18.4	32.6
09-09-2021	17.7	8.6	49.2	19.6	31.2
15-10-2021	16.8	9.9	47.2	19.7	33.1

Karbauskis was a strong supporter of anti-vaccination leaders inside his party, Dainius Kėpėnis, Valius Ažuolas and others. He took a stance and tried to defend their position saying that ‘alternative opinion makes rational sense.’

In individual ratings, Karbauskis’s popularity was growing during the first half of 2021, when his political opponents were struggling with an efficient strategy to stop the spread of Covid-19. He achieved top public support in May 2021, but lost contact with his populist supporters when they switched to other more radical anti-vaccination leaders (e.g., a rise in public support for Nausėda and Uspaskich) (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** Karbauskis and the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union.



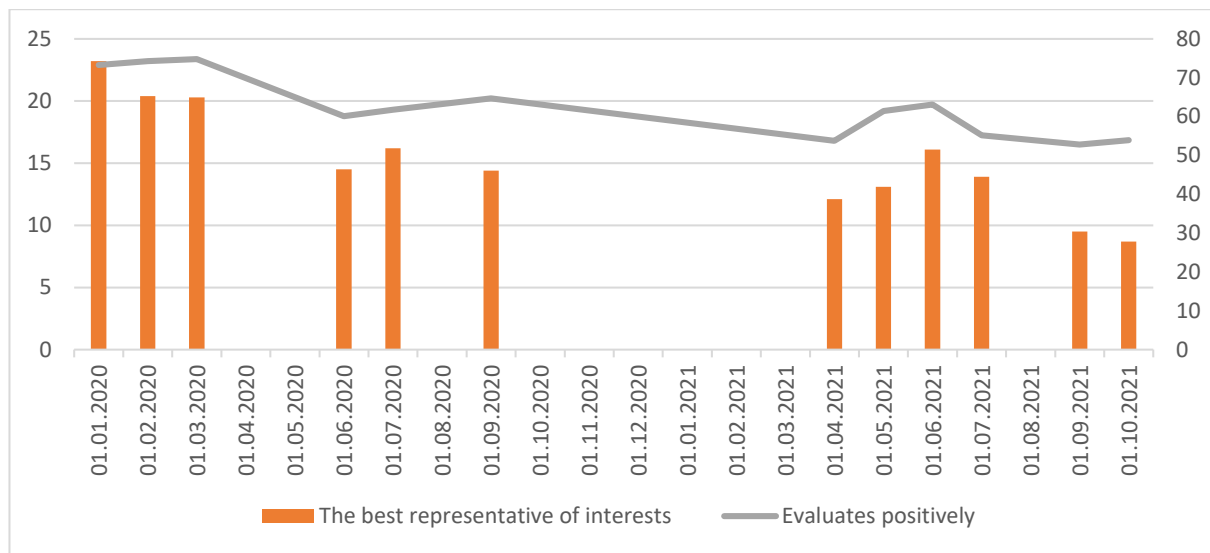
Polling date	Support the party	Choose the best political representative	Positive evaluation	Negative evaluation	Don't know
10-01-2020	11.3	2.6	21.5	59.5	19
07-02-2020	11.6	2.9	19.4	63	17.6
06-03-2020	12.4	2.5	23.9	54.7	21.4
05-06-2020	13.4	3.3	24.8	53.1	22.1
10-07-2020	17.6	3.3	25.8	51.7	22.4
04-09-2020	15.1	3.2	29.2	50.4	20.4
08-04-2021	15.4	4.5	25.9	52.2	21.9
11-05-2021	16.2	5	26.3	50.4	23.3
09-06-2021	15.1	4.1	27.2	50.1	22.7
29-07-2021	15.6	3.9	26	47.2	26.8
09-09-2021	10.4	3.4	24.4	49.8	25.8
15-10-2021	9.4	2.8	25.4	50.4	24.2

The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union had also lost a considerable amount of public support due to the separation of Skvernelis’s political group in June-September 2021.

During the spring-summer of 2021, President Nausėda became a perfect illustration of opportunist political communication in the context of Covid-19 disinformation. In early spring 2021, he made early contacts with the leadership of the new political gathering ‘Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis’. In May-June, he criticized the Government for taking too strong measures against the non-vaccinated citizens, and even expressed his support for the radical leaders of this part of the society.

