

VILNIUS UNIVERSITY

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**POST-DEMOCRACY AND POPULIST DISCOURSES IN
LITHUANIA (2004 - 2016)**

SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Social sciences,
Sociology S 005

VILNIUS 2019

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DISKURSAI LIETUVOJE (2004-2016)**

DAKTARO DISERTACIJOS SANTRAUKA

Socialiniai mokslai,
sociologija S 005

VILNIUS 2019

Disertacija rengta 2014– 2018 metais Vilniaus universitete.

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Disertacija ginama viešame Gynimo tarybos posėdyje 2019 m. balandžio 5 d. 13 val. Vilniaus universiteto, Filosofijos fakulteto 201 auditorijoje. Adresas: Universiteto g. 9, LT-01513 Vilnius.

Disertaciją galima peržiūrėti Vilniaus universiteto bibliotekoje ir VU interneto svetainėje adresu: <https://www.vu.lt/naujienos/ivykiu-kalendorius>

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SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

We are noticing a considerable rise of populist powers in the 21st century. It is described as potentially threatening to liberal democracy in media (Sandford 2017), as well as in scientific literature (Roth 2017). It is a rather paradoxical situation, because after the breakup of the Soviet Union and socialist block, liberal democracy was triumphing in a bigger part of the European continent. It was hailed as the dawning of the new era of harmonious society without archaic ideological battles, where every political problem would be solved through liberal consensus. However, increasing inequality, waves of immigration, crisis of global capitalism and other modern economic and political problems seems to be challenges too difficult for traditional parties. Decreasing electoral turnout and reliance on political leaders, dissolution of ideological differences and other symptoms of democratic erosion could be generally described as the post-democratic condition of modern society. In the place of the political elites who no longer can mobilize political masses, emerge alternative and often radical political subjects. These, sometimes more similar to social movements, than to political parties, new political actors coming from various ideological wings consider themselves to be bearers of true democracy based on people will. Today, when so-called populist parties get more and more attention of the media and are increasingly successful in the elections, the question of conceptualization of populist phenomenon as well as its relation to democracy is more relevant as never before.

In this dissertation, relationship between populism and post-democratic condition of society is studied in the context of post-communist Lithuania. For the sake of maximum concreteness of

empirical analysis, the temporal scope of empirical analysis is limited to 2004-2016 period, We start with the year 2004, when Lithuania joined the European Union and NATO, hereby successfully finishing its post-communist transformation as defined in the transitological theories). Lithuania from the importer of western liberal democratic institutions became one of the most active exporters (between post-communist countries) of the same institutions to the other ex-Soviet Union countries, which are still outside the Western geopolitical block.

Accordingly to adopted theoretical perspectives (C. Mouffe, J. Ranciere, S. Žižek) the post-democratic condition of society is considered to be the knot of three interconnected registers:

1. Imaginary register, where all ideological battles have ended;
2. Symbolic register, consisting of various institutional practices, which help to reduce the political domain to technocratic policy area;
3. Real or ontological register, which covers the political difference between the configuration of existent social order and the fundamental absence of the ground for that social order

Although conceptualizations of post-democracy of the aforementioned authors significantly differ, yet they all accentuate erosion of politics as an area of contestation. Various policy mechanisms displace political domain and reduce political battles to technical administrative problems solved by elected competent administrators.

The repression of antagonism is never conclusive, the pluralistic nature of the social world always generates conflicts that have no rational resolution. That is why the post-democratic condition is never already actualized totality, yet it is an anxious attempt to erase ineradicable ontological origins of antagonism (Mouffe 2005: 9). The

disappearance of ideological differences between traditional parties does not destroy antagonism; it merely raises new and radical political subjects directed against the hegemony of the neoliberal global model.

The of post-democracy prefix *post* itself shows the importance of temporal analysis. In order to demonstrate how neoliberalism gradually reduced political institutions to modern-day post-democratic condition, we draw on the W. Streeck's genealogical analysis of neoliberal capitalism. The post-democratic condition here is approached as evolutionary as well as dialectical process, during which all partial solutions to capitalism crises generate new problems. Neoliberal reforms emancipated capitalism not from state influence (on which it still depends a lot), but from the impact of mass democracy on the distribution of wealth. The analysis of these processes shows that economic conditions determined by transnational political actors and finance diplomacy leave no meaningful choice for traditional parties but to apply neoliberal agenda. This necessarily creates a vast political space for realistic or unrealistic populist alternatives.

