

**„YOU’RE BEING HYSTERICAL“ AND „THIS IS A WITCH-HUNT“:  
DISCOURSES DISCREDITING GENDER  
IN ESTONIAN MEDIA**

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## Abstract

This thesis analyses the terms ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ as analytical categories in the theoretical framework of the anti-gender discourse. I locate the anti-gender discourse in the Estonian context, drawing out its main tactics: self-victimization, being triggered by specific events, and instrumentalising the anti-communist and nationalist elements that are embedded in the social and historical context that the anti-gender actors operate in. Then, I conduct case studies on events in Estonia where the use of ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ has become particularly salient. In the case of ‘hysteria’, I analyse the media coverage of a theatre director’s act of violence against a woman, the media coverage of a feminist campaign condemning the further platforming of this person, and the public anti-feminist outcry that followed in 2017–2018. These events were a part of establishing ‘hysteria’ in the Estonian public discourse as a tactic to discredit gender and obstruct further criticism of violence against women. In the case of ‘witch-hunt’, I analyse the media coverage of the far-right populist party EKRE upon their admission to the Parliament of Estonia in 2015. I look at the political criticism that EKRE’s members received for using racist language and advocating for fascism, and their tactic of titling this criticism ‘a witch-hunt’, comparable with Donald Trump’s use of the term. I draw out how the ‘witch-hunt’ discourse has structural similarities with the anti-gender discourse and how it appropriates a historical gender order in order to diffuse accountability of politically powerful men. The aim of the analysis I conduct in this thesis is to explore how gender has become discredited in a broader sense than the particular anti-gender campaigns observed in the existing literature. I also aim to explore the implications of the normalisation of this discrediting and articulate the tactics that the discourses of ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ entail.

## Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

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Signed \_\_\_\_\_ (Piret Karro)

(Signature appears on the hard copy submitted to the library)

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## Introduction

Six weeks after I had arrived in Budapest in 2018 to begin my master's studies at the Gender Studies department, the Hungarian authorities erased my program from the list of accredited academic programs. Due to this, CEU was not able to enroll new students to the two-year MA program in Gender Studies, and the Eötvös Loránd University had to close their department. At the same time, the government of Hungary had put CEU under legal pressure to end their activities in the country. This meant that my cohort became the last generation of students who can acquire an academic degree in Gender Studies in Hungary to date. The political leaders of the country “publicly denied the legitimacy of gender studies as an academic subject“ (Aspasia 2019: 1).

At that time, I knew that CEU is struggling to stay in Hungary, and that the government's efforts to force the university into exile are motivated by political reasons – or more precisely, ideological reasons. That autumn in class, I learned the name of the discourse that was one piece in the puzzle of this ideology – the anti-gender discourse. This discourse existed in my local context in Estonia, too – propagated mostly by the In Defense of Family and Tradition Foundation (SAPTK). The similarities included a talk of “gender ideology”. Before learning to analyse this subject matter academically, I had perceived the actors of this discourse as harmful and destructive, especially towards women and LGBTQ+ communities.

In the end of my first year at CEU, an alarming political change happened in Estonia: the radically nationalist Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) joined the government coalition in March 2019. EKRE's ideological work is closely tied to SAPTK. Their respective online webpages exchange news media often, their values are very compatible, and they have supported each other's campaigns publicly. Therefore, this political change also marked the institutionalisation of the anti-gender discourse in Estonia. EKRE's own public rhetoric was often condemned for its racist and xenophobic statements and some hoped that their inclusion into the government would make their hate speech more benign. While the political party is subject to some liability, SAPTK and its leading members have managed to make statements inciting violence a banal phenomenon, comparable to the rhetoric of the Fidesz party. In Hungary, the cultivation of the anti-gender discourse resulted in the ban of gender studies (Barát, Erzsébet 2020: 22).

The decision to ‘ban’ gender studies in Hungary was part of a wider transnational political process. This process consists campaigns against abortion rights, campaigns against the legal recognition of same sex partnership, against criminalizing domestic and intimate partner violence, etc. These are rights that feminist gender politics represent. Legal action against these campaigns questions not only the academic discipline of gender studies, but undermines “institutions and politics that, in the first place, were established based in feminist insight, knowledge, and perspective“ (Aspasia 2019: 2). Therefore, the organisations that cultivate the anti-gender discourse and the political parties that institutionalise it are working in a wider anti-feminist framework.

In my work as a feminist critic writing about culture and politics in Estonia, I have experienced particular resistance to “feminist insight, knowledge, and perspective” and to publishing gender analysis in cultural magazines. This resistance comes in the form of, for example, calling feminist authors “hysterical” for their stance of criticizing men’s violence against women. This has guided me to look critically at language that also discredits gender, but that is not established – and perceived – as a coherent discourse such as the anti-gender discourse. This language includes the terms ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ that I have chosen to use as analytical categories in this thesis. The genealogy of both is the one of misogyny – historically, the physical condition that was named ‘hysteria’ was seen as a particularly feminine trouble, and the wave of trials and persecution of ‘witches’ in early modern Europe and North-America resulted in the death of mostly women.

When EKRE gained their first 7 mandates of the 101 in the Estonian parliament in 2015, they began to retort the criticism their members received with calling it a ‘witch-hunt’. The criticism was against their obvious use of racist and xenophobic language, and in some cases, use of Nazi Germany symbols and statements that favoured fascism as a political regime. This rhetorical tactic is similar to how Donald Trump titled the criminal investigations he was subjected to in 2017–2019 a witch-hunt. The aim of the tactic is to avoid addressing the criticism by portraying it as unfounded and trivial, and the political person or party as undeservingly subjugated to it.

The discourses surrounding ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ consist of particular tactics which are implemented for certain effect. Calling feminist criticism ‘hysteria’ trivialises the stance against gendered violence, and as an effect, normalises the anti-gender sentiment. Calling the criticism of a problematic and powerful male figure a ‘witch-hunt’ subverts the gender order

by co-opting the historical subjugation of women – as the dominated class – with the aim to direct attention away from the potential misdeeds or even criminal acts of these men, and creates an effect of them as the victim of an unjust process. Moreover, both categories are used in structurally similar tactics, explored in this thesis. Implementing language which is embedded in the history of misogyny for an anti-feminist cause contributes to similar aims as the anti-gender discourse does.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I give an overview of the theoretical framework of the anti-gender discourse in the Estonian context. I establish the key actors of the discourse in Estonia, and the people and organisations who have distributed this terminology. I discuss the sociopolitical context that this is set in, namely Estonian anti-communism and nationalism. I also give a brief historical overview of the terms ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ in order to establish them as gendered terms and therefore, worthy of being analysed in the anti-gender framework.

In Chapter 2, I analyse the use of the term ‘hysteria’ based on a chain of events that took place in Estonia in early 2018. This chain of events includes a theatre director who was under investigation for intimate partner violence, an act of feminist resistance against this person being commissioned to direct a theatre performance at a politically significant event, and the public anti-feminist outcry that followed. This chain of events established the discourse of ‘hysteria’ in the popular culture in Estonia. In this chapter, I show how the term ‘hysteria’ was implemented in this case to obstruct further analysis and feminist criticism of violence against women.

In Chapter 3, I analyse the use of the term ‘witch-hunt’ based on public debate around the inclusion of EKRE’s members into the Parliament of Estonia in 2015. EKRE received much criticism for their politics and rhetoric at that time and retorted by calling the criticism a ‘witch-hunt’, similarly to Donald Trump’s tactics. In this chapter, I borrow elements from the anti-gender discourse and show how these can be observed in the discourse surrounding the use of ‘witch-hunt’ as well.

In the conclusion of this thesis, I bind these discourses together and articulate their shared tactics.

## 1. From the Far-right 'Anti-gender' To the Normalisation of Discrediting Gender<sup>1</sup>

“Gender ideology” is a concept that emerged in the Vatican, first echoing in documents such as *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988) and *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), which speak of a “true genius of women” (John Paul II 1995). The concept was developed as a strategy to oppose the acknowledgement of sexual and reproductive rights in the United Nations rights system, in preparation for the UN 1995 Beijing conference on women (Kuhar, Roman and David Paternotte (eds.) 2017: 9–10). Nowadays, reference to ‘gender ideology’ has become a particular strategy used by a transnational network of far-right political and fundamentalist Catholic groups in Europe and the Americas (Gunnarsson Payne, Jenny 2020). It is systematically implemented to undermine policies which aim to protect women and LGBTQ+ communities from gendered and sexualised violence. Within the anti-gender discourse, the claims opposing these policies are often based on references to Catholic morality and ‘traditional family values’ – an institution that includes a married man and woman and their (biological or adopted) children. (Kuhar, Roman and David Paternotte (eds.) 2017: 9) In the Estonian case, explored in this chapter, these claims are more often based on an appeal to the Estonian nationalist consciousness, which may allow for a larger common ground than Christianity (Velmet, Aro 2019: 477–478).<sup>2</sup>

However, it is not only the explicit labelling of ‘gender’ of the anti-gender discourse operating in the far-right political discourse but there are strategies at play which indirectly gender certain categories to oppose women’s and LGBTQ voices and rights. In this thesis, I will study the uses of the gendered terms of ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’, functioning to either undermine criticism of violence against women (‘hysteria’), or that of anti-feminist political institutions (‘witch-hunt’). The functional elements of the discourses in which these terms are implemented and politicised are similar to the ones within the anti-gender discourse. They both are usually

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<sup>1</sup> I have incorporated a revised and adapted course paper into this chapter with my thesis supervisor’s knowledge. The paper, titled „The anti-gender rhetoric of the right-wing: the case of Estonia“ was submitted to Violetta Zentai in the course *Inequalities in Central Eastern Europe* (Winter 2018).

<sup>2</sup> In a 2007 survey, the Apostolic Administration of Roman Catholic Church in Estonia was reported to have 6000 members, while the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church had the highest number of members: 200,000. In a 2005 survey, 80 per cent of Estonians reported to attend religious services never or 1–2 times a year. For local non-Estonians, this percentage was 60, while 24 per cent of non-Estonians reported to attend religious services 3–4 times a year. For Estonian respondents, almost half of the respondents never prayed, and 16 per cent reported to pray every day. For non-Estonian respondents, one fourth reported to never pray, and 36 reported to pray every day. See both tables at Jaanus, Eva-Liisa 2016: 183; 179.



triggered by a particular political/cultural event and include a tactic of self-victimization and they operate within an anti-communist framework. The effect of the direct and implicit discourses I am analysing is also similar to the anti-gender discourse: both aim to enforce and maintain the hegemony of patriarchal gender hierarchies.

In this chapter, I give an overview of the main components of the anti-gender discourse and how they function within the Estonian context. I will then elaborate on the anti-communism frame, particularly zombie socialism in Estonia, which is an important functional tool for the discourses of ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ (Chelcea, Liviu and Druță, Oana 2016). This will be followed by the genealogy of the terms ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’, to show that these terms are already gendered prior to them becoming part of these particular anti-feminist discourses. I will compare the discourses of ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ with the tactics within the anti-gender discourse to show how these two terms produce the normalisation of discrediting gender.

### **1.1. The 'anti-gender discourse' in the Estonian socio-political context**

On December 13, 2018, Varro Vooglaid, head of the In Defense of Family and Tradition Foundation (*Sihtasutus Perekonna ja Traditsiooni Kaitseks*, SAPTK) handed over a petition to Mailis Reps, the Minister of Education of Estonia, voicing concerns over the “ideology of sexual education” that is taught to children in Estonian schools and kindergartens. Signed by over 2000 people, the petition demanded that

Estonian schools would not become the breeding ground of anti-family ideology that deforms the meaning of family and marriage; that the propaganda of gay and gender ideology would be removed from the education materials used in schools; and that the ideals of natural family and faithful marriage it is based on would be systematically emphasised in schools and kindergartens, as well as the ideals of masculinity and femininity, and fatherhood and motherhood.<sup>3</sup> (Vooglaid, Varro 2018)

This petition is just one example of a series of anti-gender campaigns that have been regularly taking place all over Europe since the 2010’s. Anti-gender is a term used as an analytical tool to explore the constitutive elements of this kind of discourse shared in Europe and the Americas: opposing “gender” as a central threat to the stability of European societies. (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018: 8) Often, gender is called an ideology as a scapegoat to find the culprit of any kind of problem in society. There is literature on the contemporary anti-gender

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<sup>3</sup> Originally in Estonian, my translation.

campaigns with similar discourses and strategies in France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia (Kováts, Eszter and Maari Põim (eds.). 2015), Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Russia, Slovenia, Spain (Kuhar, Roman and David Paternotte (eds.) 2017), Lithuania (Buschmann, Dovainė 2017), and on the Estonian case (Velmet, Aro 2019; Einman, Agnes 2020). The campaigns opposing gender in these countries “bear a striking resemblance”, and can communicate with other similar organisations transnationally (Kuhar, Roman and David Paternotte (eds.) 2017: 2). Moreover, Erzsébet Barát has recently argued that the act of redefining “gender” as an “(hideous) ideology” in Hungary has become a tactic in the strategy of discrediting gender (Barát, Erzsébet 2020: 24).

