

# Uncovering Slow Memory in the Narratives of Lithuania's Post-Communist Transformation

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This article contributes to the field of memory studies by exploring the potential application of the *slow memory* concept in analysing the narratives of individuals versus far-right politicians. Through an analysis of oral history interviews and far-right populist narratives about the post-communist transformation in Lithuania, the study reveals that only a minority of narratives can be described as *slow memory*. Narratives of disappointment and perseverance lack specific decisions or events but instead highlight more mundane, everyday experiences. They focus on long-term change and reform and can be considered examples of *slow memory*. The findings suggest that one key characteristic of slow memory is its absence from public discourse and political space in a complete and comprehensive form. Political narratives tend to foreground specific events or leaders, thereby obscuring the complex, multidimensional nature of slow memory. This analysis of political narratives raises questions about the possibility of slow memory within political discourse more broadly.

**Keywords:** slow memory, populist far-right, post-communist transformation, counter-narratives

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## Introduction

After more than three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the post-communist transition remains a pivotal process in contemporary political debates. On the one hand, the transformation process is evoked to explain the emergence of right-wing

populism, arguing that the parties are supported by the ‘losers’ of the transition (Minkenberg, 2017). On the other hand, recent studies reveal that political actors effectively trigger populist sentiments (Hawkins, Kaltwasser, Andreadis, 2020) by crafting narratives to mobilize the electorate (Bartels, 2023). The success of populist leaders is greatly determined by their capacity to develop a political identity with the electorate by providing emotionally saturated narratives of the past and present, and by drawing symbolic boundaries between individuals or groups (McLaughlin, Velez, Dunn, 2019).

This article proposes to return to the analysis of narratives about the transformation period. For this purpose, this article applies the notion of ‘slow memory’ to investigate how the memory of the post-communist transformation is constructed in the narratives of individuals and far-right politicians. The ‘slow memory’ framework shifts focus from the memory of events to the process of transformation, from fast memory of “eventful” and “sited” pasts to those that are slow-moving’ (Wüstenberg, 2023: 60). This contribution focuses on the implications of the concept of slow memory and a careful examination of its possibilities by comparing how individuals and far-right populist politicians construct the memory of the post-communist transformation.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, the theoretical concept of slow memory is introduced. Then, the data is described, and its analysis is conducted. Finally, the oral history interview narratives along with narratives and counter-narratives formulated by politicians are presented.

## Slow Memory in Narratives

Memory studies have traditionally focused on ruptures, dramatic events and their commemoration, ritualization and memorialization (Jones, Putte, 2024; David, 2020). This represents the domain of ‘fast memory’ – memory centred on discrete events, specific characters, and public commemoration. For example, the collapse of the Soviet Union serves as a founding myth articulated by Eastern Bloc leaders through significant events. These narratives provide direction and establish normative attitudes (Assmann, 2011a). They become institutionalized through a process which simplifies complex memory, selects key symbols and actors, and determines both the content and the practice of remembrance. This immediate or fast memory manifests visibly in memorialization practices and is conveyed through schematic templates.

However, memory can also indicate continuity alongside ruptures. Cultural memory, which refers to a meaning circulating within a group, often operates more slowly and endures longer than single events (Ibid.). Societies construct their identity and maintain continuity by weaving a cultural fabric from memory over time. Cultural memory encompasses ‘tradition forming, past reference, and political

identity or imagination' (Ibid.: 9). And yet cultural memory is an institutionalized and objectified form of memory embodied in symbolic forms, even if narratives about the past can be altered and challenged.

The slow memory approach extends beyond traumatic events, master political narratives, and institutionalized memory forms. It addresses 'slow-moving' changes and gradual reforms rather than 'eventful' and 'sited' pasts (Wüstenberg, 2023: 60). The post-communist transformation exemplifies this concept, as it 'cannot be easily "pinned down" to have taken place on a particular date or in a place' (Wüstenberg, 2023: 61). Instead, it represents a process spanning over time and space. Transformative changes following major reforms occurred well beyond central locations, making them subject to 'un-sited or multi-sited developments' (Ibid.: 62). Crucially, slow memory manifests in 'everyday experiences and practices' (Ibid.), while remaining intangible and invisible on the margins of political representation.