In this dissertation, E. Laclau's theory of populism is used to conceptualize this phenomenon. It is post-structuralist theory taking its roots from C. Mouffe's and E. Laclau's discourse theory. Populism is understood here as the political logic of collective identity formation and not as a specific ideology, rhetorical style or political strategy. This approach is essentially formalistic. It includes all ideological or normative variations of populism as far as they are congruent with this formal populist logic. It allows avoiding intrinsic problems of other conceptualizations when the ideological or normative description of phenomenon requires one exception after another.

The construction of populist logic in the theory of E. Laclau is political act *par excellence*, contrarily to stable post-democratic policy procedures. There is no political intervention, which to some extent would be not populist. However, it does not mean that all the political projects are equally populist. The smallest unit of analysis

here is the category of political demand. Populism emerges when lots of unfulfilled political demands connect through the chain of equivalence and form political antagonism between *populus* and the institutional “other”. The extent of populism depends on the scope of demands connected through this chain. In the institutionalized discourses, where the logic of difference is dominating, this chain is reduced to a minimum and it is maximized in the discourses, where society is radically cut into two parts.

The essential linkage between post-democracy and populism hides in the compromise of liberal democracy that embodies both democratic and undemocratic logics. It guarantees as well as restrains exertion of people’s will. Increasingly dominating logic of the society as the regulated system makes populism the almost necessary shadow of democracy – the space, where political demands dissonant with institutionalized political positions are articulated. That means that political balance unsettled by the technocratic political approach of traditional parties is attempted to be reinstated by the populist parties. From this point of view populism is not the anomaly of democracy but its symptom, which paradoxically can rejuvenate democratic institutes as well as destroy them.

2. CURRENT RESEARCH, RELEVANCE AND NOVELTY OF THE DISSERTATION

2.1 Current research on the subject matter

The topic of the dissertation is not widely researched in Lithuanian scientific context. J. Stašienė has analyzed relationships between populism and democracy (Stašienė 2016), R. Račkauskas has examined populist radical right parties (Račkauskas 2018). Phenomenon of post-democracy as dialectics of politicization and depoliticization was described by K. Šerpetis (Šerpetis 2009) and V. Laurėnas (Laurėnas 2014). Hence, both phenomena have been

analyzed separately in Lithuanian scientific literature along with their being no attempts to examine problematics of populism in post-structuralist tradition.

Scientific literature on the topic of populism is immense (e.g. Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, Anselmi 2017, Betz 1994, Brading 2012, Canovan 2005, Goodhart 2017, Horsfield, Mazzoleni and Stewart 2003, Judis 2016, Kazin 1998, Lukacs 2005, Mény and Surel 2002, Moffitt 2016, Mudde 2014, Muller 2016, Richards 2017, Taggart 2000, de la Torre 2014 et al.). Yet the vast majority of it considers populism as phenomenon connected to classical democracy problems and therefore is not relevant to the topic of this dissertation. Analyzing of connections between populism and post-democracy (sometimes the term post-politics is used) is a relatively new tendency in social sciences. In this context, we can mention E. Syngedouw's works on processes of depoliticization (Syngedouw 2004, 2011) in the post-structuralist and psychoanalytic tradition written works of Y. Stavrakakis, which connect populism and political ecology (Stavrakakis 2000, 2009). F. Panizza has modified and adjusted to South American cases E. Laclau's theory of populism (Panizza 2005, 2013). Special mention is due to Essex School of discourse analysis created by E. Laclau and C. Mouffe. Scholars representing this school (A. Norval, D. Howarth, O. Marchart, J. Torfing etc.) elaborated post-structuralist discourse theory in various directions - problematics of democracy (Norval 2007), problems of political identities formation (Howarth 2000), post-foundational political theories (Marchart 2007, 2011) or opportunities for new research fields using post-structuralist methodology (Torfing 1999).