In this thesis, I am following the theoretical framework Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte have outlined for the anti-gender discourse in their *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe. Mobilizing against equality*. The editors show that this framework is relevant across countries in Europe, although the specific arguments used can be context-specific. One of the core terms in these campaigns is the coining of *gender ideology*. This term is constructed to represent gender as something that “threatens most societies, especially in the West, and endangers mankind,” as Kuhar and Paternotte have articulated. *Gender is said to be ideological* in that it allegedly refuses the existence of sexual differences and gender complementarity, and so its ‘true’ aim is to eliminate the essential foundation of the family. (Kuhar, Roman and David Paternotte (eds.) 2017: 2–5)

Indeed, gender ideology is understood as “a term initially created to oppose women’s and LGBT rights activism as well as the scholarship deconstructing essentialist and naturalistic assumptions about gender and sexuality”. (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018: 8) The concept bares several names: *gender ideology*, *gender theory* or *genderism*, all of which are used more or less in accordance with the same rhetoric. In Estonia, the term most frequently used in right-wing publications is *gender ideology*, translated into Estonian: *sooideoloogia*. There has been an corollary attempt to create a stronger alienation-effect in some countries by using the English term *gender* in the local language, e.g. *genderism* in Lithuanian. (Buschmann, Dovainė 2017) With rare exceptions of using the half-translation “*gender-ideoloogia*”, (Vooglaid, Varro 2018) the most common choice in Estonia is the fully-translated version “*sooideoloogia*”. Nevertheless, the claim remains that the term stands for an alien and hostile propaganda that is not integral to the ‘native culture’ of the society.

The main intermediaries mobilising against gender ideology in Estonia can easily be identified and their relevant histories traced. One of the main organisers of the anti-gender campaigns has been the In Defense of Family and Tradition Foundation (SAPTK), led by lawyer and social figure Varro Vooglaid and journalist Markus Järvi. Both men began their campaign in the mid-2000s by publishing articles advocating against abortion – which was legal in Estonia since the mid-1950’s. (Velmet, Aro 2019: 474) Vooglaid and Järvi founded SAPTK in 2011, closely following the rhetoric and even visual elements of the Brazilian anti-communist Catholic movement, Tradition Family Property (Velmet, Aro 2019: 475) mixed with terms taken over from the Catholic Church, such as the “culture of death” and “culture of life” in their campaigns against abortion rights. (Kuhar, Roman and David Paternotte (eds.) 2017: 6)

SAPTK claims to stand for a traditional society and European cultural heritage that honours the family, moral order, human dignity and human rights and property, all based on the teachings of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> On their weblog called Objektiiv, the organization regularly publish opinion articles against abortion rights, LGBT rights, and immigration. SAPTK’s core claim is that policies allowing for any kind of liberties in these domains of life are made for ideological pursuits and oppose the law of nature and traditions. Objektiiv also publishes news articles translated from international sources, mainly those depicting transgender activists as ridiculous and immigrants as criminals. On the site, news from the governments of Hungary and Poland are kept in the focus and Christian morals are emphasized throughout.<sup>5</sup>

### *1.1.1 Anti-communism and nationalism in Estonia*

In countries in Central Eastern Europe (CEE), which were under the rule and/or ideological influence of the Soviet Union in the wake of World War II, the alienating effect of *gender ideology* is often achieved through presenting gender as the return of totalitarianism. A vocabulary known to people with experience of the Soviet Union, and shared traumas from that era are used as references to sow fear and resentment of gender-based movements. The comparison claims that *gender ideology* is the return of the communist ideology, in which “totalitarianism has made a costume change and now appears in the mantle of freedom, tolerance, justice, equality, anti-discrimination and diversity.” (Kuhar, Roman and David Paternotte (eds.) 2017: 6–7) Political work for equal rights is framed as something alien, unnatural, and unwanted, and I would claim that invoking the anti-communist framework in

<sup>4</sup> The webpage of SAPTK can be found at <https://saptk.ee/> [accessed 29 May 2020].

<sup>5</sup> The webpage of Objektiiv can be found at <http://objektiiv.ee/> [accessed 29 May 2020].

this context is an instrumentalization of the sensitivities of people with shared fears and traumas in post-Soviet Europe.

In the late 1980's, during the struggles to gain independence from the Soviet Union, the idea of an independent democratic state became strongly tied to the idea of a culturally and linguistically homogeneous country. In fact, only around 60% of the residents in Soviet Estonia spoke Estonian as their mother tongue at the time. The nationalist intellectuals argued that sovereignty can only be achieved through limiting migration and helping birth rates to increase. These ideas were formative enough to shape the principles that were articulated in the political declarations of Estonian independence in 1991 (Velmet, Aro 2019: 462–466). When Estonia joined the European Union in 2004, this understanding of national sovereignty to be secured through a monolingual nation and high birth rates was the grounds for a wave of Euro-skepticism, (Velmet, Aro 2019: 467) stigmatizing the European Union mainly as a transnational institution hostile to the 'nation (state)' that is acted out by its gay rights and migration agenda.

From the late 1990s to early 2000s, the anti-communists found a common language with those opposing the European Union. European individualism and liberalism was somehow interpreted as 'crypto-communism'. (Velmet, Aro 2019: 468) As the historian Aro Velmet has summarised, the EU was seen as too leftist with its policies of redistribution, anti-war sentiment, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. These principles were framed as the totalitarian pressure of a small corrupt transnational elite that suppresses pro-nationalist views and censors opinions that do not support the liberal dogmas coming from 'Brussels'. The migration politics of the EU were portrayed as empowering the local Russian community and reinforcing the extinction of the Estonian nation. This implied a comparison with the USSR. When Estonia joined the EU in 2004, the local conservative nationalists stated that the EU headquarters in Brussels is the equivalent of the Communist Party (Velmet, Aro 2016: 140–143).

One of the key rhetorical devices in Eastern Europe, discrediting the critical potential of the analytical category of gender is interpreting the policies for women's rights or LGBT rights as an imported, alien ideology from the West which does not comply with the local national context or with the traditional values of the country. (Kuhar, Roman and David Paternotte (eds.) 2017: 9) For example, the 2007 Tallinn Pride was framed as a march of European import values conflicting with traditional Estonian values, even if there had been positive gay representations

since the late 1980's, more so in the 1990's (Velmet, Aro 2016: 141–142). “The West” can also be used as an example of the destructive results of gender ideology, which is the case in the 2018 petition Varro Vooglaid presented to the Minister of Education Mailis Reps (referenced in the opening). Their major warrant to support the existence of the ideological threat of gender is that the ideological change ‘Western’ countries have suffered – due to the gender equality changes implemented in their education system – can be attested by a rise in their figures of abortion, divorces, and miserable people. (Vooglaid, Varro 2018)

The relationship of Estonia with its socialist past can be best understood through the term *zombie socialism* that refers to the phenomenon of bringing out the ghost of socialism in public discourse in strategic ways. The function of zombie socialism is to create the hegemony of neoliberalism by keeping the traumatic memories of the socialist regime alive. (Chelcea, Liviu and Druță, Oana 2016) In Estonia, the terms *kommunist*, *neomarksist* etc are often used as an attack against those articulating criticism against capitalism or against economic inequality.<sup>6</sup> The claim that there is a corrupt elite imposing its values and will onto the people – one of the ways the ghost of communism is resurrected – is often used by the right-wing in their anti-gender campaigns. According to this argument, importing “gender ideology” is also one of the ways in which the liberal elite in ‘Brussels’ suppresses the traditional Estonian values (Buschmann, Dovainė 2017: 40–41).

The rhetorical move of connecting *genderism* with *communism* exists across the Baltics. The Lithuanian sociologist Gediminas Merkys, for example, claimed in a speech at a forum titled “For Family” held at the Lithuanian parliament in December 2014 that “radical gender ideology is being shoved to us by force ... against the will of the majority of the citizens and electors”.<sup>7</sup> He continued by framing this supposedly radical gender ideology as a threat to traditional values. He asked, who has done this before, and replied: the Bolsheviks. (Buschmann, Dovainė 2017: 40) In a similar way, the Estonian journalist Maarja Vaino (daughter of Mart Helme, the head of EKRE) drew a direct line from gender neutral kindergartens to the totalitarian terror of the Soviet Union. In one of her articles, she expressed confusion with the concept of gender neutrality – her reading of the concept seemed to be rather the total denial of the existence of the male or female gender. Stalinist terror was implied when she said that subjecting

<sup>6</sup> I have elaborated on the examples in an essay in Karro, Piret 2018.

<sup>7</sup> A version of the speech is available in Lithuanian at Merkys, Gediminas 2015 [accessed 7.06.2020].

generations of people to experiments with non-redeemable results reminds her of times long-gone she does not wish to remember. (Vaino, Maarja 2016)

The anti-communist discourse is always enmeshed intensely with nationalist discourses in Estonia. While the European anti-gender campaigns are commonly connected to the Catholic Church and its relation to the state in each country (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018: 12), in Estonia, these campaigns rather ground their arguments in a nationalist framework. With an entangled history of concern for the growth of the population dating back to 1980s, the anti-gender campaigners often find their own references from the nationalist discourse as well. The reproduction of the Estonian people has been an important concern for the local nationalist intellectuals, and their ideas have helped the current anti-gender campaigners to find grounds for their arguments.

### *1.1.2 Common features in the anti-gender campaigns in CEE and Estonia*

Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte have argued that “mobilizations against “gender ideology” and right-wing populism are the two faces of the same coin” and that essentially, these mobilizations represent a “global and unqualified backlash against everything achieved in terms of gender and sexuality in the last decades”. (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018: 6) Kuhar and Paternotte propose a number of common traits that can be observed to be present in these campaigns transnationally. The most recognizable shared trait in the transnational anti-gender discourse is the use of the terms *gender theory*, *gender ideology*, and/or *(anti)genderism* to oppose women’s rights and LGBT rights. (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018: 8) Next, I will bring out some of these traits and show how they are relevant in the Estonian context.

Often, the anti-gender campaigns are triggered by the (proposed) introduction of a specific policy and the debate surrounding it (Kuhar, Roman and David Paternotte 2018: 8). One of these policies that found stark objections from right-wing circles in Europe was the Istanbul convention which is an initiative from the Council of Europe to combat violence against women and domestic violence. This was one of the key triggers of anti-gender campaigns, for example, in Poland in 2012 when the convention was first brought to the public attention (Kováts, Eszter and Maari Põim (eds.). 2015: 90) and opposed by the Minister of Justice Jarosław Gowin who called the convention “the product of feminist ideology”. (Kováts, Eszter and Maari Põim (eds.). 2015: 141) Due to these debates, the ratification of the convention was stalled in Poland until 2015. In Estonia, the Istanbul convention found loud opponents mostly from the Estonian Conservative Nationalist Party (EKRE). One of the representative of the

party in Parliament, Martin Helme, interpreted the policy as an act of forcing boys to wear dresses in kindergartens. (Mallene, Laura 2016) The paragraph that Martin Helme found to be the most disturbing was Article 12:

Parties shall take the necessary measures to promote changes in the social and cultural patterns of behaviour of women and men with a view to eradicating prejudices, customs, traditions and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of women or on stereotyped roles for women and men. (Hester, Marianne and Sarah-Jane Lilley 2014: 7)

Helme interpreted this paragraph as proposing to eradicate all traditions, including the traditional gender roles since these make the woman inferior to the man. Helme concluded that the Istanbul convention is hiding radical feminist ideology (Mallene, Laura 2016). Despite this opposition, Estonia ratified the Istanbul convention in September 2017 (Riigi Teataja 2017b).

The ratification of the Istanbul convention was not the only bill that found severe backlash from the right-wing circles in Estonia in the given period. In 2014, the draft of the Cohabitation Act which would allow same-sex civil partnerships to be legally registered. The law was criticised most vocally by SAPTK who collected nearly 45 000 signatures in a petition against the act and claimed that “forcing through” the law is undemocratic since it opposes the will of the majority of the people. (Vaino, Urmas 2014) In the petition, SAPTK claims that the law is undermining the core principles of our society.<sup>8</sup> The law was passed in October 2014 (Riigi Teataja 2014), which on the one hand, gave progressives and the LGBT community a reason to celebrate, but on the other hand, gave all the reasons for SAPTK to continue its crusade against “gender ideology”.

These claims by Jarosław Gowin in Poland and Martin Helme in Estonia of the effect that feminists should have a secret hand in the Istanbul convention trying to disrupt families can show that the anti-gender campaigns are often based on a transnational common discourse. They have a “traveling repertoire of action”, and they share similar discourse strategies across countries in Europe. (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018: 8) The anti-gender campaigners draw a clear line between themselves and the supposed perpetrators of the ideology, portraying events as if evidence of a secret power matrix. The campaigners have taken reproductive rights, LGBT rights, and sex education in schools as their main targets and claim that these values are under attack by radical feminists who wish to dismantle the traditional family. Their claim also

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<sup>8</sup> „Ei kooseluseadusele“. Screenshot available at SA Perekonna ja Traditsiooni Kaitseks [In Defense of Family and Tradition Foundation] 2017.

includes a concern for democracy, which is supposedly under threat since the policymakers are acting under the dictate of a small pressure group and are not listening to the will of ‘the People’. (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018: 9)

There is a repertoire of action shared by the anti-gender activists which stretches from activism both in physical and online space, to establishing new political parties:

The repertoire of action includes demonstrations, stand-ins and sit-ins, petitions and the collection of signatures, litigation, expertise and knowledge production, lobbying, referendum campaigns, electoral mobilization, party politics (including the establishment of new political parties), incitement to vigilance and ad hominem exposure campaigns in schools and hospitals. Anti-gender activists are extremely active on the web and take advantage of the possibilities offered by new information and communication technologies. (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018: 10)

In Estonia, SAPTK was founded almost in parallel with the declaration of core principles by the Estonian Conservative Nationalist Party (EKRE) in 2012, which stands for conservative nationalist values. EKRE has been the main political party actively engaging in anti-gender rhetoric in close collaboration with SAPTK and as of spring 2019, EKRE is a coalition party in the government of Estonia. EKRE contributes to the hyperactive online presence of anti-gender movements through their weblog Uued Uudised which regularly recirculates news and articles from Objektiiv.