This diachronic memory can be discerned in different memory layers. Communicative memory reveals the everyday perspectives of contemporaries through living, embodied memory conveyed in the local language (Assmann, 2008). It is embedded in individual biographies, everyday interactions, and witnesses' living memory, maintaining an informal character (Assmann, 2011b). While slow memory could be associated with a bottom-up approach whereas fast memory would thus be related with top-down narratives, the relationship is more complex – communicative memory and people's memories can exhibit either slow or fast characteristics. Furthermore, the question of whether politician-constructed memory can be slow merits examination. Non-mainstream politicians, particularly the far-right populist figures analysed in this study, create counter-narratives that critique or subvert the dominant narratives (Meretoja, 2021: 34). Through these counter-narratives, they attempt to construct shared memory and political identity, thereby creating space for slow memory which exists beyond master narratives and eventful pasts.

## Analysing Oral History Interviews and Political Discourse

In this article, I apply the concept of slow memory to analyse two distinct sources of memory narratives. The first dataset comprises oral history interviews examining the post-communist transformation in Lithuania. Semi-structured biographical-thematic interviews were conducted with the residents of two industrial districts of Lithuania, specifically, Panevėžys and Jonava, between 2021 and 2023. The informants selected for the interviews worked in industrial enterprises, the cultural sector or collective farms and were at least 18 years old at the time when the Soviet Union collapsed. The interview questionnaire consisted of questions on biographical and professional circumstances during the period of transformation, asking respondents to reflect on whether and what changes occurred during this period. A close reading and comparison of the interviews was done to identify recurring narratives. Although

there is not enough space in the article to cover the full range, the most prominent and most frequently heard narratives are highlighted here.

Rather than framing memory around major political events or specific decisions, we asked interlocutors to share their memories and experiences of the 1990s. This approach shifted focus from “eventful” and “sited” pasts to those that are slow-moving’ (Wüstenberg, 2023: 60). The interviews reveal that although the triggering events were fast, the resulting changes were prolonged and gradual. Consequently, participants often struggled to identify precise beginnings and endings, making it difficult to pinpoint specific events and the timing of the transformation (Budreckaitė, 2023). The memories captured in these interviews reflected more on how the process and time period felt rather than the causal mechanisms underlying the change process.

The second dataset comprises discourse from Lithuania’s populist far-right. Far-right populists are defined here as collective actors who compete for parliamentary seats while operating within procedural democracy’s boundaries and positioning themselves at the far right of the left-right ideological scale. Their essential characteristic is populism, which divides the political landscape into two homogeneous groups: the decent, moral people and the corrupt elite (Mudde, *Ed.*, 2016). Their nativism manifests in viewing the nation as a homogeneous unit requiring protection from foreigners or dangerous intruders (Wodak, 2019). This protection of the homeland favours a strong or even authoritarian rule (Golder, 2016; Bustikova, Kitschelt, 2009; Mudde, *Ed.*, 2016), particularly emphasizing the majority rule as an essential feature of democracy (Mudde, *Ed.*, 2016; Wodak, 2019). These groups perceive political elites as corrupt entities working against the people’s will (Golder, 2016; Bustikova, Kitschelt, 2009; Wodak, 2019).

For the period from October 2022 to March 2023, three political organizations meet this definition: *The National Alliance* (Nacionalinis susivienijimas, NS), the *People and Justice Union* (Tautos ir teisingumo sąjunga, TIS), and the *Lithuanian Family Movement* (Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis). The People and Justice Union held one parliamentary seat; this politician was impeached at the end of 2023 but elected to the European Parliament in 2024. The National Alliance secured three seats on the Vilnius City Council in 2023 and won one mandate in the national parliament in 2024. The Lithuanian Family Movement partnered with the Christian Union to contest the 2024 European Parliament elections. The movement currently holds five seats across various municipal councils. The analysed dataset includes these organizations’ electoral manifestos and statements from their official websites and *Facebook* accounts between October 2022 and March 2023. The collected textual data was coded to identify the sections dealing with the post-communist transformation. The extracts were then cross-referenced against each other for recurring narratives.

## Oral History of Post-Communist Transformation

When recalling the 1990s, interlocutors primarily began with the Reform Movement of Lithuania – *Sąjūdis*. Most interviewees vividly recalled their involvement in the movement and its events. Similar to Poland’s *Solidarność* movement, *Sąjūdis* was a mass movement which officially engaged approximately 20% of the population, and which occupies a significant place in the post-communist transformation memory. In February 1990, *Sąjūdis* won the election to the Supreme Council of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic and declared the restoration of the independent Republic of Lithuania (the Act of March 11<sup>th</sup>). Interviewees described these experiences by using first-person plural pronouns, indicating unity and collective participation in an extraordinary moment. Their accounts consistently conveyed pride, enthusiasm, happiness, joy, hope, and anticipation:

