

Confronting Catholic Fundamentalisms in the Former Soviet Union: The Case of Lithuania



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Center for Equality Advancement (Lygijų galimybių pletros centras)
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Over the past two decades, Lithuania has undergone considerable social, economic and political transformation. In this climate of rapid and often destabilizing change, the Catholic Church has presented itself as providing a sense of continuity and familiarity, thereby strengthening its hold on social and political institutions in Lithuania. Campaigns driven by the European Union (EU) to eliminate discrimination against minorities and non-traditional families have been met by fundamentalist calls to preserve the traditional family and marriage as a national cultural value. In this context, many NGOs are confronting a range of factors that hinder progressive campaigns against fundamentalist politics, including limited funding and reliance on government funding, a lack of cooperation among civil society organizations, and a lack of broad-based popular support. This paper will examine the strategies used by the Center for Equality Advancement, a local women's rights organization, to intervene in parliamentary debates on the National Family Policy Concept bill, which openly discriminates against single mothers and non-traditional families.

Context

In Lithuania, the appeal of religious fundamentalism is rooted in fears of uncertainty and displacement generated by massive social, political and economic transformation. In less than 20 years, Lithuania has evolved from a Soviet republic into an economically weakened state, then into an increasingly prosperous and open nation. In 2004, it acceded to the EU. With the increased mobility of migrants and workers moving into and out of the country, the fear of rapid change and social upheaval has been unsettling to many, and the message of religious fundamentalism has provided an anchor.

Since Lithuanian independence, the Catholic Church and its political allies have been attempting to guide the country according to policies sanctioned by the Church and recognized as aligned with Lithuanian national identity and traditions. Accession to the EU raised fundamentalist concerns that religion and tradition would be undermined as EU programming encouraged the country to follow a secular and tolerant path. For example, the EU has funded a number of social programs and public awareness campaigns that aim to strengthen diversity, combat discrimination against minorities, and provide support for non-traditional families. These ideas are anathema to religious fundamentalists in Lithuania, who view them as weakening the foundations of the nation.

The period between 2007 and 2009 will be recorded in Lithuanian history as a time when reactionary forces strengthened their hold on social and political institutions. Claiming to defend traditional families and national values, conservative, Christian Democrat and populist politicians and organizations worked to strengthen systemic discrimination against ethnic/national minorities, homosexuals, and single and unmarried mothers. Among other reactionary measures, the passage of the Prevention of Domestic Violence Concept bill was halted, despite the dramatic incidence of domestic violence in Lithuania. During this period, the minister of justice and a group of parliamentarians initiated the passing of the draft law entitled Protection of the Embryo in the Prenatal Phase, under which abortion would be legal only for cases that present a danger to the mother's life or health and for pregnancies resulting from rape or incest. The Parliamentary Commission of Family and Child Affairs also introduced an amendment to the Law on the Negative Impact of the Mass Media on Minors, which aimed to prohibit dissemination of information about homosexual relationships on the grounds that it damages the physical, mental, and moral development of minors, violates the public interest, and threatens traditional family values.

The Political Influence of the Catholic Church

While the term religious fundamentalism can have a variety of meanings, the words that author and former Catholic nun Karen Armstrong uses to describe the phenomenon captures the situation in Lithuania: "Fundamentalism represents a kind of revolt or rebellion against the secular hegemony of the modern world. Fundamentalists typically want to see God, or religion, reflected more centrally in public life. They want to drag religion from the sidelines, to which it's been relegated in a secular culture, and back to center stage."¹ Throughout Europe, religious fundamentalism is often assumed to be an external issue or a phenomenon associated with Muslims. In this view, religious fundamentalism could not in principle emerge from within the

continent, as the EU is founded on democratic values and respect for human rights, and promotes the principles of gender equality, diversity and anti-discrimination. As in other countries in the region, however, recent developments in Lithuania indicate that religious fundamentalism is indeed an internal issue and must be addressed as such.

The [Constitution](#)² declares the Republic of Lithuania a secular state; yet in practice, several aspects of political life raise questions about this claim. Although the Constitution recognizes an additional eight traditional Lithuanian religions, in state schools, only the Catholic faith is imparted. Catholic priests are engaged in most social councils and committees that weigh ethical, educational, and even reproductive rights issues, while the Bishops' Conference constantly interferes in policy debates and rallies against abortion, cohabitation, and homosexual partnership. Church representatives were also involved in working groups that drafted the sexual education programs and the national family policy strategy. With so many opportunities to participate in forums related to social interests, the strong influence of the Catholic Church over Lithuania's social politics and politicians is not surprising.