It is evident from the graph, that Nausėda’s actions and public stance helped him to regain public approval at least partially. He managed to increase his approval ratings from April to June 2021. Meanwhile, it is also noticeable that his initiatives had only a short-term impact. As soon as Nausėda’s direct involvement began to fade, his leadership started quickly to vanish away, even though his general approval rating remained comparatively high (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6.** Nausėda and the President of the Republic of Lithuania.



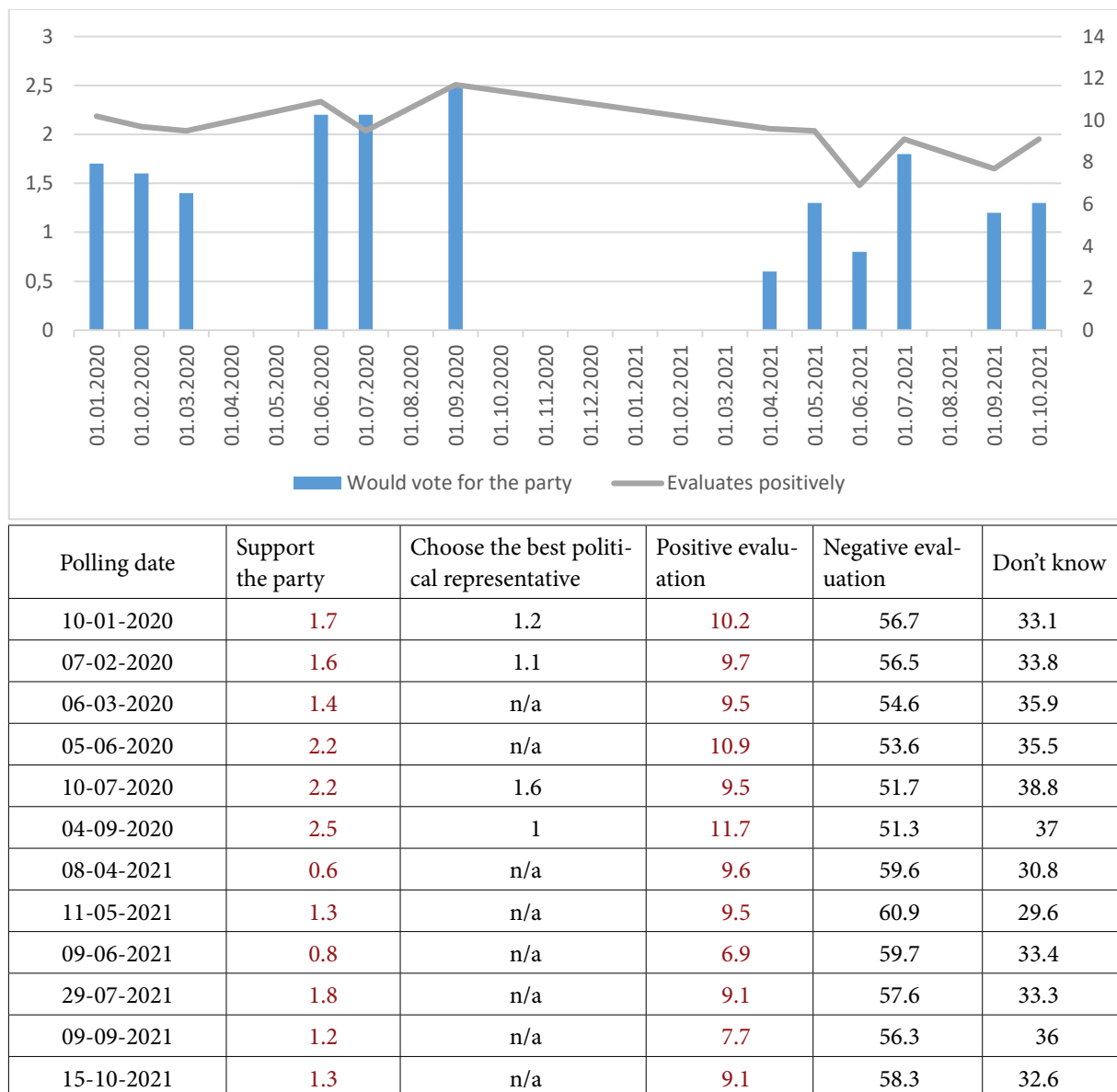
Polling date	Support the party	Choose the best political representative	Positive evaluation	Negative evaluation	Don't know
10-01-2020	n/a	23.2	73.3	7	19.4
07-02-2020	n/a	20.4	74.3	7.7	18
06-03-2020	n/a	20.3	74.8	7.8	17.4
05-06-2020	n/a	14.5	60.1	13	26.9
10-07-2020	n/a	16.2	61.8	11.7	26.5
04-09-2020	n/a	14.4	64.7	13	22.3
08-04-2021	n/a	12.1	53.8	26.1	20.1
11-05-2021	n/a	13.1	61.4	20.2	18.4
09-06-2021	n/a	16.1	63.1	18.6	18.3
29-07-2021	n/a	13.9	55.2	23.9	20.9
09-09-2021	n/a	9.5	52.8	25.8	21.4
15-10-2021	n/a	8.7	53.9	24.9	21.2