Regarding the shared features of their rhetoric, there is the self-victimizing position assumed by the speakers in these campaigns. They often depict themselves as silenced victims whose voices have been apparently oppressed by the entitled minorities in power. The leaders of the campaign pose as the defenders of the silenced majority of the people, speaking on their behalf, standing for the indigenous nation in the whirlwind of (alien) globalism. (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018: 10) SAPTK often refer to “thousands” or “tens of thousands of people” who have been treated in disaccord with the Constitution by the “political cartel”. (‘Juhtkiri: kilter, kubjas, aidamees – Brüsselis nad kõige ees [Lead: Taskmaster, overseer, farm accountant – in Brussels, they are front and center]’ 2018) Kuhar’s and Paternotte’s observations regarding the self-victimization strategy are also relevant in the Estonian case, where the anti-gender voices are “presenting oneself as the true defender of oppressed people”. However, unlike other European cases, they are not “hiding the political and religious origins of the movement”, (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018: 10): SAPTK does not deny its Catholic roots and collaboration with EKRE in their joint struggle to implement a political program.



## 1.2. ‘Hysteria’ and ‘witch hunt’ as gendered categories

Following the analysis on anti-gender discourse, my aim is to show that the strategic use of the terms ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ in the respective contexts of violence against women and far-right politics also functions in a similarly structured way – there is a shared discourse, a positionality of self-victimization, and anti-communist references. Therefore, I will begin by showing how these terms come to be gendered to begin with, and how this gendered history informs the contemporary use of the terms.

### 1.2.1 ‘Hysteria’

The English term *hysteria* is derived from the Greek term *hysteria*, which means uterus and the history of its meaning is that of the entanglement of the body and the mind. In classic Greek medicine, a woman’s erratic behaviour was accounted for her womb wandering around her body (Micale, Mark S. 1995: 3) – this understanding marks the beginning of the particularly gendered understanding of hysteria. During Renaissance, this understanding manifested through its meeting with Christian cosmologies – the symptoms of hysteria were connected to witchcraft. For example, the 19<sup>th</sup> century French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot diagnosed the *stigmata* as a symptom of hysteria. This term has semantic connections with *stigmata diaboli* – the marks on the skin signifying that the person has signed a contract with the devil and become a witch. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century studies, most carriers of *stigmata*s were women. (Mazzoni, Cristina 1996: 24–25) In the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, hysteria as a medical category lost its relevance. Instead, it became an interest of study for feminist historians. Nowadays, *hysteria* functions as a category for analysing the historical position of women in patriarchal societies and the idea of femininity in past scientific discourses. (Micale, Mark S. 1995: 8)

The assumption that *hysteria* is essentially a feminine illness carries on to this day. In this thesis, I analyse the use of the term *hysteria* in popular media, more precisely the act of calling someone ‘hysterical’ for condemning an act of violence. I understand this as an act of portraying anti-violence statements as showcases of madness and unruly emotionality. This articulation of the meaning of the term covers up the fact that these statements in fact are mobilized to work at a political level (Patel, Shaista 2014: 202). Women protesting against the violence enacted upon them are stripped of the political dimension of their protest. I would compare this process of weaponizing psychology with Shaista Patel’s analysis of the othering of the ‘Muslims’ in Western discourses:

Lewis (1990) easily dismisses political motives and actions of Muslims as being about their emotions only. He gives no context to how those “deeper passions are stirred” by draconian foreign policies and invasions of Muslim countries and resources. The childlike Muslim might burst into an “explosive mixture of rage and hatred” at apparently some “upheaval and disruption,” presumably of their own doing. This leaves no room to consider the historical and political context of the violence of the neocolonial and imperial policies of Western governments. These have colonized Muslims and their lands for ages and continue in the neocolonial and imperial invasion on the sovereignty of Muslim nation-states, lands, and bodies. (Patel, Shaista 2014: 204)

Indeed, the tactics described here are also present in the de-politization of the criticism of violence against women. The political motives of women protesting against their subjugation are dismissed as beyond reason; the acts of violence as a trigger of these protests are strategically forgotten and the act of protest is presented as if erupting from nowhere; and the surrounding patriarchal context which silences violence against women and advantages men towards power is not considered. All of this is done within the implications of calling out someone for being ‘hysterical’.

A similar comparison could be made with Patel’s discussion on how the black body came to be associated with “innate madness”, i.e. schizophrenia and the discreditation of the protests against racial inequality in the United States in the 1960’s. Patel refers to psychiatrists who claimed that participating in the Black Power movement against racial discrimination causes symptoms of schizophrenia. Consequently, it was not the institutionalised violence against Black communities in the United States that is argued to have caused their fear and anxiety but the other way round. It is the protests themselves which are argued to drive protesters to ‘schizophrenia’ or madness. This reversal of the cause-effect relationship results in questioning the protesters’ capacity of reason when making their judgement of their social situation. “Their demand for political equality was seen as the very proof of their psychopathology,” Shaista Patel writes (Patel, Shaista 2014: 204–205).

I see similar dynamics in the discourse that claims that women (and men) who protest against violence enacted upon them are being hysterical. “You’re being hysterical,” hears the woman who has lashed out against her abuser, implying that her anger is irrational, her protest against the violence her body suffers is ungrounded. The institutional power structure that enables violence against her is rendered invisible. The *madness* of enacting such violence on someone goes unacknowledged.

### 1.2.2 'Witch-hunt'

The history of the discourse of witch-hunt is tied to the history of Christianity and capitalism. The Catholic and the Protestant Churches in Western Europe were against believing in sorcery. It was seen as the highest form of heresy according to the doctrine of witchcraft in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, a century that was seeing the first witch trials in Western Europe against peasants uprising against the feudal order. Witch trials escalated into witch-hunting in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century and reached their peak between 1580–1630, and by its decline in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, “hundreds of thousands of women were burned, hanged, and tortured.” (Federici, Silvia 2004: 166; 164) Silvia Federici connects 16<sup>th</sup>-century witch-hunts to the peasant revolts against price hikes taking place at the same time, pointing out that the majority of the leaders of these revolts were women. (Federici, Silvia 2004: 174). She sees the historical Western European witch-hunts as a class war, during the time when the feudal economic order was being replaced by early mercantile capitalism (Federici, Silvia 2004: 166).

I should note that in the Estonian context, there were no witch-hunts of a comparable scale with the Western European events. Spanning across the 16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> century, around 200 people were accused of witchcraft, 65 of whom were sentenced to death. Furthermore, the ‘witch-hunts’ in the Estonian region were not targeting primarily women, in fact, there was a remarkable gender balance in the numbers of female and male witches. Moreover, accusations of witchcraft did not necessarily reflect men’s misogynistic impulses, but were often a method of settling quarrels between women themselves. (Vähi, Tiina 2017: 722–728) The researchers of witch-hunts in Estonia have noted that “the Estonian folk had petty witches”. (Vähi, Tiina 2017: 732)

The Estonian theologist Tiina Vähi has emphasized the gendered character of European witchcraft. Women’s physical and intellectual characteristics became to be coded in a negative light and therefore, they could be associated with witchcraft – it was the discourse that portrayed witches as mainly women. (Vähi, Tiina 2017: 728) Silvia Federici describes the witch archetype, based on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, as follows:

the figure of the witch ... as the embodiment of a world of female subjects that capitalism had to destroy: the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone, the obeha [sic!] woman who poisoned the master's food and inspired the slaves to revolt. (Federici, Silvia 2004: 11)

The witch-hunt discourse of early modern Europe is specifically gendered with witches being mostly depicted as women. Vähi has also described the witch archetypes: *the ugly old hag*, a

cliché which was often projected onto older female beggars or widows – women no longer “useful” in the patriarchal context and therefore the receiver of its rage. The figure of the *young lustful woman*, seen as mistresses or whores – a prototype that evolved due to a large number of single women in the society and were seen, in turn, as a threat to the basic social value of family and marriage. Finally, midwives and the village wisewomen were accused of witchcraft since they acquired mystical knowledge of how to return one to health before the development of the discipline of modern medicine. Midwives were the first women in touch with a newborn before baptism, and so it was believed they could easily sacrifice the baby’s soul to the Devil. All of these types of witches evoked untypical women who did not perform the role that was expected of women at the time. (Vähi, Tiina 2004: 104 –106)

One of the core treatises that is referred to in researches of this topic is the *Malleus maleficarum* (1487). The title could be translated as (*Female*) *Witch Hammer* and the authors of the treatise, demonologists in the Roman Catholic church, emphasize that in the core of demonology is a contract with the Devil. The treatise postulates that witches and heretics are women more often than men, since compared to the latter, women are much more superstitious, vainglorious, untruthful, fervent, etc. Essentially, according to the Hammer, women are more gullible to deals with the Devil, and therefore they are easier prey to becoming witches (Vähi, Tiina 2004: 102).

However, it was not the witch doctrine that invented misogyny. Vähi emphasizes that attitudes hostile to women originate in the antique, Aristotelian tradition, in which woman was the one who brought evil and misfortune to the world, which depicted women as the imperfect human. In the early middle ages, these traditions have been continued by Augustinus, in his idea of the original sin, and by Thomas Aquino, in his ideas of the inferiority of the woman. Vähi emphasizes that the fact that the witch narrative became focused on women should be looked at in the context of the continuation of these traditions. (Vähi, Tiina 2004: 103–104)

Some researchers have interpreted the witch trials as patriarchal gender hatred and have called the witch-hunts of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century “a crusade against women”. (Vähi, Tiina 2004: 106) Silvia Federici asks, how come the rise of the modern capitalist era was contemporary with a war against women? (Federici, Silvia 2004: 14) One explanation for why the witch-hunt became a specifically gendered category, is from the perspective of the folkloric belief systems. By the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian crusades had managed to effectively diminish the public religious rituals practices by mostly men in the cultures of European peasantry. However, the more traditional folkloric beliefs were still practiced in secret, in the private circles of the

communities and in the domestic sphere, since it was more resistant to the influence of the developing state. The domestic sphere was a feminized arena and therefore, the accusations against women was a method of implementing state control over the domestic sphere. (Vähi, Tiina 2004: 111) Federici agrees with this:

It is generally agreed that the witch-hunt aimed at destroying the control that women had exercised over their reproductive function and served to pave the way for the development of a more oppressive patriarchal regime. It is also argued that the witch-hunt was rooted in the social transformations that accompanied the rise of capitalism. (Federici, Silvia 2004: 14)

Historically, witch-hunts were processes of condemning women for behaving in ways which did not comply with the gendered expectations of the time. While the historical witch trials in Estonia did not necessarily follow the Western European patterns in terms of gender proportions and the number of victims, the misogynist Western discourse of the witch-hunt is prevalent in Estonia as well.

In the context of the United States, Ross E. Cheit has conducted analysis on the use of the ‘witch-hunt’ trope in the 1980s–1990s media. While Cheit’s primary analysis on criminal case records show that they did include “credible evidence of abuse” (Cheit, Ross E. 2014: 14), the accusations were dismissed at the time as ‘witch-hunt’, and “did not result in any convictions”. (Cheit, Ross E. 2014: 3) The author studies a particular example, where the ‘witch-hunt’ narrative succeeded in focusing public attention on questioning the methods of the investigation rather than the guilt of the perpetrator (Cheit, Ross E. 2014: 203–282). This narrative includes the claim that the media generates false accusations with no factual basis, and the public reactions to these cases can be described with “hysteria” and “panic” (Cheit, Ross E. 2014: 15). However, in Cheit’s analysis, it is the media that employs the trope of the ‘witch-hunt’, rather than the accused subject.

### **1.3. The normalisation of discrediting gender**

‘Hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ are gendered categories and therefore, studying the tactics of the anti-gender discourse can provide tools to deconstruct the current anti-feminist discourses that surround these categories. Essentially, the aim of the anti-gender discourse is to undermine and dismantle policies, laws, practices, and organisations that work to protect the rights of women and LGBTQ+ communities. I argue that the discourse centring on the terms ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ consists of similar tactics and equally effectively undermines the struggle for freedom from violence by women and LGBTQ+ communities.

The aim of my study on ‘hysteria’ is to show how opposing and trivialising gendered analysis has become a normalised stance and therefore its resonance with the stance of the radical right has become less noticeable. The act of calling out “Hysteria!” has a similar effect to the act of calling out “Gender ideology!”: both trivialise the argument of whomever is protesting against gender relations of power, either explicitly or indirectly implying that gender issues are not to be taken seriously. The aim of my study on ‘witch-hunt’ is to show how the radical right itself has co-opted a gendered term to counter and defuse the criticism they are facing. They co-opt and reverse the criticism addressed to them by women and people from LGBTQ+ communities to be able to depict themselves as the ‘real victim’ of a type of violence. The effect is similar to the use of ‘hysteria’: the argument against them is portrayed as inherently invalid.

Both of these tropes are invoked in a similar strategy: the overarching aim is to portray a subject who 1) has institutional power, and 2) has come under public scrutiny, as immutably innocent, therefore invoking impunity for the potential abuser of power. The case studies I have conducted in the following two chapters are from different fields: I study the trope of ‘hysteria’ in the context of violence against women; and the trope of ‘witch-hunt’ in the context of far-right politics. I have chosen these particular cases since they became significant political and social events in their respective contexts. However, the tropes of ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ can travel across these fields – the *hysteria* trope has also been used in reference to politics (e.g. Kolga, Voldemar 2019; Kiisler, Indrek 2020), and sometimes the terms are used together, as *hysterical witch-hunt* (e.g. Objektiiv 2017; Põlluaas, Henn 2015). The ‘witch-hunt’ trope also became used in the context of the #MeToo movement, the online awareness campaign of sexual harrasment of women (e.g. Chow 2017; BNS 2018). In the following chapters, I explore the ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ tropes as strategies to discredit gender, which by extension, function to undermine institutions and politics which “were established based in feminist insight, knowledge, and perspective” (Aspasia 2019: 2).