2.2 Novelty and relevance of the dissertation

The novelty of the dissertation is defined by the very topic of the research (Lithuanian political field after transition to democracy) and approach applied for its examination: connections between populism and post-democracy in Lithuanian political field are analyzed

combining post-structuralist theories with post-foundational political theories. The dissertation demonstrates the heuristic research potential of these theories applying them for the first time both in Lithuanian and international research in the case study of political development in Lithuania since the end of post-communist transition as defined in the transitology.

3 AIM, OBJECTIVES AND DEFENDED PROPOSITIONS

The main aim of the thesis is to theoretically analyse connections between populism and post-democracy and empirically apply this analysis for the examination of the politics of contemporary Lithuania after the end of transition to democracy.

In order to achieve the aforementioned aim, the following objectives were set:

- To conceptualize post-democracy, by describing its specific characteristics and the social, economic and political processes which determine them.
- To conceptualize populism in the specific context of post-democracy.
- Applying these conceptualizations and post-foundational discourse analysis (PDA), to examine most salient cases examples of post-democratic populism in the Lithuanian politics after the end of post-communist transition in this country

3.1 Defended propositions

In the light of the aim and objectives, the propositions defended in this dissertation are as follows:

- Post-democratic condition, embracing interconnected ontological, institutional and ideological disavowal registers of political dimension, cannot fully suppress social

antagonisms. Under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism, these antagonisms unavoidably re-emerge, often endangering not only the neoliberal direction of development but also the democratic regime itself.

- Populism on the conceptual level is a fundamentally ideologically neutral phenomena. It is not a specific ideology or strategy, but discursive logic of collective identity formation; therefore, we can only speak about the degree to which discourse of a particular political subject in particular historical period is exemplifying this logic.

- Differently from other most similar post-communist countries which completed democratic transition by process of *refolution* (Poland and Hungary), Lithuania did not take the populist authoritarian turn, because in the critical moments populist forces could not formulate alternative against the primal post-communist party system discourse, which is based on the different evaluation of Soviet past.

- Cases of Lithuanian political parties examined show the complete spectrum of reactions to post-democracy, from anti-post-democratic discourses to parapolitical imitation of regime renovation, which only further consolidates the post-democratic political condition.

- In the Lithuanian political field, it is possible to identify all post-democratic forms of politics disavowal (archipolitics, parapolitics, metapolitics and ultra-politics), which until recently succeeded in neutralizing all the attempts to challenge the dominant neoliberal agenda.

4 RESEARCH METHODS, STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION AND KEY CONCEPTS

Methodologically, the research applies post-foundational discourse analysis (PDA) developed by Essex School of discourse analysis¹. This analytical approach should be a conceptual paradigm understood more like research framework rather than empirical theory in the strict sense. It consists of ontological presumptions, theoretical concepts and methodological principles, but does not advance falsifiable propositions predicting or explaining the logic of different collective actions. Since E. Laclau's theory of discourse is metatheoretical, it contains only most general principles of populist identity construction. Drawing on these principles, for empirical analysis of particular case of populism in Lithuania political field we constructed the original research model, enabling to focus on typical populist articulations.

E. Laclau's theory is based on the presumption that populism is not the type of organization or ideology, while particular party can use (or not) various populist mobilization logics in different stages of its political history. Therefore, we decided to investigate the most intense and clear period of political articulation – elections to parliament, limiting the scope of empirical analysis to three last parliament elections after Lithuanian joined European Union (2008, 2012 and 2016). Technically, 2004 election happened after Lithuania became a member of EU as well, but by the time of election the impact EU policies still did not come to full force shaping the configuration of Lithuanian political field.. Selections of analyzed political parties were

¹ Especially see: Howarth D. 2000, *Discourse*, Buckingham: Open University Press or Howarth D., Norval A. & Stavrakakis Y. (eds) 2000. *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: identities, hegemonies and social change*. Manchester - New York: Manchester University Press.

based on public opinion, that these parties used populist articulations most actively.

Sources used in the research are documents of original party communication about themselves - party manifestos, election programmes, articles in party official or unofficial internet pages, interviews with party members, various political advertisings etc. The aim is to show how collective identity is defined from the inside and not how journalists, critics or scientists describe it.