*And so it went, and the 90s dawned. Well, it was very interesting. Inside... the whole society... at least most of it felt some kind of uplift... hope... the period of hope was like that. Something... I personally felt, well, something good must happen, something must be different. (Male, 71 years old)*

In accounts of the movement, various events spanning across several years merge into a coherent emotional narrative. Events neither form the narrative’s axis nor frame its beginning or end. Instead, they function as signifiers of collective experience and express collective emotions. These are primarily narratives about the emotions one experienced rather than specific events. The emotional script of unity and common pride forms the core of schematic narrative templates, serving ‘abstract, generalized functions’ (Wertsch, 2004). These schematic emotion narratives could underpin various specific narratives (Ibid.).

Interviewees also discussed specific events that formed the narrative’s core. These memories are emotionally intense and derive meaning through personal, concrete details – buildings, food, or routes to event locations. A frequently recalled event, accompanied by fear and anxiety, was January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1991, when the Soviet leadership attempted to occupy key Lithuanian infrastructure. The massive peaceful resistance resulted in 14 deaths and 600 injuries. Even those not directly involved in public gatherings clearly remembered their location, companions, and activities on that day. These event narratives exemplify what can be considered a specific narrative, depicting temporally ordered, explicitly mentioned events with specific temporal-spatial boundaries and clear actors (Wertsch, 2004).

These narratives exemplify fast memory, as revealed in the interviews. While the narratives vary in their focal points – some of them centred on events, yet others on emotional experiences detached from specific events – they all demonstrate characteristics of fast memory. Both specific narratives and schematic narrative templates reference extraordinary experiences. The movement experiences were

exceptional, intensely emotional, uplifting, collective, and they transcended everyday life. Furthermore, these memories have become embedded in commemorative practices, with similar emotional repertoires repeated annually: the elation and unity of the Revival paired with the fear, threat, and mourning associated with the January 13 commemorations. Through this process, collective experience becomes integrated into collective and institutionalized memory.

The narratives of extraordinary experience transition into a distinctly slower memory of the subsequent period – one characterized by hardship, uncertainty, and disillusionment amid economic decline, rising unemployment, unstable incomes, and increasing crime. The market economy transition, which unfolded over several years across various locations, encompassed multiple interrelated processes: enterprise privatization, establishment of private business frameworks, dissolution of the collective farm system, and the land restitution reform. In the interviews, these memories emerge less tangibly than the earlier movement experiences, connecting more intimately to immediate environments and everyday life. This period contrasts sharply with the revolutionary experience, as the unity of the Revival period gives way to disappointment:

*I remember the Sājūdis, the '90s. Somehow people believed in everything. Well, something new. [...] The euphoria was very great. [...] But then somehow... We saw things start to fall apart. I mean, the 'prihvatization'. [...] Who grabbed what, who carried what. You could buy things there for one rouble. Well, you know, they bought a palace for one litas. (Female, 69 years old)*

This disappointment arises from two main sources: the perceived greed of fellow citizens who exploited the uncertain situation for personal gain, and the actions of those in power who used their resources to promote their own interests. Frustration and anger are especially evident in terms like 'prihvatization', which refers to the opaque transfer of national assets – particularly large enterprises – and the abrupt dismantling of collective farms.

However, some narratives highlight perseverance during these tumultuous times. These accounts carry significant instructive and normative implications, suggesting that effort and hard work can lead to a reasonably good life:

*Here, you know, the most [difficult] was probably the 1991, 1992. And then I say, I started to sew something with my friends, to do something then. Well, there was no such thing, I thought, we'll do something anyway. Well, it wasn't that we weren't going to work. (Female, 64 years old)*

Both narratives – those of disappointment and perseverance – can be better described as *slow memory*. They lack specific decisions or events, while instead focusing on long-term changes and reforms. These narratives also highlight more

mundane, everyday experiences. Such memories form neither a specific narrative nor a schematic template; parts of the story remain unsaid, characters are unknown, and events do not happen. The concept of communicative memory also does not fully capture the essential characteristics of these narratives, as the communicative memory can display either slow or fast characteristics, as the examples above have demonstrated. While the differing narratives of disappointment and perseverance may represent broad emotional templates, their complexity is not adequately reflected in collective memory or political discourse, where the transformation period is often framed in terms of progress and a return to Europe (Ramonaitė, Vijeikis, 2023).