## 2. The trope of ‘hysteria’ in the media coverage of violence against women<sup>9</sup>

In Europe, one in five women has experienced physical or sexual violence from their intimate partner. (Selliov, Olle; Õnne Liv Valberg 2018: 28) In Estonia, it is one in three women aged 15–74 who has ever been in a relationship, who has experienced physical, mental or sexual violence from an intimate partner. Out of all violent crimes committed, domestic violence makes up 43% (Sotsiaalministeerium 2018), with the majority of those incidents resulting in physical injuries. According to statistics on intimate partner violence from 2017, almost 80% of the victims of domestic violence in Estonia are women, and 86% of the perpetrators are men. Every tenth man in Estonia has been violent within an intimate relationship (Selliov, Olle; Õnne Liv Valberg 2018: 34; 37). Within a population of 1,3 million, the police receive 800–900 calls every month for such incidents, around 40 calls a day. While many incidents still go unregistered, reporting domestic violence incidents have increased rapidly since 2018, thanks to rigorous collaboration and campaigning by the police, social ministry and women’s shelters (Sotsiaalministeerium 2018). While men experience violence mostly in public spaces, for women in Estonia, home is the most dangerous place, especially in the evening and during holidays (Selliov, Olle; Õnne Liv Valberg 2018: 37).

The Istanbul convention on preventing violence against women was ratified in 2017 and came into force early 2018, which introduced the terms ‘violence against women’ and ‘domestic violence’ into the Estonian legislation (Riigi Teataja 2017a). However, in the Estonian Penal Code, such terms have not yet been included. Types of violence against women are usually regulated under the Chapter on Offences Against the Person, including manslaughter in provoked state (§ 115), which is punishable by up to five years imprisonment. The subdivision on Offences Hazardous to Health include causing serious health damage (§ 118) as an offence, and this otherwise nongendered paragraph includes causing miscarriage. The paragraph of physical abuse (§ 121) is listed under the subdivision on Acts of Violence and its punishable by pecuniary punishment or up to one year of imprisonment. Offences against Sexual Self-determination are regulated under eight paragraphs, including rape (§ 141) (see ENÜ 2020 for

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<sup>9</sup> I have incorporated a revised and adapted course paper into this chapter with my thesis supervisor’s knowledge. The paper, titled „You’re being hysterical: The gendered discourse of violence against women in Estonia“ was submitted to Adriana Qubaia-ova in the course *Gender in/and War* (Fall 2019).

list of paragraphs implemented for cases of intimate partner violence; see Riigi Teataja 2002 for Penal Code).

The harrowing statistics in the opening paragraph reveal an underlying current of ongoing violence within many Estonian homes. A violent incident at home is not an isolated event but a tendency. It is the eruption of a continuous power imbalance on the axis of anger and fear, domination and subjugation within that relationship. Almost half of the victims of domestic violence have suffered these “incidents” several times over the past five years (Sotsiaalministeerium 2018). While some of these eruptions prompt the victim or a witness to call the police, more than two thirds of domestic violence cases go unreported, and out of the ones that do, only about 4% result in a criminal proceeding (Laasik, Tambet 2019). If one in three women has experienced violence from their intimate partner, this means that almost every family is affected, directly or indirectly – this is a situation not short from a state of emergency. In fact – due to the fact that most victims of domestic violence are women, and most perpetrators are men, and the institutional conditions within these cases happen rather support the men and undermine the help for women, this state of emergency can be seen as war on women (see e.g. Ferris-Rotman 2018).

A woman in a (former) intimate relationship with a man who has hit (or humiliated, harassed, battered, raped, etc.) her once, is subjected to his violence continuously. Be it prior to or following threatening, manipulation, or harassment, the perpetrator has psychological (and physical) effect on their victim over a period of time. Violence against women should be looked at not only as an individual trespassing of one’s right to health, life and bodily autonomy, but as being embedded within an institutional context which enables this type of violence. Silvia Federici noted that the early capitalist era witch-hunts were a war against women, as discussed in Chapter 1 (Federici, Silvia 2004: 14). Similarly, looking at the statistics from nowadays in the opening paragraph, the scope of violence against women’s bodies is wide enough it could be analysed as a war against women.

Cynthia Cockburn describes war as a continuum of violence rather than “as spasms of war-fighting”:

leading from militarism (as a persisting mindset, expressed in philosophy, newspaper editorials, political think tanks), through militarization (processes in economy and society that signify preparation for war), to episodes of ‘hot’ war, and thence to cease fire and stand-off, followed perhaps by an unsteady peace with sustained military investment, beset by sporadic violence that prefigures a further round in the spiral (Cockburn, Cynthia 2010: 148).



Much like this, domestic violence can be seen as a continuum. The gendered dynamics within the society regarding acts of domestic violence interconnect with each other, each aspect being in a co-productive relationship with the other aspects of this continuum. Fixed gender stereotypes that are cultivated within the (popular) culture which praise male aggressiveness and female submissiveness validate incidents of psychological, physical, or sexual violence (much of which can overlap or co-occur). If an act of violence has been committed, and the victims wishes to start a criminal investigation, they often face a difficult gauntlet of juridical procedures, which often do not result in the conviction of the perpetrator. This is surrounded by mechanisms of silencing victims and trivializing their testimonies in the media, which leads to more silencing complicit with the occurrences of violence.

Looking at the dimensions within this continuum: cultural meanings which are creating lived experiences that contribute to cultural meanings; the gendered stereotypes within a culture influence people's lived experience too. The men perpetrating violence at home usually do not act as aggressively towards their co-workers or neighbours (otherwise the violence statistics would have different proportions). This shows that enacting violence is not an expression of some spontaneous innate anger or irritation, but an acquired practice to achieve control in particular venues rather than in others – ‘privately’, that is, away from the glances of strangers, against a targeted victim. Moreover, if a man subscribes to stereotypical gender roles, he might become more aggravated when his female partner is reluctant to observe his dictations (Soo, Kadri 2016).

The dimensions I am interested in this chapter regarding this continuum, are the public and private reactions to an act of violence – discussed further down – and the juridical infrastructure available for the victim to seek just penalty for their perpetrator. According to an attorney (Laasik, Tambet 2019), the Estonian court system usually urges the victim to agree to a settlement, which exempts the perpetrator from criminal punishment. The victim is urged to find a compromise with the perpetrator with reference to “the interest of children” or an overly gruelling court proceeding otherwise. Even stating that the perpetrator has been violent can be seen as the victim's disagreement to “compromise”. Therefore, as this attorney draws out, the court system in Estonia is interested in the victim acknowledging that she is a victim but not pursuing any further responsibility from her perpetrator (Laasik, Tambet 2019). A court system acting as a gauntlet for women seeking justice against domestic violence is complicit with silencing the victims and benefiting their perpetrators. The act of violence analysed as a case

study in this chapter reached a settlement agreement (Talve, Teele 2016), and therefore is located within this problematic context.

Domestic violence is clearly gendered, with women being the victims of men's violence in most cases. Moreover, a man hitting a woman behind closed curtains late at night, is part of the structural power relation that is *gender* (Cohn, Carol 2013: 4). This creates hierarchies between different categories of people, human relationships and activities, (Cohn, Carol 2013: 3) and organizes the 'private' space of the home. The discourse of gender (Cohn, Carol 1993: 228) is intertwined with thinking about domestic violence. In other words, the incidents of physical violence are connected to other intersecting discourses, for example, the way in which women are talked about in the media, the way in which cases of domestic violence are talked about in the media, and the way in which perpetrators of this type of violence, mostly men, are talked about in the media.

To analyse how domestic violence plays into the order of gender discourse in Estonia, I will study one particular case of intimate partner violence which received intense public attention. I have chosen this case due to its prolific broadcasting in the media, and the symbolic meaning it has gained within Estonian discourse of violence against women. The articles published in the media regarding this event and the events that followed have made far-reaching statements in the discourses of *punishment*, *victimhood*, *violence*, and paint an implicit picture of gender relations in regards to who is enacting violence against whom and in what ways.

In this chapter, I focus on the meaning making of the terms as they are used and structured in the Estonian context: *domestic violence* is understood as synonymous with *intimate partner violence* and as a subcategory of the broader term *violence against women* (Selliov, Olle; Õnne Liv Valberg 2018: 6).

## 2.1 Case study

In 14<sup>th</sup> January 2016, Tiit Ojasoo, pushed an actress in the parking lot of his theatre, and kicked her twice (Teder, Merike 2016). Ojasoo was a well-known theatre director – together with his wife Ene-Liis Semper, they were the head and the artistic director of Theatre NO99, one of the most prestigious theatre companies in Estonia, loved and hated for its megaprojects making political commentary. The actress he attacked was a project-based employee at the theatre, and in an intimate relationship with him at the time. She was 12 years younger than the perpetrator. In this case study, I will not name the actress for matters of privacy. After that assault, she left

the location and called the police. On the next day, a criminal case was opened against the man, based on the paragraph of physical abuse in the Estonian penal code.<sup>10</sup> Among the evidence, the police had the footage of the security cameras surrounding the parking lot of the theatre, which recorded the act of violence (Ibrus, Kadri 2016a).

This case of violence was an abuse of power on several axes: the theatre director committed intimate partner violence to a person who was dependant on him both financially (employed on a contract), institutionally (under the control of the director's decisions) and professionally (being a younger actor in their professional field). Moreover, according to the gender dynamic of power, she has potentially less power than him.

Ojasoo emphasized that this incident was the result of a private affair which “escalated” and is not connected to the fact that they had professional ties (Ibrus, Kadri 2016a). In his public statements, he chose to deny the relevance of the axes of financial, institutional and professional dependence that tied him to his victim, which reinforced the weaker position the woman actor had towards him. However, this institutional dependence clearly exists between them, locating this case on the intersection of intimate partner violence and workplace violence. In my view, the theatre director's statement that this was merely a private affair functioned to silence the motivation of discussing this case as a question of public attention. While the case was an act of intimate partner violence, it happened in public space, but also on the territory that both of the people were in an institutional relation with (the theatre's parking lot). If this institutional intersection would have been seriously considered in the public discussions of this case, perhaps it would have been acknowledged more seriously, and the overwhelming interpretation of ‘hysteria’ would have not emerged, or taken a different form.

In April, 2016, Ojasoo was exempt from criminal charges of physical assault of the younger female employee. The parties agreed on a settlement instead, obliging the perpetrator to follow specific requirements stated in the settlement agreement, details of which are restricted to the public (Ibrus, Kadri 2016a).

The theatre director's assault became public information in June 2016, six months after the incident, when an investigative journalist published two articles, the first entitled *The resignation of theatre director Tiit Ojasoo was preceded by a criminal case over assaulting an actress* (Ibrus, Kadri 2016a) and five days later, *Tiit Ojasoo hit an actress repeatedly with*

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<sup>10</sup> Penal Code § 121. Physical abuse. Paragraph accessible at Riigi Teataja 2002.

*hands and feet* (Ibrus, Kadri 2016b). The latter article was short and kept to the facts – the only factual mistake made, later corrected in another media outlet, was that the woman was lying on the ground by the end of the battering. The correction stated that she was not and had left on her own feet after she had been hit (Teder, Merike 2016). A week after the initial news was made public, ten members of the Parliament, each representing a faction, sent a joint letter to the minister of culture and the board of the theatre, stating that the director should resign from his position. The joint letter republished in the media stated: “The behaviour of the head of a public institution serves as a role model for society, shapes its norms, and informs its development. This is the reason why the theatre director cannot carry on [as the director] after what has happened.” (Helend-Aaviku, Katrin 2016) In the letter, the MPs state that there is no excuse for violence, but the consequences for the theatre director should be decided by the board of the theatre. While the letter by the MPs states that this incident is not in line with ‘*our values as a society*’, it does not define the incident within the terminology of any gendered type of violence.

The board of the theatre did not manage to take a stand after hours of discussion on June 15<sup>th</sup> 2016 and decided to postpone the discussion for the following week (ERR 2016). This reads as a stand in itself – the board members do not share an univocal opinion on the consequences that should follow for the theatre director for the act of violence. On the next day, June 16<sup>th</sup> 2016, the director announced his resignation in a letter addressed to his colleagues at the theatre. In the letter, the director stresses that he has apologized for his actions, mentioning it four times, and that he regrets “his mistake”, saying twice, and expresses his concern that “clearly this is not enough” and states that in order to pre-empt the possibility of destroying the theatre, he must “step down”. The end of the letter reads as an obituary (to himself), signed, “I love you [his colleagues at the theatre]” (Ojasoo, Tiit 2016). I should note that Ojasoo did resign from his position as the head of the theatre. However, this coincided with his planned hiatus with Ene-Liis Semper, his wife and the artistic director of the theatre. There were speculations that this hiatus was due to internal tension in the theatre collective (Virro, Keiu 2016). When they returned in September 2017, Ojasoo assumed the position of a director of a theatre performance (Luik, Hans H. 2018).

On the same day of Ojasoo’s resignation, the actors of the theatre published a letter on Facebook, titled “Have you had enough?” (Teater NO99 2016), in defence of the director. In it, they introduce rhetorical elements which later become some of the key concepts within this discussion: *punishment*, meaning the measures of taking responsibility the perpetrator should

assume, and *victim* of blood-thirsty society, i.e. the perpetrator. The signatories of the letter do acknowledge that the director committed intimate partner violence against an actress. They express their regret over this and state that the director has apologized for the violence. They cry out that this should have been enough. The central claim of the letter is that the head of the theatre was still forced to resign due to political pressure. The actors speculate whether the MPs urged the director to resign as a political revenge against the theatre for the performances critical of Estonian politicians that were directed by the theatre director. They also adopt an accusatory tone when addressing the readers and asking if *you* have had enough now that the sacrifice [sic!] has been made. In the letter, the perpetrator of violence is portrayed himself as a victim of politicians, journalists and the general public (*you*) who demanded the sacrifice. This reflects a powerful tactic of setting themselves up as the victim often done by perpetrators of gendered or political violence after they have been asked to take responsibility. It also creates the illusion that the perpetrator has been convicted, when, in fact, the case was closed with a settlement agreement. (These tactics are analysed more thoroughly on the examples of EKRE and Donald Trump in Chapter 3.)