4.1 Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation consists of five chapters. The main conceptualizations are discussed and genealogical analysis of post-democracy is presented in the first chapter. The post-structuralistic concept of populism is elaborated in the second chapter. The third chapter is devoted to the methodology of the empirical case study.. Applying post-foundational discourse analysis, pre-election identities of five Lithuanian political parties are researched in the fourth chapter,. Finally, the Lithuanian populist configuration is compared with Polish and Hungarian cases, hereby identifying specifics of Lithuanian post-communist context in the fifth chapter.

4.2 Key concepts

To theorize post-democracy we use typology of the modes of repression of political antagonism, where four modes (parapolitics, metapolitics and archipolitics, ultrapolitics) are distinguished. The first three of them: parapolitics, metapolitics and archipolitics are coined by J. Ranciere (Ranciere 1991:61-93). Archipolitics is the tactics of depoliticization which grounds a policy order in the idea of a harmonious community, like various nationalist or neo-communitarian projects. Parapolitics then is a tactic of depoliticization which does not assume that society is harmonious but recognize that it is differentiated along multiple axes. Parapolitics divestsexisting hierarchical societal differentiations of their disruptive qualities by reducing them to a technocratic competition between different

opinions of the better way of administration (Rancière 1999). Metapolitics denounces any of these channeling devices as a false appearance of underlying social structures. The prime example of this tactic is ideology promoted by neoliberal think tanks that trace all existing inequalities to a statist interference in the personal freedom of natural subjects (Ranciere 1991:61-93). The fourth mode of depoliticization ultrapolitics is described by S. Žižek and means “the attempt to depoliticize the conflict by bringing it to its extreme via the direct militarization of politics – by reformulating it as the war between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’, our Enemy” (Žižek 1999: 187). All these modes enforce each other and create one interconnected post-democratic matrix of depoliticization.

The key concept of populism is part of the broader post-structuralist conceptual apparatus created by C. Mouffe and E. Laclau in their *magnum opus* – “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy” (Laclau E. and Mouffe S. 2001 [1985]). The main concepts in their analysis are a chain of equivalence and an empty signifier. Identity is discursively constituted through chains of equivalence where signs are sorted and linked together in chains in opposition to other chains which thus define how the subject is, and how it is not. The empty signifier is the master signifier which organizes political discourse in populist context. It is representative of a collection of various demands, constituting a chain of equivalence. The construction of a chain of equivalence, represented by an empty signifier, is possible through the erection of an antagonistic frontier between the chain of equivalence and some other identity, such as “oligarchy”. The members of the chain of equivalence are equivalent insofar as they are all equally opposed to a common enemy through the antagonistic frontier. Thus, there is no collective identity without antagonism, and, since collective identities are an integral part of politics, there is no politics without antagonism.

5 FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE CASE STUDY

Post-democracy can be defined as the domination of policy mode in politics. This neoliberal, consensual, technocratic political practice represses political antagonism and attempts to foreclose real political dimension. It relocates political conflict to the outside realm (metapolitics and ultra-politics) or negates its existence inside the society (archipolitics and parapolitics). However, political antagonism is an essential feature of society, the pluralistic nature of our social world in itself raises conflicts, which do not have any rational resolution. Hereby, post-democracy can never become totally “post” and is marked by the permanent comebacks of various suppressed conflicts.

The post-democratic reality is consolidated not only ontologically (by denying the political dimension of society), but also through various institutional mechanisms, which are changing the relation of democracy and capitalism. Gradual neoliberal transformation of a welfare state interacts with the declining influence of mass democracy on capitalism: wealth accumulation, efficiency, competitiveness, austerity policies and market domination instead of democratic choices are crucial in political distribution of resources. A depoliticized economy, controlled by various transnational political entities and means of financial diplomacy, leaves no choices for national governments, but to adopt neoliberal policies, disillusioning citizen about control powers of their own democratically elected representatives.

The post-democratic ideology of neoliberalism strengthens the illusion of “end of history”, which is denying political dimension in societies and further legitimizes privatization of a welfare state as a natural, therefore inevitable condition of economic progress. One of the outcomes of this process is the shifting of societal conflicts from political to moral modes. Then instead of contention between left

wing and right wing politics we observe the conflict between the righteous and unrighteous. Another manifestation of this tendency is the rise of new anti-populist populism political discourses, where renewal of the system is just imitated by applying anti-ideological post-democratic logics.