According to public opinion surveys, the Catholic Church is perceived as an honest and trustworthy institution. In order to win the confidence of the population, political parties shape their policies in order to show solidarity with the Church. Conservative political parties openly support the position of the Church and oppose homosexual partnerships, reproductive health rights and sexual education. To avoid publicly opposing the Catholic Church, liberal forces also give in to conservative trends on these issues. Many parliamentarians have openly expressed their homophobic attitudes and have supported intolerant legislation. In 2005, the newspaper Respublika published the viewpoints of each parliamentarian on homosexuality, which the Catholic Church in Lithuania denounces as deviant behaviour. Eighty-nine parliamentarians supported the Church's stance and expressed their hostility towards homosexuality, claiming that it is against human nature and the family. Only 14 parliamentarians opposed the Church and an additional 16 remained neutral.

In 2006, the Commission of Family and Child Affairs, chaired by MP Rima Baskiene from the Peasant and People's Party (formerly the Women's Party) openly supported the position of the Catholic Church against homosexuality and warned the Ombudsperson of Equal Opportunities against interfering in the conflict over the exhibition Life Together: Modern Traditional/Non-Traditional Family. According to Baskiene, officials dealing with sensitive issues such as homosexuality should ignore anti-discrimination legislation and instead act according to the traditions and moral values of the nation.

In 2007, touted as the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All, Lithuania was the first country to ban the entry of the “anti-discrimination truck,” a component of the EU’s For Diversity, Against Discrimination campaign. Moreover, the municipal government of Vilnius refused to issue permission for the city’s first-ever gay pride event. In response, human rights NGOs sent petitions to a number of international bodies and filed complaints with the offices of the Ombudsperson and the General Prosecutor. In 2008, the situation repeated itself, despite the EU’s criticisms concerning homophobia in Lithuania.

In June 2007, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour drafted new amendments to the Law on Equal Opportunities in response to an official report by the European Commission noting Parliament’s failure to incorporate the provisions of EU directives 2000/43/EC and 2000/78/EC dealing with anti-discrimination and equal treatment in the area of employment. Following lengthy and heated discussions, the Law on Equal Opportunities was amended in June 2008, but the influence of conservative politicians resulted in exemptions for the Catholic Church. The amendments specified that the law’s provisions would apply neither to the Catholic Church (and other religious organizations), nor to any institutions or establishments under the Church’s control, which left Catholic schools and social service organizations exempt. In these spheres of activity, the Law on Equal Opportunities is unable to protect the rights of female, LGBT and other minority workers. According to Minister of Social Security and Labour Vilija Blinkeviciute, these amendments were discussed and vetted with the officials of the Catholic Church.

Amendments to the law also established compensation for discrimination and included an important provision allowing NGOs, associations, and other legal entities to defend the public interest in court. Ten non-governmental human rights organizations petitioned the president of Lithuania, Parliament, and the Constitutional Court to delete the provisions that would allow religious organizations to discriminate and thus violate the Constitution of Lithuania and the Law of Religious Communities, but no official response was offered on the matter.

Preserving the Traditional Family as a National Cultural Value

Adopted in 1992, the Constitution of Lithuania enshrined the importance of family in society. Since that time, demographers and social scientists analyzing the tendencies of population development in the country have concluded that Lithuanian society has been experiencing a demographic decline, the postponement of marriage, decline of the traditional family, the emergence of new family forms, high rates of divorce, increased use of birth control, and a lower fertility rate. While recommendations to address this demographic decline have included introducing

comprehensive and sustainable family policies with gender equality as one of the underlying principles, Lithuanian policies have as their primary objective the preservation of the traditional family (culturally defined as a married man and woman and their children).

Since 2004, when Lithuania acceded to the EU, politicians of conservative, right, and populist parties have openly rejected policies that would promote gender equality and have strengthened calls to preserve the traditional family and marriage as a national cultural value. Diversity of family models and control over fertility are often interpreted as threats to the Lithuanian nation and statehood. As a result, family policies discriminate against cohabitating unmarried couples and homosexual couples, stigmatize single motherhood, and deepen the poverty of single parents (usually mothers) and their children following divorce.

In June 2008, Parliament approved the National Family Policy Concept bill, which defines as state subjects only those families that are based on the marriage of a man and a woman, and can thus be used to deny state recognition and assistance to families that fall outside this norm. This bill would not only result in social exclusion and stigmatization, it would also increase the risk of women living in violence and poverty. For example, a woman living with an abusive husband might be hesitant to obtain a divorce, as she and her children would not be considered a family under the state’s new narrow definition.