Tomaševskij can be characterized as an ‘occasional denier.’ He is not an active participant in social media, therefore his publicity has been limited to classic media. Journalists have rare opportunity to interview him due to the fact that Tomaševskij is a member of the European Parliament, thus, in his case the distance creates additional challenges.

The roller-coaster in party support data could be explained using the methodology of Vilmoris researchers. It has a relatively high error margin (3-4pp). The Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania–Christian Families Alliance has a low support level, therefore the rating is objectively fluctuating (see Figure 7).

Due to ‘occasional’ occurrence, there is no evidence of substantial changes in individual approval ratings. It could be a sign that populist political communication must have a long-term record in order to achieve a noticeable impact.

**Figure 7.** Tomaševskij and the Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania–Christian Families Alliance.

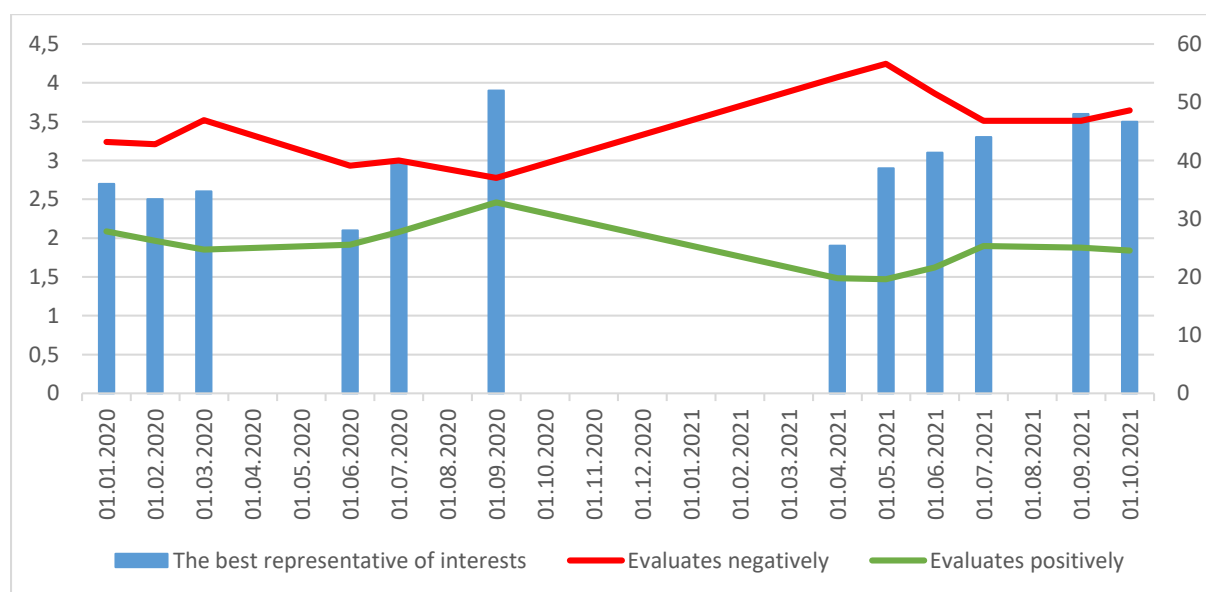




Uspaskich is the leading representative of the political anti-vaccination wing. From December 2020, he organized a regular live broadcast, where he supported many major Covid-19 disinformation narratives. The data collected showed the growing public support in April-July 2021, when the major anti-vaccination movement began in Lithuania.