On the contrary, some of the bottom-up narratives of this period are closely intertwined with the political cleavages that express *fast* memory. Interviewees often expressed strong emotions, particularly resentment, toward political figures representing the two antagonistic sides of the era. The transformation process created a fundamental party system divide between former communist party members (currently, the *Lithuanian Social Democratic Party*) and the organizers of the independence movement (presently, the *Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats*). Some interviewees voiced particular resentment toward Vytautas Landsbergis, the leader of the Sąjūdis movement and Head of the Supreme Council which proclaimed Lithuania's independence in 1990. They held him responsible for the radical transformation reforms, including the rapid dismantling of collective farms. Similarly, others expressed anger and disappointment with Algirdas M. Brazauskas, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Lithuania and the country's first elected President after the Soviet occupation. These accounts reflect a sense of resentment over the insufficient dissociation from the Soviet past during the transformation period. These schematic emotional narrative templates clearly delineate who is responsible for the downturn and who deserves the blame. References to politicians function as markers of specific emotional experiences, helping to anchor political identities and reinforcing the central cleavage in Lithuania's political landscape, shaping political support for these mainstream parties until today (Jastramskis, 2018).

## Narratives of the Lithuanian Populist Far Right

Lithuania's far-right politicians construct three main narratives about the past: the existential crisis narrative and the narrative of the failed post-communist transformation as counter-narratives to the hegemonic story of the country's success. They also evoke the trauma narrative and the 'fighting and suffering' memory regime (Budrytė, 2022). In this section, I examine whether these three narratives can be connected to the concept of *slow memory*.

The period of post-communist transformation in the discourse of the Lithuanian far-right is situated between two dark periods – the crisis of today and the dark



communist period that threatens to return. Politicians discursively conflate a series of failures (emigration, immigration, inequality, geopolitical threats) and elevate them to the level of existential crisis (Moffitt, 2015). The current crisis is deemed urgent and requires decisive solutions rather than representing slow multi-sited changes:

*This is a challenging time for our country. Almost a third of the nation, a million of the most active citizens who cannot stand untruths and lies from the government have already left the country. Once again, the fleeing nation is in danger of disappearing within a few generations, leaving only a name on the maps, a chapter in the history books, and a scattered crowd of people who have lost their identity and no longer know either their language or their past.* (Lithuanian Family Movement)

The existential crisis is further emphasized by equating the present with the communist period – the ‘dark ages’ of Lithuanian history. The spectre of communism is invoked in two main ways. First, politicians argue that the current crisis is rooted in the legacy of the communist era. They claim that the failure of the transitional justice process casts doubts on the decisions made at the beginning of the transformation period. According to them, this is the source of widespread public distrust in the State. They also express resentment toward the privatization process, which is described as the capture of the State’s assets. Responsibility for this is placed on the allegedly self-serving political forces, particularly Vytautas Landsbergis. This emotional narrative conveys frustration and resentment toward mainstream politicians, challenges the legitimacy of the transition process and reforms, and stands in opposition to the hegemonic narrative of the country’s steady progress (Ramonaitė, Vijeikis, 2023).

Second, the parallels with the Soviet era allow politicians to reconstruct a victim-perpetrator narrative, positioning themselves as persecuted and repressed in a manner akin to Soviet dissidents. In this narrative, the authorities and political elites who have held power since independence are cast in the role of perpetrators, treating those who resist in the same way as the authorities did during the ‘dark ages’.

*A little more than thirty years ago, waves of holy indignation and condemnation rolled in Lithuanian radio and television, in Pravda and Komsomolskaya Pravda, and in other publications, over the rally at the monument of A. Mickevičius, organised by ‘a handful of splinters’, ‘bourgeois nationalists and clerics’, ‘reactionaries and obscurantists’, ‘radicals and extremists’ and ‘haters and slanderers of the Soviet order’. The same waves followed the commemoration of the Defenders of Freedom Day – without any explanation or even an attempt to delve deeper into the reasons for this far-from-everyday event, all participants were roundly labelled a ‘booming mob’.* (The National Alliance)



In the far-right discourse, the solution to the existential crisis is mass mobilization in response to an imminent threat. Politicians invoke the memory of the Sajūdis movement to construct an image of the future marked by positive emotions, national unity, and moral, idealistic politics. The proposed way to overcome the crisis is to replicate the independence movement, rallying once again to fight against the existential enemy – the communists and the *nomenklatura*:

*The time has come to take back and renew the state, privatized by a few factions. The only way in the world to change something is to take it and start changing it. And the first step is to awaken people from the darkness of fear, lies, frustration and self-doubt.* (The National Alliance, Lithuanian Family Movement)