Despite critical assessments from the press, intellectuals, social activists and social scientists, Parliament approved the National Family Policy Concept bill. Two weeks prior to the vote, the dean of the Vilnius Cathedral encouraged his flock to pray for the passage of the bill. Politicians heard his prayer, or more precisely, his thinly veiled threat. Aware that priests exert significant influence in small Lithuanian villages, and that parishioners seek their direction on political matters, politicians understood that disobeying the order could create problems for them in the parliamentary elections which were to take place in autumn 2008. When asked to present his program after recent elections, the new Speaker of the Parliament (representing the Populist Party) said that his program was short: he was willing to follow the Ten Commandments.

The Role of NGOs in Fighting Lithuanian Religious Fundamentalism

The NGO sector in Lithuania has grown increasingly active and visible and has been responsible for a slow, but important, shift in society. NGOs have played a critical role in drafting innovative legislation, serving on government committees and advising the government, yet

their influence in other areas is limited. For organizations engaged in advocacy on equality, human rights and anti-discrimination, numerous problems hinder the effectiveness of their work, including limited funding, reliance on government funding, lack of cooperation with the government and among organizations, and lack of public participation. While finding stable sources of funding is a challenge for NGOs worldwide, in Lithuania the lack of funding from institutional sources is compounded by a weak tradition of philanthropy.

When Lithuania joined the EU in 2004, the flow of funds from foreign donors decreased sharply. For example, in 2000 foreign donors provided EUR 60 million for Lithuanian NGOs; by 2005, that amount had dropped to EUR 25 million. Although the government has stepped in to replace some of the funding that was lost, this has created a new problem. Many NGOs, now heavily dependent on government funding, are hesitant to criticize the government. Strategies to oppose religious fundamentalism will almost certainly not receive financial support from the State. Some groups, trying to obtain financing from the government, feel they are in direct competition with potential allies and forego opportunities to cooperate. This dynamic has resulted in the lack of an integrated approach to combat discrimination.

Among women's organizations, a disparity of goals negates the possibility of a strong and united front. Few among Lithuania's women's organizations adhere to feminist ideals; indeed the term "feminism" carries a negative connotation in this context. Many women's rights groups define their function according to the service they provide (e.g., assisting battered women or collecting donations for children) and do not tackle structural issues such as women's reproductive rights or gay rights. Some women's rights NGOs, for example, refused to participate in initiatives to oppose the National Family Policy Concept bill.

Perhaps no single barrier is as significant in hindering the effectiveness of the work of women's rights NGOs as the lack of a politically active grassroots. With the exception of the Catholic Church, which is very politically active, few organizations engaged in advocacy enjoy widespread support or a large membership base. Although in other countries, such as the United States, churches are important centres of community and political organizing, many of these countries also enjoy a solid tradition of grassroots activism. Lithuania, however, is a post-Soviet state, and during the Soviet era individual political engagement was suppressed. As a result, the generations that grew up under Soviet rule are passive and wait for the State to take the first step, rather than taking political initiatives themselves.

While the Catholic Church boasts the country's largest, unrivalled grassroots organization, its conservative ideals render it one of the biggest barriers for progress in the realms of gender equality and gay rights. Without their own base of supporters to draw on, progressive NGOs engaged in advocacy are essentially powerless to push their agenda. For example, the National Family and Parents Association, a close ally of the Catholic Church, launched a campaign against the preschool equality program entitled Gender Loops. One of the program's modules briefly and in age-appropriate terms discussed tolerance towards gays, recounting a fairytale about a king and his king. Catholic Church representatives actively instigated panic about the program, and other conservative organizations joined their efforts. When women's and human rights organizations communicated their concerns to the minister of social security and labour, responsible for implementation of and compliance with equality measures, he openly admitted that their opinions were unimportant to him and that he did not plan to react. As NGOs do not enjoy the support of a broad popular base in Lithuania, they are not able to mobilize by reaching out to like-minded voters, organizing letter-writing campaigns, or pursuing other strategies that are commonly employed in countries with a longer track record of grassroots organizing.

The Center for Equality Advancement's Response: An Example of a Campaign against the Catholic Church's Initiatives

The Center for Equality Advancement does not shy away from criticizing the policies and proposals advocated by the Catholic Church and conservative politicians acting on its behalf in Parliament and within the government. Indeed, many of our projects are geared towards challenging the conservative, anti-women, and anti-family initiatives that Lithuania's religious fundamentalists have spawned. But any campaign against Church-supported initiatives is hindered by the lack of a large grassroots, limited funding, and the difficulty of generating press attention in this age of media saturation. Therefore, we must strategically choose our battles and be resourceful when choosing our means.