The data show a clear growth of support for Uspaskich from April to May 2021. Moreover, it does not stop in summer (as it was the case for Nausėda or Blinkevičiūtė) but continues to grow even in autumn 2021. A similar trend is evident both in individual and party support ratings (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Uspaskich and the Labour Party.



Polling date	Support the party	Choose the best political representative	Positive evaluation	Negative evaluation	Don't know
10-01-2020	6	2.7	27.8	43.2	29
07-02-2020	5.9	2.5	26.2	42.8	31
06-03-2020	5.1	2.6	24.7	46.9	28.4
05-06-2020	4.6	2.1	25.5	39.1	35.4
10-07-2020	6.2	3	27.7	40	35.4
04-09-2020	8.4	3.9	32.8	37	30.2
08-04-2021	3.9	1.9	19.8	54.3	25.9
11-05-2021	4.4	2.9	19.6	56.6	23.8
09-06-2021	5.2	3.1	21.6	51.5	26.9
29-07-2021	5.9	3.3	25.3	46.8	27.9
09-09-2021	5.6	3.6	25	46.8	28.2
15-10-2021	5.7	3.5	24.5	48.6	26.9

It is important to mention, that Uspaskich is the real leader of the Labour Party; however, other party members working in the Parliament, such as Aidias Gedvilas and Mindaugas Puidokas, have expressed similar views. Therefore, the party result should be an indication of broader activities. Nevertheless, Uspaskich's activities helped him to take the main political stage and to stand out as a clear leader of the anti-vaccination movement among the established political parties having representatives in the Parliament.

## 2.2. Low Profile Examples

The candidate vetting has excluded such politicians as Puteikis, Petras Gražulis, Puidokas, Aidas Gedvilas, Pinskus, Živilė Pinskuvienė, Kepenis, Ažuolas and Antanas Guoga and potential leaders of new political parties (as in the case of ‘Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis’).

A few of them were very active in Covid-19 disinformation dissemination in April-June 2021. Partially it showed up in the polling data. For example, Gražulis and Puidokas were mentioned for the first time in a national survey in July 2021. Nevertheless, such a mention was temporary, and the long-term conclusions regarding it are too early to draw.

## Discussion, Conclusions and Further Research

This article provides additional information about populist political communication. It proves that populist politicians exploit various social wedge issues. The Covid-19 pandemic was a perfect opportunity for them to divide society, unite part of it under personal leadership and capitalize on this support in a form of public political approval.

Such a perspective can only be built around various forms of confrontation. During the pandemic, the evident ‘enemy’ was the government in its various forms: directly elected politicians, state or municipal institutions, and even non-governmental or private entities. The confrontation was built around several semi-civic movements, which received support and encouragement from ‘traditional’ populist politicians. A large-scale public communication campaign exploited fear, uncertainty and defamation tactics to raise substantial publicity and encourage citizens to support a new political movement.

It might seem counterproductive in terms of incompatibility between the efforts needed and the change of approval ratings; however, it is true of traditional political organizations. When we talk about radical parties and radical politicians, even the change of 1-2 percentage point is a clear win for their political agenda. In case of successful continuation, such campaign could become a perfect platform to reach a minimum barrier in the parliamentary elections (5%).

Finally, there is at least partial evidence that the active participation in the dissemination of Covid-19 disinformation narratives helps to raise the level of public support. Active supporters such as Us-paskich and Nausėda received a substantial boost in their approval ratings for a period of 3 to 6 months, whereas mild supporters, such as Karbauskis and Blinkevičiūtė, showed partial positive results in their individual and/or party ratings.

Further in-depth quantitative measurement and evaluation that would compare the changes in public support vs. specific narratives, target groups, and chronological events is needed. It could be also expanded into the content analysis of specific disinformation narratives, their distribution and impact on society.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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