I argue that one can draw structural similarities between the media coverage of the theatre event in 2016 and an incident of domestic violence which managed to stand out as an exceptional case on the general backdrop of the invisibilization of violence against women. The joint letter by the MPs stated that violence is not accepted, especially coming from a public figure. However, the incident was quickly normalised and folded back into the blanket of silence that covers the high levels of domestic violence in the country – mainly due to the supporters of the perpetrator himself who possess social capital. This circle could be compared with how domestic violence cases are treated in a state of emergency – once they occur, the fact that an act of violence was committed is quickly overrun by the normalising voices of discourses that stop thought and deter further analysis. I will elaborate on the dynamics of *stopping thought* in a subsection below, after discussing the next section of this case study.

### 2.1.2. Building the discourse of 'Hysteria'

Ojasoo and Semper returned to the public eye at the end of 2017, premiering two new performances on the same night, some five hours altogether. Ojasoo directed the play *The Kindly Ones*, written by Jonathan Littell, and Semper wrote and directed *Hysteria* ('NO32. The Kindly Ones' 2017; 'NO33. Hysteria' 2017). The first one gives the audience an opportunity to participate in the torture of the character of a former SS officer, with the moral implication that we all share responsibility for each other's atrocities. In *Hysteria*, a group of actors, dressed

in pink, spent the entire show laughing hysterically on stage, creating scenes which seemed re-enactments of the latest harassment cases covered in the Estonian media.

It is important to note that in 2016 and most of 2017, articles published in print media (including dailies, weeklies, and monthlies) that the keyword *hysteria* was mainly mentioned in connection with the national security of the state of Estonia.<sup>11</sup> The ongoing debates surrounded the state's military powers and the official reasoning behind the Government's security decisions in foreign policy against the allegedly ever-present threat of Russian invasion, in the immediate context of the transnational migrations perceived as a threat to national security. All these elements were often debated within the discourse of *threat of war*, but they were also referred to in terms of heightened emotional conditions, e.g. *hysteria*.<sup>12</sup> In my reading, the fact that this scale exists from perceiving an event as a serious threat of war to perceiving it as state of emotional overwhelming within the context of foreign affairs, points out that the tactic of trivialisation is rooted deep in the society. These articles often refer to the events of World War II, the Soviet occupation of Estonia and the KGB, drawing a clear genealogy between the militant events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the current foreign affairs.<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, prior to the media coverage of the theatre pieces mentioned above, the few articles in the culture sections that do mention *hysteria*, are interviews with public intellectuals of the generation who grew up in Soviet Estonia (which is broadly perceived as a military occupation), who refer to their past experiences.<sup>14</sup> Other articles that consider cultural phenomena in connection to the term *hysteria*, express concerns over the national symbols like the National Museum of Estonia or the traditional national Song Festival. This is significant, since these are one of the most important institutions in the national and nationalist context. A potential threat to, e.g. the National Museum of Estonia can easily be perceived as a threat to the nation.

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<sup>11</sup> According to DIGAR, the digital archive of articles published in Estonia, the keyword *hysteria* appears in 233 articles in the time period from January 1st 2016 – 31st December 2017. 30 % of these article were published on or after 20 September 2017, when the theater play *Hysteria* is first mentioned in the media. See ('DIGAR Eesti Artiklid' 2020).

<sup>12</sup> An example, reiterated by many others, could the article titled „Is talking about the threat of war a hysteria or a useful warning?“ by Argo Ideon in Maaleht, 2.11.2016. (Ideon, Argo 2016)

<sup>13</sup> For example, one article began a debate in the opinion section of the daily newspaper, by the leader of the Estonian Conservative People's Party, titled „Is there hysteria in the air? Indeed, there is“ (published 11 March 2016 in the biggest daily Eesti Postimees). The article claimed that hysteria has risen from seeking the culprits of the decline of European society, and the inner and foreign dangers that are threatening the mediocre and inapt governments constituted of political puppets. The article also discusses Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels (Helme, Mart 2016).

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g. Velvet, Aro 2016 and Tammjärv, Maia 2016.

At the end of 2017, there is a joint interview published with Ojasoo and Semper (available at Luik, Hans H. 2018). This is the first article that mentions the keyword *hysteria* outside of the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century wars and concerns over national symbols, cultural events happening in the country. The keyword comes up in the interview as the title of one of the theatre performances, *Hysteria*. The title introduces the term *hysteria* in a new way, pulling it away from the fears of military invasion into a new discursive sphere, seeing the rising concerns over sexual harassment cases as enactments of ‘hysteria’.<sup>15</sup> In the following months, opinion articles are published in various outlets by a number of authors to the same effect. This is also the time when the #MeToo movement becomes prominent in Estonia, and discussions around sexual harassment and sexual violence become a daily occurrence both in the press and social media. How to read the fact that this term was used to name the traumas, fears and paranoias of a post-war, post-occupation society, and then is shifted to be used in the context of an ongoing invisible domestic conflict? This shift implicates the contextualisation of domestic violence in Estonia as war on women.

There were several reviews of the performance of the play *Hysteria*, including my own (Karro, Piret 2018b). I chose to contextualise the choice and staging of the piece in the framework of the violence case dissected above. The ground for this decision is that the violence two years before happened on the premises of the same theatre, committed by the director, who is the husband of the director of the play. In the performance the events on the stage emerge from within the continuous laughing of the actors: two men come on stage, laughing hysterically, both wearing pink jumpers with the slogan “Girls unite” on them. I wonder if this could be seen as scoffing over the #MeToo movement. Two couches are erected on their sides next to each other, and the laughing actors climb through the crack, as if escaping from each other. They create a visual resemblance to an incident of sexual harassment behind a refrigerator that was committed by the former Prime Minister of Estonia, and became a public scandal just months before the premiere (Tagel, Liisa 2017). Finally, an actress pulls on a rubber suit of a superhero with protruding muscles and proceeds to attack other characters on stage. Is this the theatre director himself, I ask in the review, with irony.

Another theatre critic, Meelis Oidsalu, responded to my review (Oidsalu, Meelis 2018b), stating that my interpretation “is the continuation of what is happening on stage in the

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<sup>15</sup> Some examples include: an older generation poet expressing concern over „political correctness“ (Osila, Virve 2017); a popular woman writer states in a tabloid that for the „local champagne feminists“, the American dream of sexual harassment has come true (Pauts, Katrin 2017), and a male writer summons the memory of burning books of Bertolt Brecht et al in 1930’s (Maimik, Andres 2017).

performance” (i.e. hysteria). He categorizes my statements as *hysterical kindness* (creating a collocation out of the titles of the two theatre performances). This is one article in many which labels different kinds of analysis of violence against women, *hysteria*. In the same article, the author expresses admiration for another public figure who had broken the nose of his girlfriend several times, for “staying calm” in public when explaining the violent incident, juxtaposing my authorial voice of *hysteria* to his *calmness*.

Parallel to the premieres and receptions of these theatre performances, the theatre director’s harassment case was directly re-addressed in print media in early 2018, on the eve of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Republic of Estonia. The President’s office had announced that the Theater NO99 had been commissioned to stage the performance of the celebration event, and would be directed by Ojasoo and Semper. The celebration of the anniversary of the state is one of the most prestigious events annually, more so that year, and the President’s office selected the theatre for this task due to their international success. The involvement of Ojasoo was protested by a group of feminists (myself included), who drafted a public letter to the president (Reisenbuk, Karel 2018), signed by 104 people. In the letter, we stated that it is not appropriate to trust a person with such a symbolic political position who has committed violence against women, which is one of the core problems in Estonian society. The only term describing emotion in the letter was “indignant” [nördinud].

The reactions to this letter of feminist protest operated with the concepts: *hysteria*, *media battering*, *group pecking*, *going crazy*, and *state censorship*. These were articulated by the theatre director, the then minister of justice, and several well-known public figures. The news about this person directing the anniversary event became known in January 2018, letter was sent to the President on 15 January 2018, less than a month after the premiere of the two plays discussed above (22 December 2017). The director claimed in an interview published on the day of the premiere of the performances *Hysteria* and *The Kindly Ones* that “Your moral is hysteria” (Kiisler, Vilja 2018), addressing the authors and signatories of the feminists’ letter. The minister of justice published an opinion article (Reinsalu, Urmas 2018), urging the authors to “end their hen pecking”, calling it media battering (targeting the theatre director) and similar to the trance of witch burning. He expressed regret over his prior public statements where he condemned violence against women, because “public condemnation has taken the form of collective trance of witch-burning.” One MP even said, “We should not expel people with witch-hunt from the society.” (Kattago, Denes 2018) Another one summoned the memory of Soviet censorship of artists (Pilvre, Barbi 2018). The theatre critic mentioned above, Oidsalu,



stated that the authors of the public letter have gone mad (Oidsalu, Meelis 2018a). He undermines the testimony of the victim of the theatre director, shows support of both him and another violence perpetrator, and call out the critics of violence for being hysterical.

## 2.2. *Hysteria* as “stopping thought”

*Hysteria* has its roots in the history of misogyny, and the term carries this implication with it. Characteristics which are coded as feminine within a culture, are valued less, and the ones tied to those characteristics – e.g. a group of people called hysterical – are likely to be marginalized, their voice unheard. Moreover, *hysteria* refers to a state of extreme emotionality, irrationality, the state out of control, which make the same loop from being coded as feminine, i.e. devalued, i.e. coded as feminine (Cohn, Carol 1993: 229–231). Descriptions of a pack of hens pecking on a weaker one, or “media battering” evoke an image of emotionality, out-of-controlness. If a group of feminist people criticising the praising of a violent man is described this way, the point of their criticism is trivialized.

In this particular context, the terminology of *hysteria* acts similarly to Carol Cohn’s analysis of the term *wimp*. It is a term which *stops thought* (Cohn, Carol 1993: 235), deterring any further analysis on the grounds of the action of the person marked with this term. This terminology pulls anything articulated into the framework of not-to-be-taken-seriously, and therefore silences the criticism of violence against women. This cycle of characteristics coded as female being undervalued in comparisons with those coded male is itself an attribute of patriarchy. Much like patriarchal gender relations predispose societies to war (Cockburn, Cynthia 2010: 140), they are a driving force of the state of emergency addressed in this chapter.

Domestic violence and violence against women, as I established in the opening section of this chapter, are one of the most prominent social problems in contemporary Estonia that should be understood as a state of emergency. However, violence against women is not usually treated as such in the Estonian media. Instead, the testimonies of the victims are discredited, the perpetrators are portrayed as martyrs, and the ones criticising this dynamic are trivialized through the thought-stopping discourse of *hysteria*.

The effect of this cycle illuminates the mechanisms of patriarchy. Cynthia Enloe emphasizes the need to use the term *patriarchy* when thinking about “the constructions of power and the systems by which power is both perpetuated and implemented.” (Cohn, Carol, and Cynthia Enloe 2003: 1191) Enloe says that *patriarchy* “reveals patterns of causality” and finds the term

thought-opening since it requires anyone to seek how masculinity and femininity operate in distinct hierarchical arrangements in relation to each other on a daily basis. Patriarchy, however, is not just “men on top” in general, Enloe says, but it is a certain kind of masculinity, i.e. hegemonic masculinity that certain men are positioned to perform and are recognized and awarded for. This masculinity is claimed with the intent to be taken more seriously and to be more valued than other types of masculinities (or femininities, I would add). In this case, the hegemonic masculinity is expressed by the expectation one to not be *hysterical* (which is coded feminine) as a tactic to disqualify one’s stance. Enforcing patriarchy can be done through daily decisions, daily deeds within the community, also by the women subjugated by it (Cohn, Carol, and Cynthia Enloe 2003: 1192). An example could be calling an act of criticism hysterical. Therefore, the act of naming the other *hysterical* is a gendered act. The one who claims the ground of labelling others *hysterical*, implies that it is a ‘he’ and he is closer to the more highly valued type of masculinity, he is more worthy of to be taken seriously, and the other is hysterical, therefore feminine, lower on the hierarchy, and therefore what the other expresses, is not as important. This is a mechanism of silencing.

The other important effect that the act of calling criticism of violence *hysteria* has is stripping the criticism and the violence itself of its political dimension (Patel, Shaista 2014: 204). Calling something hysterical implies that what has happened between the perpetrator and the victim, and the way in which it is publicly discussed, is ‘only’ about emotions with no structural character or social genealogy. However, these acts of naming them ‘emotional’ happen in a systemic way; they contribute to the production of, reflect and sustain the widespread cultural stereotypes of gender in society: there is a specific protocol of handling the cases of violence in the court which does not work in support of the victim; and women’s accounts of their own experiences are trivialized. Therefore, the qualifier “hysterical” or “hysteria” depoliticizes this type of violence and trivialized it – if something is not perceived as a structural issue within the society, looking for solutions for it are not perceived to be a structural task. “You’re being hysterical” is a powerful tool of stopping thought to reach the understanding of domestic violence as a war on women.