E. Laclau's post-structuralist discursive theory of populism escapes the main problem typical for other theoretical approaches – normative treatment of populism as some kind of subversion of politics. Such view not only makes impossible to separate of populist and non-populist political entities but also is unable to explain the phenomenon itself. In Laclau's theory, populism is understood not as inadequate, defective politics, but as an ontologically defined concept of genuine politics, in which we can always find reference to the main political subject – the people. However, this is not enough in order for concrete political discourse to become fully populist. To achieve that populist discourse needs to establish an antagonistic political frontier with the dominant institutional regime.

The minimal unit of analysis in E. Laclau's theory is the category of political demand. Then, the institutional system cannot answer demands in the differential way (one separate from other), between them a chain of equivalence forms, simultaneously creating an antagonistic frontier between people and an institutional system which is unable to fulfill these demands.

Unfulfillment of many social demands allows to progress from isolated demands to populist demands, based on equivalence. It is exactly from this articulation of demands based on the logic of equivalence, where construction of people as the political subject begins. It means that inside the harmonious society a certain *lack* emerges. The construction of people precisely is an attempt to name this lack. Without this social fracture, no matter how little it is in the beginning, there is no possibility of social antagonism. Hence, this lack is the first essential category constituting populism. The second one is naming the cause of lack – *power* (elite, oligarchy and etc.)

which is unfulfilling the demands of the people. The third category of *empty signifier* emerges when populism matures. While constructing a chain of equivalence there is a need for a common denominator to signify the emerging new political movement. Since it can emerge only from inside the movement (from the chain of demands), it can be only a particular demand, which for some circumstances assumed a central role. This denominator is called an empty signifier and its purpose is to unite populist camp.

The nature of an empty signifier is not connected to ideological or political naiveté or backwardness. It means that it is an elementary fact that every political manifestation is happening in the radically heterogenous social environment. Populistic symbols, of course, do reflect some demands, but cannot be reduced to one of them. An empty signifier means a place in the system of signification, which is impossible to represent. This identity is expressed through the equivalence of many unfulfilled demands and means that fullness of society is unreachable (empty) in populism.

Populism is not a type of the movement and is not connected to the specific ideologies, social or economic characteristics of its participants, specific rhetoric or political questions. It is political logic, manifesting itself in the creation of sociability. This creation is connected to social demands and is always implying some political changes. Political changes in society can happen through the articulation of difference or equivalence. When it is articulated through equivalence connecting various social demands and creating antagonism against the institutionalized “other”, no matter what ideologies or social questions are included, populism is born.

In every political manifestation we can find elements of both logic of equivalence and logic of difference; therefore, populism is a gradual phenomenon in all political discourses. We can speak only about to what degree particular discourses express populist logic and articulate all or just a few populism defining categories. Particular political movements usually make only partly populist discourse

which has the potentiality to become fully populist, or vice versa after making it to the government it is institutionalized and partly or fully loose radical populist categories. Although various elements in populist logic are interconnected causally, their appearance is not a coherent step-by-step process. Hereby we can speak about partly populist discourses, as well as about articulation of particular populist categories.

The specifics of populism under the conditions of liberal democracy are determined by the ambiguity of democracy itself. Liberal democracy consists of two inseparable parts – radical egalitarian demands from marginal parts of society and universal rules of democratic regulation, which control electoral procedures. The first part is at least partly directed against the second – the coercive invasion of egalitarian logic unsettles hierarchical functioning of the societal system. Populism is problematic, not because it is fundamentally undemocratic, but because it refers to the substantive understanding of the people as a political subject, which can (if there is a reason for that) suspend democratic formalities.

The modern European political field is not only polarized between post-democratic technocratization and populist politicization. There are also symbiotic political subjects as well, when the technocratic administration by a party in government coexists with the populist logic of electoral mobilization. It means that pure post-democracy, where governments represent itself only as as competent administrators, is impossible: any political regime needs some kind of additional populist self-legitimization. Post-democratic technocracy cannot fully erase the political dimension as well as clearly articulate demands of the people. Consequently, no matter what political ideology inspires populist mobilizations, they mean only one thing: that the political dimension refuses to accept the end of history and political antagonism.