In the spring of 2008, when Parliament began debating the National Family Policy Concept bill, which had languished in committee for months, we felt the time had come to act. The bill not only posed a significant threat to women and non-traditional families, but unlike other discriminatory and reactionary initiatives supported by Catholic fundamentalists, it would also clearly and directly impact large swaths of Lithuanian society. We felt that a campaign against the National Family Policy Concept bill was the right thing to do and had the ability to generate more attention than other campaigns we had undertaken in the past.

The first part of our strategy to focus media attention on the National Family Policy Concept bill consisted of a campaign to print Mother's Day postcards with information that would make journalists aware that motherhood is often synonymous with poverty in Lithuania. This information attracted media attention because amid all the sweet and flowery discourses of Mother's Day, journalists were seeking something unique that would stand out from the common news. In turn, we used the media coverage to discuss the consequences of this bill, which was a clear assault on mothers and families.

When Parliament began debating the bill, we moved to the second part of our strategy. Along with other women's rights NGOs (including The New Generation of Women Initiative, Vilnius Women's House, Tolerant Youth Association, Lithuanian Family Planning and Sexual Health Association, Kaunas Women's Association, Youth Center In Corpore, and The New Left 95) we organized a vigil in front of Parliament. A few dozen protesters from CEA and allied groups carried signs encouraging parliamentarians not to approve the discriminatory National Family Policy Concept bill. Some elements of the protests provided interesting visuals and generated much media coverage. For example, we collected a pile of children's toys of children's toys that also "protested" in front of Parliament, and we hung slogans on the toys demanding that parliamentarians stop discriminating against women and children. We also played music at the protest, delivered speeches, and held a tongue-in-cheek marriage ceremony.

Our efforts paid off. The demonstrations managed to attract the attention of journalists, and progressive intellectuals joined the debate, strengthening our arguments. The media, in general, provided fair coverage of the issue, serving as an important conduit of information. Numerous print and internet articles and editorials were devoted to the bill and its consequences, and on several occasions CEA staff were approached for comments and analysis. Although we were few in numbers, the publicity that our strategy received focused the attention of citizens and the media on a bill that had until then remained uncontroversial. We were able to demonstrate that behind the beautiful, saccharine phrases about supporting families was a bill that would infringe upon human rights and stigmatize women and children. Although the bill ultimately passed, we felt that our campaign, which had catalyzed a previously non-existent societal and media dialogue, had some success.

Compared to the machinery of the Catholic Church, our campaign was small and limited, but we were able to attract the media and the press and to disseminate our information on a much larger scale than we had anticipated. While our actions were not able to stop the law's passage, we were able to raise awareness about this issue, which was important during the recent parliamentary election and during the

formation of the new ruling coalition. It is necessary to recognize, however, that all criticism of the Catholic Church was redirected towards parliamentarians. Strategically downplaying its interference in political matters, the Church again managed to avoid direct criticism. In this way, religious fundamentalism in Lithuania is like a chameleon, difficult to distinguish and catch.

Next Steps: Future Struggles against Fundamentalism in Lithuania

In the Lithuanian context, the Catholic Church presents itself as a defender of the national identity and as the only organization that openly opposed the Soviet occupation. In this way, it is effectively able to frame any opposition to its moral authority as the propagation of amoral values. In an ideological battle, the manipulation of public discourse is a crucial tactic, and it has become common in Lithuania to use the rhetoric of traditional values for the purpose of rationalizing intolerance toward others. When considering strategies and actions to defy the Church, the most difficult aspect is to find a balance between the ability to attract attention (i.e., generate media coverage) and to articulate a strong moral position, in order to fend off opposition from the Church's supporters.

As James Lull states, hegemony implies a willing agreement by people to be governed by principles, rules and laws that they believe operate in their best interests, even though in actual practice they may not. Social consent can be a more effective means of control than coercion or force. One social group could consolidate hegemony upon others if it could show or prove that its aims and intentions correspond to common goals. In Lithuania, the common goal of supporting the traditional family safeguards the nation's strong foundation. It would be difficult to find a more "natural" and uniting purpose.

When considering counter-strategies, it is necessary to design plans that can be easily understood and supported by populist approaches. Our actions in this case were to appeal to a common concern for children's welfare by stressing that members of parliament who would vote for the National Family Concept bill would in effect deprive children being raised by single mothers or non-traditional families of the recognition that they are growing up in a family.