### 3. The 'witch-hunt' trope in the media statements of far-right populists

“WITCH HUNT!” tweeted Donald Trump, the President of the United States, with seemingly no context (Trump, Donald J. 2019b). He tweeted this in December 2019, echoing a trend on his Twitter account, declaring that “the greatest witch-hunt in American history” is currently going on against him. The statements have a few variations (e.g. “Impeachment Witch Hunt”, “partisan Witch Hunt”, “Democrat Party’s Witch Hunt”, “Mueller Witch Hunt”), and are often accompanied by epithets like *phony*, *scam*, *hoax*. (‘Trump Twitter Archive’ 2020) Some of these tweets are accompanied by a clip from a talk show while others refer to a person’s quote (e.g. Trump, Donald J. 2019a; 2019d). Looking at these tweets, one realises that what Donald Trump mostly refers to as a witch-hunt is the 2017–2019 FBI investigation of the possible Russian interference into the 2016 presidential campaign as part of Trump’s 2019 impeachment trial.

In Estonia, the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, EKRE) has also established the ‘witch-hunt’ narrative as one of its rhetorical strategies. The leader of the party, Mart Helme has also expressed his view that the FBI investigation into Donald Trump’s election campaign was a witch-hunt mostly to use it as a substantiating claim to his assessment of the global political scene with a similar witch-hunt going on against Boris Johnson, Victor Orban [sic!], Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen, his son Martin Helme and himself – all known far right leaders in Europe. Helme’s rhetoric sets up a chain of equivalence between the “left-liberal” voices critical of his party in Estonia with the international ones criticising the politicians abroad. In one article, he even seems to create an atmosphere of some larger scale witchery going on by calling his critics also sorcerers with the aim to discredit their actions as unreasoned:

our home-grown sorcerers [kodukootud loitsijad] have not come up with their arsenal of accusations and warnings by themselves. As they copy their left-liberal masters in a slave-like manner in everything else, they do this with propaganda too. (Helme, Mart 2019: 4)

In this view, one can see that from Mart Helme’s perspective, there is a global process which can be described as a witch-hunt driven by unfounded left-liberal propaganda against nationalist politicians.

This chapter aims to analyse the witch-hunt narrative present in contemporary political rhetorics in the case of EKRE and to explore their main rhetoric used that organizes this narrative. I will identify the claims to witch-hunt in the public discourse around EKRE in early 2015, the year when the party was first voted into the Estonian Parliament. While many authors, journalists and editors voiced their criticism of EKRE's populist methods and their members' use of fascist symbols, the leaders of the party retorted the criticism by utilizing the witch-hunt trope. This was indeed similar to Donald Trump's use of the trope to repudiate the criminal investigation around his presidential campaign and the impeachment process in 2017–2019. In this dynamic, rather than responding to a critical argument with a counterargument, the politician made accountable (Trump, or EKRE) claims that the argument is invalid to the extent that it is motivated by some irrational urge to annihilate its object – similarly to the 'witch-hunt' in the late middle-ages, thereby trivializing and foreclosing the debate instead of having it. While there are many ways to trivialize a debate, my claim is that the witch-hunt trope functions in specific ways: there is the tactic of *self-victimization* coupled with the tactic of an *illusion of conviction*, and the tactic of *call for no reaction*, all of which comprise the witch-hunt narrative as a rhetorical strategy with the aim to portray a subject *innocent* of the misdeeds they are accused of by the 'witch-hunters'.

An overarching conceptual gesture that is done when political figures like Donald Trump or the members of EKRE claim that a witch-hunt happening against them, is the reversal of the gender order. As established in Chapter 1, the historical witch-hunts in early modern Europe and the 17<sup>th</sup> century US targeted mainly women – they could even be conceptualised as “war against women” (Federici, Silvia 2004: 14). The reversal of the gender order takes place to the effect that the dominant class – these authoritarian men – portray themselves in the position of the historically subjugated class – the women victims of the witch trials. How is it possible then, that male and masculinist politicians are able to use this trope to refer to themselves? In my view, this question illuminates the scaffolding of this discourse and shows that its constitutive elements are populist tactics rather than claim for any event in the factual world.

The chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I will give a brief overview of the evolution of the witch-hunt narrative in the context of the United States with the aim to build a comparative context for the Estonian case. I will show how Donald Trump claimed that a witch-hunt is happening on his name, also bringing some examples of the analysis of this claim in the US media. Then, I will move on to the contemporary Estonian context and look at how the witch-hunt narrative became prominent in 2015 when EKRE gained their first 7 seats in parliament.

The data includes articles criticising EKRE for their politics and articles published by members of EKRE, claiming that there is an undeserved witch-hunt going on against the party. I will conclude with the description of the three main tactics within the witch-hunt narrative.

### **3.1.The witch-hunt narrative in the United States**

#### *3.1.1. “Witch-hunt” for Donald Trump*

In May 2017, the FBI began an investigation of Russia’s potential interference in the 2016 US presidential campaign on behalf of Donald Trump and the alleged illegal communications between the representatives of the Russian government and the Republicans. The investigation was led by the special prosecutor, Robert Mueller, and was concluded in 2019 with the so-called Mueller Report. The abstract of this report comes up with an inconclusive judgement:

if we had confidence after a thorough investigation of the facts that the President clearly did not commit obstruction of justice, we would so state. Based on the facts and the applicable legal standards, however, we are unable to reach that judgment. (Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller, III 2019: 2)

Donald Trump’s tweets from May 18, 2017, i.e. the beginning of the Mueller investigation, until the time of writing this chapter (June 2020), one can say that Trump tweets about “witch-hunt” consistently. I have looked up his Twitter Archive and searched for the occurrence of the term to establish its distribution (‘Trump Twitter Archive’ 2020). In 2016, prior to his presidency, the number of tweets by @realdonaldtrump including the term ‘witch-hunt’ was zero. Once in office, in 2017, the number of his tweets with the term ‘witch-hunt’ was 20; in 2018, it was 138. In 2019, the overall number was 174, with January having 4 such tweets. The first peak month of Trump’s tweets in 2019 mentioning “witch hunt” was July (21). One significant event in July 2019 which Trump refers to, is the Special Counsel Robert Mueller testifying to Congress that Trump could be charged with obstruction of justice after he left office (Thomsen 2019). A quick drop in the number of “witch-hunt” mentioning tweets can be observed in August (1), and Trump seems to return to the narrative in September (20), with a second peak in October (34). In September 2019, Trump’s impeachment inquiry began about his potential abuse of presidential power to gain political gain (Fandos 2019). Throughout these processes, he refers to the trials as *the* witch-hunt, as if their labelling were common-sense disposition and knowledge. In the first five months of 2020, he has mentioned the keyword over 30 times on Twitter.

The witch-hunt narrative was not restricted to Donald Trump's Twitter account. He did refer to the investigation of Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 elections on his behalf as a witch-hunt in his official statements as well. One of the most notable references to this is his letter to Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, sent from the White House in December 2019. The six-page letter was sent to Pelosi a day before the House of Representatives was expected to vote on the impeachment articles. In it, Trump claims that Pelosi and the Democratic Party are impeaching him with *no evidence of guilt*, referring to the investigation of the Russian interference as the "Russian Witch Hunt" (Trump, Donald J. 2019: 4). Referring to the upcoming impeachment process, he draws a parallel between his case and that of the infamous Salem Witch Trials claiming that, "More due process was afforded to those accused in the Salem Witch Trials" (Trump, Donald J. 2019: 5). In this letter, two tactics emerge: the self-victimization and creating the illusion that an *unjust conviction* is taking place.

In favour of Trump, some Republican congressmen also called the impeachment a "politically motivated" (Hice, Jody 2020) or "partisan" witch-hunt (Shelley, Tim 2019). Trump's use of language is also endorsed by Gregg Jarrett, a legal analyst for Fox News, in his books *The Russia Hoax: The Illicit Scheme to Clear Hillary Clinton and Frame Donald Trump* (2019) and *Witch Hunt: The Story of the Greatest Mass Delusion in American Political History* (2019). Both books are published by Broadside, which is under HarperCollins Publishers, and specialises in publishing pro-republican, anti-socialist and anti-liberal narratives.<sup>16</sup> Gregg Jarrett also hosts a podcast entitled "The Impeachment Witch Hunt" on Fox News Radio.<sup>17</sup> We can say that, there is a particular pro-Republican, pro-Trump segment in the US media market supporting and maintaining the narrative that the criminal investigation and the impeachment trial should be a witch-hunt against Trump.

While most of Trump's claims in the letter were "inaccurate or misleading" (Sheth, Sonam and Eliza Relman 2019), some media outlets critical of his use of the metaphor paid particular attention to unwrapping the reference to the historical events of witch-hunts in Trump's letter, pointing out its invalidity. The research-based commentary outlet *The Conversation* published an online article by Philip C. Almond, an emeritus professor at the University of Queensland. The historian emphasizes that in the witch-hunts from 1450 to 1750 in Europe and North America, the victims were mostly women, often from socially and economically marginalised social positions. He reminds the readers that the term "witch-hunt" came to common usage in

<sup>16</sup> See their website at <https://bookshout.com/publishers/broadside-e-books> [accessed 6/05/2020].

<sup>17</sup> Accessible at <https://radio.foxnews.com/podcast/the-impeachment-witch-hunt/> [accessed 6/05/2020].

the 1950s in Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (Almond, Philip C. 2020). The plot of the play is based on the Salem witch-hunts of 1692–1693, but Miller later admits that it was triggered by his experiences with the anti-communist persecutions during the McCarthy era (Miller, Arthur 1996). This was the cold war period in the 1950s in the United States in which particular people were targeted as 'communists' by the US government, under the leadership of Republican U.S. senator Joseph McCarthy (Schrecker, Ellen 2002). The historian Philip C. Almond's observation helps to draw out the tactic of self-victimization and the claim for innocence:

From Miller's *The Crucible* and the McCarthy investigations, there is a straight line to Trump's understanding of a witch hunt – the American state as the inquisitor and *persecutor of an innocent individual* (Almond, Philip C. 2020, emphasis mine).

Christine Johnston, a historian at Washington University shares this line of criticism in her article published in the *Washington Post*. She refers to the witch-hunt parallel as a “discrediting device” (Johnson, Christine 2020). She writes that witch-hunts were the results of abuse of legal processes, leading to the escalation of witch trials. Characteristic to the witch-hunts of early modern Europe was the extraction of testimonies by torture or under the threat of torture and hundreds of people (mostly women) were routinely executed once ‘found guilty’. Johnston points out that a more apt comparison would be the choice of the prosecutorial campaign against urban violence in the 1980s and 1990s in the US, in which legal tactics were used to profile mostly African American citizens as drug traffickers. The “arsenal of legal tactics” included “confessions extracted through threats, indefinite detention awaiting trial, plea bargains in the face of a potentially decades-long imprisonment” and it “was wielded to produce the facade of legal effectiveness” (Johnson, Christine 2020). She adds that the official state rhetoric of the ‘war on terror’ in the wake of 9/11 2001 confirms this logic, which entails a marginalised group profiled as ‘American Muslim criminals’ due to a political prejudice:

The solution is to turn the criminal justice system loose on those suspected of any link to a “terrorist enterprise,” whom the prejudices of the powerful ensure are almost exclusively Muslim American (Johnson, Christine 2020).

These two articles by two distinguished historians show that the witch-hunt claim did not go without any challenging in the political media in the US. The two historians exposed the ideological investment informing the president's unfounded claim to victimhood through exploring the history of old and contemporary cases of witch-hunt in the US history: the concept is to be associated with the historical knowledge of the 1690's Salem witch-hunt trials

and the legacy of the McCarthy-era anti-communist persecutions. According to this hybrid construction, it is the state apparatus of the United States that is the perpetrator of unjust persecution of an innocent victim. Trump is utilizing this narrative to present himself as the ‘victim of the state apparatus’ conducting a witch-hunt and thereby abusing its power. Moreover, Trump not only portrays himself as a victim, he distracts focus from the potential abuses of power he is under criminal investigation for. The tactic of *call for no reaction* could be observed here – by crying out “Witch-hunt!”, Trump implies that there is no legitimate reason to investigate or react to the fact that his actions could have potentially been criminal, reproducing denial and silence around the issue (Cheit, Ross E. 2014: 15).

### 3.2. The witch-hunt narrative in Estonia

In Estonia, the use of the keyword “nõiajaht” (witch-hunt) in media articles has become dramatically popular in the past decade, even more so in the past five years (‘Nõiajah\*’ 2020). On the one hand, Donald Trump’s claims regarding the Mueller investigation and his impeachment process were also published in Estonia (E.g. Hiietamm, Aadu 2017; Kressa, Kaarel 2017; Kressa, Kaarel 2018). On the other hand, the radical right-wing party, EKRE has also made use of the narrative, contending that there is a witch-hunt going on against their party, trying to discredit their critics and foreclose any actual debate. EKRE’s statements regarding the alleged ‘witch-hunt’ against them have become one the central loci of this narrative in the Estonian media.

According to the Estonian national media articles archive *DIGAR. Eesti artiklid*,<sup>18</sup> there has been a rapid popularity in the use of the term witch-hunt, “nõiajah\*”<sup>19</sup> in Estonian, within the past decade as well as over the entire period covered in the archive (1821– to date). I did a search count and around 70 per cent of the total occurrences of the term (1,729 items) was published between 2010–2019, and the figure made a rapid jump in 2016, peaked in 2017, and lowered somewhat in 2018–2019 but still stayed higher than in the first half of the decade. While not all of the uses of the term can be analysed in the framework of this chapter, these statistics attest to the unusual popularity of the concept of witch-hunt in its various meanings.

<sup>18</sup> Accessible at <https://dea.digar.ee/cgi-bin/dea> [accessed 8.06.2020]

<sup>19</sup> In Estonian, the term for *witch hunt* is *nõiajaht*. Since the word ending changes according to the grammatical case (*nõiajaht* in nominative, *nõiajahi* in genitive, *nõiajahti* in partitive case) and the rest of the 14 cases are built upon the genitive version, I used *nõiajah\** as the search term to include all possible variations.