Through contradiction with post-democratic technocracy, populism assumes two main expressions. Firstly, it unsettles a

common political order and increases the number of political actors participating in politics. Secondly, it positions itself in the periphery of democracy, this is why sometimes it's not easy to differentiate populist mobilizations from spontaneous mass disturbances. This kind of populism could threaten liberal democracy itself if the energy of mass could not be unleashed through democratic channels.

The examination of Lithuanian political party discourses revealed that in the context of tension between populism and post-democracy they represent all the positional spectrum. The discourse of the party "Way of courage" ideally fits into E. Laclau's conceptualization of populism. It is conspicuous case of populism, displaying political logic oriented against post-democratic logic, with a clear antagonism between populism and the institutional "other", preventing the political system from proper functioning.

We can place "National Resurrection" Party, which represents the parapolitical domain of policy, in the opposite part of the populism/post-democracy axis. It is quite a new phenomena in European politics, which could be categorized as anti-technocratic technocracy, which is referring not to the logic of equivalence, but to the logic of difference. Party is modeling its discourse through differences from everybody, while not addressing any common denominator. "While declaring post-democratic exhaustion of traditional parties as the main reason for its birth (being symptom of post-democracy), it claims nothing new, apart from even deeper anti-ideological sentiment. This party gets close to parapolitical purity, because traditional parties still have some ideological promise in its histories or names while being more and more technocratic and consensual. Meanwhile, in the National Resurrection party case we can see only the total neglect of the political domain.

The "Law and Justice" and "Labour" parties we can place in the middle of opposite poles. It is still possible to detect some populist elements, but the main elements of speaking in the name of people and forming antagonisms are already missing. Thus another differential

political option is created, which in its logic does not really differs from traditional political parties. The “Labour” party could be seen as some more populist addition to the social democrats. Its popularity could be interpreted as a signal that while using differential logic the social democrats have left empty space in the political area for left-wing populist mobilization. Meanwhile, the “Law and Justice” party discourse is an attempt to imitate European right-wing discourse, although it is orientated toward the outside of society and is incapable of mobilizing people using populist logic. We can state in this case that the old way of constructing an enemy is no longer appealing, and the new one connected to Eurosceptical tendencies is still not working in Lithuania.

The Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Unions discourse is a separate hybrid case that interconnects agrarian populism and “professional” technocracy. It is characterized by the technocratic variation of a “catch-all” political tactic where the endeavor is not to connect various political and social areas into one coherent ideological or populist formation, but conversely the separation of every field, for which the individual “professional” is responsible” is emphasized. Simultaneously, the populist discourse of “Naisiųvasara” embedded by R. Karbauskis, is being developed. In this discourse we can find some populist references, but the contradiction between countryside idyll and corruption of the city is only intuited, without clear articulation. Although in this hybrid discourse the technocratic part was dominating, we can anticipate the populist one to be more important for mobilizing the electorate in the future.

The aggregative character of Lithuanian populist configuration and its general pro-democratic tendency, in comparison with authoritarian populism in Poland or Hungary, we can explain by referring to critical elections during which in the post-communist context first post-communist party system, based on the evaluation of the communist past, ceases to exist. Analysis of post-communist political tendencies in Poland and Hungary showed that crises of the European Union are

the main factor for the consolidation of right-wing populist parties with Eurosceptical discourses. The Eurosceptical discourse not only helps to mobilize masses but also legitimizes authoritarian decisions in front of the electorate.

In the 2012 elections in Lithuania (after 2008-2009 economic crisis) populist parties, although they had some important achievements, failed to capitalize on them because of the inner disunity. In order to participate in the ruling coalition, they had to accept the main role of social democrats. This not only extended the lifespan of the first post-communist party system but also confined opportunities for populist mobilization. The attempt to use the European Union migration crisis in 2015 by the “Order and Justice” political party failed. The opportunities of the empty space left by social democrats, which suffered from various political scandals, were mainly taken by “Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union” with their successful hybrid discourse.

The further populist configuration of Lithuania will inevitably be influenced by the decay of the political divide, based on consideration of the Soviet past. What will be a new conflict, based on traditional left and right wing argumentation, or more on liberal and traditionalist confrontation, highly depends on the abilities of left-wing politicians to mobilize an appealing alternative for right-wing populism.

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