In Lithuania, the Catholic Church concerns itself not only with spiritual matters, but also with strengthening its economic and political power. Our response to the appeal of fundamentalism in Lithuania should be to recognize that religion and spirituality do have a role in personal, social, and political spheres—but their role in Lithuania must change. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "[t]he Church must be reminded that

it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.” This will require a sea change in attitudes towards the Church. Increased and effective grassroots organizing are crucial aspects of any attempt to shift public opinion against the Church’s present role, as is becoming more effective at outreach and working with moderate elements within the Catholic Church on common goals.

It is also necessary to find ways to unite civil society’s efforts not only on questions that affect women’s rights, but also when combating other types of discrimination. Only a consolidated effort can help us fight effectively against religious fundamentalism. CEA has initiated efforts to create a coalition of allied organizations that would work together to address issues that affect minority and excluded groups. Finally, we must become more creative and proactive about fundraising, recognizing that without stable sources of funding, we will be unable to mount an effective strategy against religious fundamentalism in Lithuania. Our strategy is long-term and forward-looking. Results will not materialize overnight or even over the next few years, but we are confident that over time and with a coherent strategy, we will strengthen the response of women’s rights organizations and allied groups to fundamentalism in Lithuania.

Endnotes:

¹ Jim Wallis, “Fundamentalism and the Modern World: A dialogue with Karen Armstrong, Susannah Heschel, Jim Wallis, and Feisal Abdul Rauf,” *Sojourners Magazine*, Mar.-Apr. 2002.

² The English version of the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania is available at the official website of the Lithuanian parliament: www3.lrs.lt/home/Konstitucija/Constitution.htm.

Author Bios:

Virginija Aleksejūnė has served as executive director of the Center for Equality Advancement in Vilnius, Lithuania since 2003; she is responsible for strategic planning and management of the budget and staff. During her nine years of work in the field of gender rights and anti-discrimination, Virginija has managed over 50 national and international projects and conducted research on gender equality, multiple discrimination, the inclusion of socially excluded groups, tolerance and diversity. She has also conducted trainings for teachers, civil servants and employers on tolerance, anti-discrimination, and human rights in Lithuania and internationally (Georgia, Ukraine).

Margarita Jankauskaitė, PhD has worked as a project manager at the Center for Equality Advancement since 2003; she is responsible for designing initiatives and analyzing policies in the areas of multiple discrimination, gender equality, gender mainstreaming, women’s rights and anti-discrimination. As project manager at CEA, she has conducted anti-discrimination trainings for civil servants, teachers and NGO management staff. Margarita has also worked extensively on projects dealing with gender equality and violence against women both internationally (in Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, and Ukraine) and as a national expert. As a researcher, she has participated in projects that explore intersecting forms of discrimination relating to gender, ethnicity and sexuality. Margarita is also a part-time lecturer at the European Humanities University and is often quoted in the Lithuanian press on issues of gender equality and the social exclusion of marginalized groups. She has a PhD in Humanities and a diploma in Art History from the Vilnius Academy of Art.

Vilana Pilinkaitė-Sotirovičs, PhD has been a project coordinator at the Center for Equality Advancement and a lecturer in gender history at the European Humanities University since 2005. Her research interests include human rights and gender equality policies in the EU and Lithuania. She has conducted extensive research on the quality of gender and equality policies as well as on general gender equality and machinery, unemployment, intimate citizenship, and gender-based violence. In 2008-2009 she published an article entitled “Paradoxes of Gender Equality in Lithuania: Violence against Women and Equal Opportunities” in *Feminist Conversations: Women, Trauma and Empowerment in Post-Transitional Societies*, Dovile Budryte, Lisa M. Vaughan and Natalya T. Riegg (Editors), Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008; and another co-authored with her colleague Dovile Budryte, “Lithuania: Progressive legislation without popular support” in *Minority rights in Central and Eastern Europe*, Bernd Rechel, (Editor), London, New York: Routledge, 2009.

Organizational Bio:

Center for Equality Advancement/Lygių galimybių pletros centras is an NGO established in 2003. CEA implements various projects to promote social justice and equality. CEA aims to advance the values of an open and democratic society by encouraging gender dialogue, encouraging tolerance, reducing social exclusion, and combating discrimination on the basis of sex, age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability. CEA conducts seminars, organizes public campaigns, prepares publications, conducts research and provides recommendations to improve policies of gender equality, equal opportunities and social inclusion. www.gap.lt/en