### 3.2.1. “Witch-hunt” for EKRE

EKRE is on the most far right on the political spectrum in Estonia. The party identifies as conservative and nationalist, and it has also been characterised as populist (Petsinis, Vassilis 2019). The party was established in its current form in 2012, and its popularity has been on a steady rise since then. On the parliamentary elections in March 2015, the party managed to receive its first 7 seats out of 101 in the Estonian Parliament (Riigikogu).<sup>20</sup> The incorporation of an explicitly nationalist right-wing party into the parliament marked the beginning of a radical change in the political landscape of Estonia since the 1990s (Puddington, Arch 2019). Therefore, their success at the election received major criticism in the main daily and weekly outlets, and EKRE retorted by calling the criticism a witch-hunt against their party. However, they still managed to gain more voters for the elections in 2019 and at the time of writing this thesis in the spring of 2020, EKRE is part of the coalition in power with the Centre Party and the Pro Patria, with five members from EKRE serving as ministers in the Estonian government. In the current section, I draw out how the witch-hunt narrative developed around EKRE in 2015.

The parliamentary elections for the XIII Riigikogu took place on March 1, 2015 and the new parliament was sworn to office on March 30<sup>th</sup> for the next four years. EKRE manned their newly received 7 seats in the parliament with their party leader, Mart Helme, his son Martin Helme, Henn Põlluaas, Jaak Madison, and three more people (Riigikogu 2019). Next to Mart Helme, Henn Põlluaas became one of the propagators of the witch-hunt narrative that year, and Jaak Madison, the youngest member of the XIII Riigikogu (elected on the brink of his 24<sup>th</sup> birthday), a subject of it. The positions these four men have assumed by Spring 2020 lead to their subsequent rise in power: Mart Helme is currently the minister of interior, Martin Helme is the minister of finance, Henn Põlluaas is the President of the Riigikogu, and Jaak Madison is a delegate at the European Parliament.

Immediately after the parliamentary elections in 2015, a story was published in the *Estonian Public Broadcasting* online outlet (Eesti Rahvusringhääling, ERR) which referred to Madison’s blog post from January 2012 at [jaakmadison.blogspot.com](http://jaakmadison.blogspot.com) (Kooli, Rain 2015).<sup>21</sup> In the post, Jaak Madison calls for a more favourable perspective on Nazi Germany, referring to its economic growth. The post was published a year and a half before he joined EKRE,

<sup>20</sup> As the result of the 2015 elections, the 101 mandates in the XIII Riigikogu were distributed as follows: Reform Party – 30, the Centre Party – 27, the Social Democratic Party – 15, Pro Patria and Res Publica Union – 14, Estonian Free Party – 8, the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia – 7. See ‘XIII Riigikogu koosseis’ 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Post now inaccessible at [jaakmadisson.blogspot.com](http://jaakmadisson.blogspot.com), but screenshot available at Kooli, Rain 2015.

therefore officially before his political career. When this post was resurfaced in March 2015, it was condemned by all the other four parties represented in the parliament. Two parties, the Reform Party and the Social Democrats also excluded EKRE as their potential coalition partner (ERR 2015a).

In his blog post entitled “On Fascism”, Jaak Madison wrote in January 2012:

Since I have been interested in politics for long, then naturally I have also been interested in communism, fascism, national socialism etc. However, the fascist ideology stands out the most for me, which is rather innocent in essence but which has been depicted as the embodiment of the Devil. ....

It is true that there were concentration camps, labour camps, they practiced games with gas chambers. However, the so-called *strict* order brought Germany out of the s\*it situation of that time, since the development, which indeed, was based foremost on the military industry, led the country to the top of Europe with only a number of years. I do not want to justify Nazi crimes or mass murders with this text (even though the number of victims is controversial), but one cannot look at this only from one perspective, one should also look at the positive sides that came with the order of the time. Unfortunately, no perfect form of governing exists (even democracy is not perfect), however, I see fascism as an ideology that includes many positive nuances necessary for the conservation of the nation state.<sup>22</sup>

There was a backlash of criticism against Madison and EKRE in response to this blog post. Jaak Madison tried to justify himself by saying that he was analysing the different sides of different ideologies, not praising any particular one (Salumäe, Karl-Eduard 2015). He resorted to victimizing himself as the target of a hunt, and portraying himself as innocent of any leanings toward fascism:

This is a hunt-to-kill and shameless propaganda against me and EKRE, with the aim to find any fabricated excuse for the parties in power to not invite us to coalition talks (ERR 2015c).

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<sup>22</sup> „Kuna mind on päris kaua huvitanud poliitika ja sellega seonduv, siis loomulikult olen ma ka huvitatud olnud nii kommunismist, fašismist, natsionaalsotsialismist jne. Kuid eriti tähelepanuväärne on mu meelest fašistlik ideoloogia, mis on oma olemuselt üsnagi süütu, aga mida on kujutatud kui saatana kehastust. /.../ On tõsi, et olid koonduslaagrid, sunnitöölaagrid, harrastati gaasikambritega mänge, kuid samas selline nn «range» kord tõi ka Saksamaa tol ajal üsna sügavalt p\*\*sest välja, sest areng, mis põhines küll esmajärjekorras sõjatööstusel, viis riigi vaid loetud aastatega Euroopa üheks võimekamaks. Ma ei taha küll õigustada nüüd selle tekstiga natsikuritegusid ja massimõrvu (kuigi sealgi on hukkunute arvud väga vastuolulised), kuid ei saa vaadata asja vaid ühe mätta otsast, peaks nägema ka positiivseid pooli, mis kaasnesid tolleaegse korraldusega. Paraku pole olemas täiuslikku valitsemisvormi (mida pole kindlasti ka demokraatia), kuid minu silmis on fašismi näol tegemist ideoloogiaga, mis koosneb üsna paljudest positiivsetest ning rahvusriigi säilimiseks vajalikest nüanssidest.“ (Kooli, Rain 2015) My translation.

Madison's tactics did not work this time: the Reform Party (ERR 2015d) and the Social Democrats (ERR 2015a) stated that this blog post was the last straw and they will not be inviting EKRE for coalition talks. Mart Helme initially stated that this text is simply a personal opinion of an individual, exercising his right to freedom of speech (*Delfi* 2015). But later that day, he suddenly condemned the blog post publicly, stating that EKRE stands against any totalitarian regimes (ERR 2015b). The 2015 coalition was formed between the Reform Party, the Social Democrats, and Pro Patria and Res Publica Union, leaving EKRE in the opposition with Centre Party.

However, Madison had his party members on his side: Jaak Valge, a historian and a member of EKRE, condemned the debate around Madison's statement, calling it a "witch-hunt" with the aim to find something compromising against EKRE. He assessed Madison's blog post to be a young person's discussion [arutama] about the world. He added that both national socialism and communism are equally unsuited for contemporary politics and if one wishes to find truly compromising ideas, they should look into statements made by "top politicians, like Marju Lauristin, Rait Maruste, Siim Kallas, and other communists" (Valge, Jaak 2015). With this short commentary, Jaak Valge utilises not only the witch-hunt narrative as a common trope in the Estonian public discussions but the anti-communist narrative as well. Lauristin is a member of the Social Democrats and she belonged to the Estonian Communist Party until 1990. However, she was the leader of the movement for Estonian independence from the Soviet Union, which could complicate the flattened category of 'communist' that weighs heavy on the anti-Soviet sentiment. Rait Maruste and Siim Kallas both belong to the Reform Party, which stands for liberal democracy and is considered the most neoliberal party in the Estonian political landscape. Moreover, Kallas was one of the founders of this party in 1994. These aspects should highlight how the title "communist" in Jaak Valge's use simplifies the persons' political profiles and is used to locate them in the unwanted category within Valge's ideological framework.

Coinciding with Madison's case, EKRE was receiving more general criticism as well. The second most read Estonian daily, *Eesti Päevaleht* reflected on the election results in their lead on 3 March 2015, entitled "Inciting hate in the Parliament" (*Eesti Päevaleht* 2015). They stated that the recent parliamentary elections made the EKRE MPs who are "disregarding European values" socially acceptable. The lead refers to slogans expressed by members of EKRE earlier, including "If you're black, go back" (uttered by Martin Helme in 2013, in reference to the immigration politics he would wish to see in Estonia, see Teder, Merike 2013). The lead

compares EKRE with “Jobbik” in Hungary, the National Rally in France, Pegida in Germany, and Golden Dawn in Greece, adding that the rhetoric of these parties “bring an atmosphere into Europe similar to the one which lead to the Second World War” (*Eesti Päevaleht* 2015).

EKRE committed to a narrative that the criticism against their politics is unfactual slandering. They threatened to sue *Eesti Päevaleht* (ERR 2015e) and did so in May 2016 when they sued the media house Ekspress Meedia for over 40 articles published in *Eesti Päevaleht* and other media outlets, which allegedly distributed untrue slander about the party. They demanded the articles to be erased, the allegedly false information to be corrected, and the media house to not use certain language about the party in the future. They also demanded €150 000 for compensation. In 2017, the court delivered their decision on 19 articles, favouring Ekspress Meedia (*Delfi* 2017). The court assessed the texts to be quality opinion articles, in which the authors analysed EKRE’s activities and statements thoroughly and in an argumentative manner. The court added that the value statements expressed in these opinion articles were not based on false information.

One of the most thorough articles which builds the case that there is a witch-hunt against EKRE, is authored by Henn Põlluaas, EKRE’s MP and a later President of the Riigikogu. It was published as a post on his personal blog and the edited version of this text was published on the online opinion section of the largest daily newspaper *Postimees* later the same day, Thursday, 12 March 2015. The blog post is entitled “The witch-hunt against EKRE has crossed all boundaries” (Põlluaas, Henn 2015b) and the article version is entitled “Unfounded witch-hunt against EKRE” (Põlluaas, Henn 2015a). In this text, Põlluaas brushes off Madison’s blog post as “unfortunately articulated and falsely interpreted” and says it is “not normal” that this text has overshadowed “everything else”. He sees the criticism that Madison’s blog post received as part of a systemic campaign against EKRE, which he sees as “massive”, “forceful”, and lacking of any facts or argumentation (Põlluaas, Henn 2015a). He goes on to mention several cases of ‘witch-hunt’ against his party. I will elaborate on them briefly below.

Põlluaas’s examples of the alleged witch-hunt against EKRE include the 3 March 2015 lead in *Eesti Päevaleht*, referred to above (*Eesti Päevaleht* 2015), which took a critical look at the parliamentary election results. The next example mentioned is the lead of a popular weekly, *Eesti Ekspress*, published in 4 March 2015. The author, Allar Tankler gave a quick analytical overview of the parliamentary election results, mentioning EKRE in one sentence. Tankler states that EKRE’s ideology is fascist and then cites Martin Helme’s infamous racist slogan

(Tankler, Allar 2015). Põlluaas claims Tankler's statement to be untrue (Põlluaas, Henn 2015b).

Põlluaas's third example of the alleged witch-hunt against EKRE is Aro Velvet's article (6 March 2015) on the Estonian National Broadcasting webpage, which analyses EKRE's public rhetoric. In the article, Velvet states that focusing only on Madison's blog post underestimates the larger problem: this is not a singular example of EKRE's "flirt" with far-right symbols, this is part of a pattern. Velvet lists the facts that another member of EKRE (currently an MP), Ruuben Kaalep has posed with the symbol of the 20th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS and has been platformed on the radio station Renegade Broadcasting, which represents white supremacist groups in the UK. Velvet adds that EKRE's youth group, the Blue Awakening invited the Nordisk Ungdom, a group investigated for racist harassment in Sweden, to their EKRE's torch march. This march was a symbolic event on February 24, on the anniversary of Estonia's independence since 1918, one of the most celebrated dates annually. EKRE also used to promote a video of the torch march on their official Youtube channel which featured the band's Minu Kamp song (which is an obvious reference to *Mein Kampf*, literal translation: My Gang), *I am waiting for the Leader*. The main point in Velvet's article is that events like these need to be addressed for the voters to have a clear understanding of the values of the parties they are voting for. Velvet states that EKRE is not an exclusively national socialist or fascist party, but they use fascist symbols and iconography frequently (Velmet, Aro 2015).

However, Velvet does emphasize the characteristics of EKRE that locate the party on the far right of the political spectrum, comparing EKRE with the French National Rally, Sweden Democrats, and the Finns Party. According to Velvet's article, these characteristics are a commitment to the idea of the rebirth of the 'true nation' which has a special status but is currently victimized by a demonized enemy and the corrupt elite in power. The far right groups deny the essential equality of people, but set one group of people above the others, and demand an immediate and forceful political action (Velmet, Aro 2015). This article is a thorough analysis of EKRE's rhetoric with plentiful examples of their stance against immigrants, the European Union, the Civil Partnership Law, and of their construction of the 'proper elite' of Estonians.

Henn Põlluaas's article could be one of the most thorough examples of the tactic of *call for no reaction*. While Velvet had established that members of EKRE do use fascist and Nazi symbolics frequently, Põlluaas chose to locate this article within the 'witch-hunt' narrative,

implying that the fact that these symbols had been used should have gained no particular attention. Moreover, he concluded his list of examples of witch-hunt against EKRE with two articles in which the journalists traced back the visual symbols that members of EKRE wear (tattoos, emblems on their clothes, iconography of brochures they distribute) and demonstrated the similarities of these symbols with the symbolics of Nazi Germany (Koorits, Vahur 2015) and international neo-nationalist and white supremacist networks (Sutrop, Urmas 2015). Põlluaas continued his tactic of portraying these acts as not worthy of scrutiny by disputing that the cross and eagle tattooed on the arm of an EKRE member are simply an eagle and the Maltese cross, “the history of which dates back to Jerusalem in 1099” (Põlluaas, Henn 2015b). Similarly, he diminishes the significance of the observation that the core symbol of EKRE, the blue rye flower visually resembles a pan-germanist symbol that is used by Austrian far-right.