The politicians' attempt to awaken the nation highlights the mythologized nature of Sajūdis in the political discourse. In this narrative, Sajūdis becomes a mythical signifier of an uncertain, undefined time – a better past marked by national upheaval, collective sacrifice, and a clear sense of who the enemy was. The movement's image as a struggle against the “evil empire” serves as a schematic narrative template, particularly suited for populists who frame politics as a Manichean battle against the evils of the present. Far-right politicians build on emotional scripts layered over established collective narratives (Wertsch, 2008) to evoke the emotions associated with the movement, while simultaneously stripping the event of its specificity and historical context. These schematic narrative templates (Wertsch, 2004, 2008) form the foundation of the memory process and ‘command emotional identification’ (Hammack, Pilecki, 2012). In this case, the narrative dictates who should be considered righteous and what emotions should be directed toward the politicians.

None of the three political narratives presented can be considered instances of *slow memory*. On the contrary, the narrative of a failed post-communist transformation and the legacy of the previous regime accelerate and condense the memory of what, in the oral history interviews, is portrayed as slow, incremental change. The entire fifty-year period of the Soviet occupation – spanning the Stalinist era, the Khrushchev thaw, and the Brezhnev stagnation – is compressed and remembered only in terms of KGB persecutions and Soviet repression. The populist logic of a political conflict and the construction of political identity requires the identification of antagonistic camps, naming the righteous and the wronged, and clearly identifying actors and events as signifiers of broader processes. The simplification of complex, slow and multidimensional processes is the aim of political narratives. In these memory narratives, only the political aspects of the period are recalled, leaving no space for the slow memory of everyday life during the communist era or the post-communist transformation.

It could even be argued that the goal of politicians is to suppress the slow, complex, and contradictory memory of everyday life, which articulates a much more intricate, multifaceted, and multi-sited process. The logic of political competition requires

simplifying complexity, emphasizing conflict, and constructing two antagonistic camps. In this context, it can be argued that even in the discourse of non-mainstream politicians there is no place for slow memory.

## Conclusion

This study applies the concept of *slow memory* to examine how individuals and far-right politicians construct memories of post-communist transformation. Analysis of oral history interviews and political discourse reveals diverse narratives about the transition period. Several similar narratives emerge in both political and popular discourse, though their manifestations differ. When discussing difficult reforms of the transition period, public resentment targets politicians while also drawing on personal experiences and local impacts. This negative memory contrasts sharply with recollections of the Sajūdis movement, which remain vivid and rich with personal detail. Politicians instead have mythologized the movement, while using it to create a stark moral divide between the righteous and the guilty, and to justify renewed political conflict.

Among the narratives examined, only a minority qualify as slow memory narratives – specifically, those about the transformation period revealed through oral history interviews. These accounts of everyday experience unfold over extended periods, detached from specific events and decisions. They often focus on immediate surroundings and remain largely invisible, sometimes silent (with known wrongdoers left unnamed).

This study demonstrates the value of distinguishing between slow and fast memory. The concept of *slow memory* captures elements that elude both schematic narrative templates and specific narratives. While communicative memory can exhibit both fast and slow characteristics, it fails to differentiate between memory's varying 'speeds'. The significance extends beyond a bottom-up approach to how individuals express memory. Slow memory is multidimensional and nuanced, often lacking concrete actors, decisions, or events while articulating long-term processes that profoundly affect daily life. Furthermore, slow memory is characterized not only by its intangible nature but also by its incomplete representation in the public discourse and political spaces. Therefore, this research contributes to the memory studies by applying the concept of *slow memory* as a tool to reveal memories that exist beyond official, institutionalized accounts and hegemonic narratives – memories that remain intangible, invisible, and flickering at the margins of political representation.

Political narratives, by their nature, operate through condensation and acceleration, fundamentally challenging their capacity to incorporate slow memory. These narratives systematically reduce complex, gradual, and multi-layered processes into simplified stories that advance political objectives. The populist logic driving the political conflict and identity formation requires stark divisions – the explicit naming

of the righteous actors and the offenders. In this framework, politicians actively work to diminish the nuanced, contradictory memory of everyday life that emerges from lived experience. By focusing narrowly on political events and actors, their narratives exclude the textured, slow memory of daily life during both the communist period and the post-communist transition. The inherent demands of political competition – to reduce complexity, to heighten the conflict, and to create opposing camps – effectively prevent the incorporation of slow memory, even within non-mainstream political discourse.

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