Põlluaas argues that these media articles embody a “pure witch-hunt” where the authors have tried their best to find something compromising against EKRE and since they cannot, they have come up with unfounded extreme examples of their making. He expresses doubt if the journalists have done this on their own or they are commissioned by someone, letting themselves to be used for some political propaganda. “All of this has become irrational and against any reason... This is not investigative journalism, this is inciting hate and anger,” he states. He refutes the ‘accusations’ and denies the connection to Nazism, fascism or any radical politics, claiming that EKRE’s conservatism is “European” (Põlluaas, Henn 2015a).

Põlluaas concludes his article by referring to a secret power that allegedly benefits from this but does not explicitly state which power he has in mind, saying that he would not “speculate” here. He writes:

The hysteria and witch-hunt going on is starting to resemble the Soviet persecutions and the call outs as the enemies of the people of that time. Should the members and voters of EKRE expect to fear actual repressions soon to come and the beginning of the new Silent Era? (Põlluaas, Henn 2015a)

In this quote, one can witness a similar parallel with anti-communist statements discussed above regarding McCarthyism in the United States. While in the States, the anti-communist persecutions are compared to a witch-hunt, in the post-Soviet states that Estonia is a part of, the reference functions the other way around: the Communists were the ones conducting the “witch-hunt”. The state socialist era is remembered for its repressions and this traumatic experience is recalled in the zombie socialist dynamic (Chelcea, Liviu and Druță, Oana 2016).

Referencing the traumatic persecutions under the Soviet occupation enhances the witch-hunt claim emotionally, creating an atmosphere of terror in relation to the events described as “witch-hunt”. However, Põlluaas’s anti-communist claim is not historically sound: he ties together the Soviet repressions, which took place in Estonia in 1940–1941, and the Silent Era, which was a time period from 1934–1940. Then, Estonia was under a nationalist authoritarian government and the Parliament was forced into a silent position. Põlluaas does not acknowledge the historical and ideological difference of the two eras and invests in the witch-hunt narrative that should hide this contradiction, shining through as ‘undisputable evidence’.

### **3.3.The main tactics of the witch-hunt narrative**

Following this analysis, the witch-hunt narrative could be described as comprising three different tactics. I call these tactics the self-victimisation, the illusion of conviction, and the call for no reaction. As shown in this chapter, these tactics are employed once a political character has come under scrutiny for a potential misdeed, therefore the overarching aim of these tactics is to present this character as unquestionably innocent.

In the self-victimization tactic, a very powerful entity depicts itself as a victim: the President of a powerful country or a political party with seats in the Parliament cries out for witch-hunt, and therefore, sets itself in a position of the one being hurt by someone. The actions that were labelled as a witch-hunt were either criminal investigations into Trump’s possibly criminal acts, or argumentative criticism of EKRE’s fascist leanings. Therefore, the one depicting themselves as a victim is himself potentially an abuser of power. Invoking the memory of innocent townfolk burned at the stakes for impossible deeds allows for the potential abuse of power to be overshadowed and to present the potential abuser as the victim.

Secondly, the witch-hunt narrative allows for an illusion of conviction. A witch-hunt is a process in which the perpetrator is already decided guilty and a horrible punishment is awaiting them. By crying out “witch-hunt!”, one implicitly claims that they are burned at the stake with no just process. The witch-hunt narrative creates an illusion that the person has already been *convicted* or served their *punishment*, while in reality, there has been no criminal conviction, the person has not lost their political position, and in the case of EKRE, are enjoying a rise in power.

Thirdly, as Ross E. Cheit argued, the witch-hunt narrative is a story of overreaction (Cheit, Ross E. 2014: 15). By shouting “witch-hunt!”, one creates the optic of illusion to the effect that

the reaction to their statements or acts is disproportionate to the exceptionality of the act. Under this illusion, there is no legitimate reason to look into the potentially fascist sympathies the members of EKRE are portraying, since doing so would count as overreaction. Tactically creating an illusion of over-reaction is supported by the discourse in which some responses to political violence are encoded as too emotional and therefore trivialized as non-political (Patel, Shaista 2014). All of these tactics are rhetorical tools to trivialize the criticism the political subject is receiving and are used to relativize this criticism as part of a democratic debate. This way, the witch-hunt narrative is used as a tool to erode democratic processes and institutions.



## Conclusion

In this thesis, I analysed the use of the terms ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ in the Estonian media since 2015, the the theoretical framework of the anti-gender discourse. In Chapter 1, I located the anti-gender discourse in the Estonian context. I draw out the tactics of this discourse that I am interested in regarding my research: the tactic of *self-victimization*, or portraying oneself as a victim of unjust due process in order to diffuse accountability. I also introduced the terms ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’ and gave an overview of their historical contexts as gendered terms. In Chapter 2, I conducted a case study on the media coverage of one particular case of violence against women in Estonia in 2016–2018. I analysed this event in order to exemplify the tactic of *stopping thought*. I looked at how the gendered term ‘hysteria’ is used in order to deter and obstruct further analysis on violence against women. In Chapter 3, I analysed the term ‘witch-hunt’ regarding the media coverage of the far-right populist party EKRE in 2015. I compared EKRE’s use of the term with Donald Trump’s use of the term and analysed how particular tactics are developed: similarly to calling out *hysteria*, the *witch-hunt* trope allows one to give an illusion that they have already been convicted or punished and that they are the victims of unjust due process. I analyse the similarities between the ‘witch-hunt’ discourse and the anti-gender discourse and how ‘witch-hunt’ allows a historical gender order to be turned around in order to diffuse accountability of men with political power.

Some structural similarities can be observed between the anti-gender discourse and the discourses of ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’. While the cases I have chosen to focus on in my thesis are from somewhat separate fields, the spheres of meaning of these terms sometimes overlap and they are sometimes used interchangeably. The anti-feminist discourses operates within the zombie socialist context in Estonia, making use of the fact that referring to the discredited state socialist past works there effectively to create a scarecrow for one’s argument. Secondly, the uses of the terms ‘witch-hunt’ and ‘hysteria’ have intrinsic methodological similarities. And lastly, I will show how the method of self-victimization is present both in the anti-gender discourse as well as in the discourses of ‘witch-hunt’ and ‘hysteria’.

Similarly to the anti-gender discourse, the anti-feminist discourse I am describing in this thesis draws from the anti-communism within the region. State socialism is referred to as a point of comparison to undermine feminist statements by portraying them as echoing the previous political order as authoritarian and discredited. The authors within this discourse do not engage with particular feminist statements or statements from the perspective of women regarding her

own gendered experiences on the basis of the argument, but tend to write off the act entirely as an feminist ideology or demagogy. As an example of this methodological symmetry could be the term *feminist realism* which was used by a cultural critic in a book review of a novel by Eia Uus. The novel includes themes of lesbian love and violence against women. In the reviewer's interpretation, "the flag of women's rights is flying high between the lines in this novel". He proposes the term *feminist realism* for the genre of the novel and explains that the term is directly drawn from the Soviet genre of visual art, socialist realism. (Loog, Alvar 2020) This is an example of how anti-communism plays into the anti-feminist discourses in Estonia.

The explosion in the production of the gender-opposing discourse always takes place as a reaction to an event in the cultural or political sphere. In Estonia, the use of the term 'hysteria' in the context of violence against women exploded in a chain of events which began when it became public information that a Theater Director had attacked a young woman with whom he was in professional as well as romantic relations at the time. This chain of events included criticism of the violent act, a public feminist action against honouring the Theater Director, a backlash against this action, and a theatre production titled "Hysteria" (analysed in Chapter 2). This chain of events became a trigger for the evolution of the 'hysteria' discourse.

In the case of the discourse of 'witch-hunt', one of the explosions could be traced back to the Twitter account of Donald Trump. There, he commits to referring to two political processes as 'witch-hunts': the 2017–2019 criminal investigation into the potential Russian interference of the 2016 USA elections, and the 2019 impeachment process of Donald Trump. His aim seems to be to discredit these processes by presenting them as invalid, comparable with the unjustness of the historical witch-hunts. In the Estonian context, this tactic is present in the rhetoric of EKRE. For them, an initial trigger was a chain of media articles critical of the party's far-right politics and use of fascist-leaning symbols during their first admission to the Parliament in 2015 (analysed in Chapter 3). Similarly to Trump, EKRE deploys the witch-hunt rhetoric to portray the act of criticising them as an unjust mobilisation to annihilate them.

One of the central traits in the anti-gender discourse is the tactic of self-victimization. As shown in the section 1.1.2. in this chapter, this is when a subject who claims to speak for 'the majority of the people' and/or who possesses institutional power, depicts themselves as the silenced victim of an oppressor. With this tactic, the subject neglects the global context of gender, wealth, race etc inequalities, and presents a group who has less institutional power in the global context (minorities, women) as their oppressor. In the anti-gender discourse, this often plays

out as white Christian heterosexual middle-class men portraying themselves as the victims of groups of people who are denied equal rights in that particular context, e.g. non-white, Muslim, gay or queer, poor people. In the anti-feminist discourses analysed in this thesis, the examples are men in institutionally powerful and supported positions portraying feminist activists or journalists as their oppressors.

In the discourse of ‘hysteria’, the one who has committed violence presents themselves as the *victim* of public opinion. In this rhetorical tactic, media articles that investigate or criticise the case are retorted by the perpetrator and his allies as “media battering” (elaborated on in Chapter 2). From the self-victimizing perspective, discussing the violent act in the media is as much of a violence as the attack itself – therefore, the perpetrator is the victim of this journalistic violence, and their own actions should seem less problematic in comparison. The aim of this tactic is to pivot the social understanding of the act of violence into less of a misdeed.

In the discourse of ‘witch-hunt’, a person, or a political organisation with significant institutional power (examples of Donald Trump and EKRE, elaborated on in Chapter 3) uses the witch-hunt trope to portray themselves as the *victim* of an unjust due process. The person portrays themselves as the victim by co-opting the historical narrative of the witch-hunt – where people, mostly women, were killed in significant numbers for invalid accusations. This tactic invokes an image of a mob of unjust people persecuting an innocent subject. The mob is implied to be motivated by irrational reasons, much like witch-hunters of early modern Europe were after a crime which could rationally not have existed. (Vähi, Tiina 2017: 726) In Estonia, this tactic co-functions with anti-communism – the reference *witch-hunt* is implied in comparison with the Soviet persecutions.

One example of the activation of the witch-hunt trope within an anti-communist framework could be an opinion article by a senior journalist Priit Pullerits in 2015. He published a comment on the event that a senior Estonian politician had called a younger Estonian politician of Russian decent, “the son of an immigrant”. Pullerits expressed his opinion that criticising the older politician for his words is an example of political correctness gone mad, “which shoots bullets with no mercy at anyone whose words give the slightest hint of sexist, chauvinist, racist or xenophobic thoughts”. He was aghast of the “accusations” that this politician has offended all non-Estonians and motivated hate against Russians. He wrote:

These accusations blown out of proportions remind me of the Soviet witch-hunts, when the most distasteful arguments were used to reckon with the alleged enemies of the people. (Pullerits, Priit 2015)

In here, one can notice that the title “witch-hunt” can be appropriated to a simple form of journalistic criticism of a politician’s racist statement. In this tactic, the act of demanding one to take public responsibility for one’s words or actions is depicted as an irrational and unjust, blown-out-of-proportions due process.

The self-victimization hovers within the public discourses in a more general sense as well. It is a common characteristic in public discussions of the power hierarchies and the question of which way does the power imbalance tilt. Often, questions about gendered power relations invoke the self-victimization as a trope. For example, one theatre reviewer chose this tactic in his review of the theatre production “sugu: N” (“gender: F”). (“Sugu: N” | Vaba Lava’ 2015) In the performance, four actresses presented vignettes from the lives of women, e.g. preparing children for school in the morning as if a sports act; convincing oneself that the beating husband makes her happy, etc. The reviewer complained that watching the play as a man, he began to feel himself as the victim of ‘symbolic violence’ – the female characters in this theatre production (and the women in those characters) attacking the male viewers and men as a gender. (Loog, Alvar 2016) The tactic of self-victimization is utilised here to dismiss the physical, economic etc violence that men cause on women. Instead, the man portrays himself as the victim of the *attack* which is the act of pointing out male violence on women. This pivot contributes to the normalisation of discrediting any gender-specific representation of the inequalities in the world.

The potential questions for further research on this topic could include exploring the transnational patterns of the discourses of ‘hysteria’ and ‘witch-hunt’. In the first chapter of this thesis, I followed the literature that has established the anti-gender discourse as a transnational campaign, existing in Estonia among other countries. The question could be, does ‘hysteria’ travel similarly, utilising the particular historical contexts of different countries? In Chapter 2, I provide an analysis only on the local context of Estonia. As shown in Chapter 3, the ‘witch-hunt’ discourse is present in the United States as well as Estonia. This question would direct the researcher to the path of asking, how to understand the normalisation of hate speech and discrediting gender as a transnational pattern? Which political developments does it follow, and how does it develop independently from overt politics? Moreover, further research could be done on the question of how these gendered, emotionally loaded terms – and some others, e.g. ‘panic’ – build up into one discourse, which is supported by the anti-gender discourse, but functions in its unique ways, sometimes in a more invisible manner than the more salient, and more researched anti-gender discourse.

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