

SYMBOLIC POLITICS AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POLITICAL PROTEST: THE CASE OF LITHUANIA

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Summary. The article analyses the concept of symbolic politics and its potential for explaining the mechanisms of social protest movements and the means of struggle used. A detailed discussion of the protest events that took place in Lithuania in 2021-2022 reveals how the symbolic capital of major national holidays and commemorations was exploited by the opposing political forces. It concludes that both sides of the conflict are reluctant to engage in dialogue, as their symbolic position in the political field as the true heirs of Sąjūdis depends on their symbolic positioning in the political field and their right to shape the general political discourse.

Keywords: symbolic politics, social movements, political protest, major national holidays, commemorations.

Title: POLITYKA SYMBOLICZNA JAKO INSTRUMENT PROTESTU POLITYCZNEGO: PRZYPADEK LITWY

Streszczenie. Artykuł analizuje koncepcję polityki symbolicznej oraz jej potencjał wyjaśniający mechanizmy funkcjonowania ruchów protestu społecznego i stosowane przez nie środki walki. Szczegółowa analiza wydarzeń protestacyjnych, które miały miejsce na Litwie w latach 2021–2022, ukazuje, w jaki sposób kapitał symboliczny najważniejszych świąt narodowych i upamiętnień był wykorzystywany przez przeciwstawne siły polityczne. W artykule stwierdza się, że obie strony konfliktu nie są skłonne do dialogu, ponieważ ich symboliczna pozycja w polu politycznym jako „prawdziwych spadkobierców” Sąjūdisu zależy od zajmowanej przez nie pozycji symbolicznej oraz od prawa do kształtowania dominującego dyskursu politycznego.

Słowa kluczowe: polityka symboliczna, ruchy społeczne, protest polityczny, główne święta narodowe, upamiętnienia.

INTRODUCTION

Sociology and political science have numerous ways of analysing how group identity is constructed and maintained during social protests, how collective memory is invoked and politically exploited, how discrimination is named and defined and how ways of overcoming it are sought. The social frames of protest movements are nowadays understood as a kind of cognitive medium that helps social actors to orient themselves in the world and to make sense of it (Glynn, Ostman, McDonald, 1995: 249-277; Oliver, Johnston, 2000: 37-54; Oliver, Cadenaro-Roa, Strawn, 2003: 213-244). According to Jacqueline van Stekelenburg and Bert Klandermans, for a protest to succeed it requires the coincidence of certain social *conditions*: *demand* (complaints, anger and resentment), *supply* (protest organisations), and mobilisation (effective communication networks) (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, 1997). These conditions coincided in Lithuania in the years 2021-2022, which were characterised by an increase in social discontent and a proliferation of protest actions and forms of social discontent, although an increase in the frequency of various protest events, including those related to the political issues of history, can be observed as early as 2019 (Čepaitienė, 2020). However, the recent campaigns differed significantly from the previous ones not only in the geography and social composition of the participants (mostly not Vilnius inhabitants, but provincial residents, representatives of the so-called “lower social strata”), but also in the nature and scope of the problems identified. Instead of economic issues raised by specific social groups or professions, such as policemen, scientists or teachers, etc., the rhetoric of the “culture wars” (Brennan, 2006), the demands for systemic change and calls for the resignation of some high-ranking officials or even of some institutions, such as the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, was more prominent in 2021-2022. The frequency of these protest events and the number of protesters has also increased significantly. Some of the public gatherings in the capital and in other cities have attracted a number of participants unseen since the 1990s - the time of the national movement Sajūdis.

The most important reasons for the growing discontent among a significant number of citizens were the radical domestic and foreign policies and legislative initiatives that were introduced by the ruling coalition formed at the end of 2020 by the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD), the Liberal Movement (LLS) and the Party of Freedom (LP), and the government it appointed, as well as initiatives that reflected the so-called gender discourse. The question has been raised: to what extent do these aspirations of the ruling party reflect the opinion of the democratic majority of voters? The parliamentary

elections on 11 October 2020 were attended by only 47.1% of all eligible voters, and the ruling coalition that was formed, with 40.1% of the vote, represented less than 20% of all eligible voters. The disregard of the will of the majority of citizens, as recorded by sociological surveys, by the indiscriminate implementation of the so-called “progressive” and genderist agenda and the drive to legalise drugs, and by the intensive dissemination of messages in the public domain in favour of the LGBTQ+ community and its values, as well as the intention to silence those who oppose it by means of the “hate speech” law, have provoked outrage amongst citizens who are concerned with preserving their natural family and traditional values. This resentment has been compounded by the often excessive, inconsistent, double-standard, scientifically unsound and manipulative ways in which the covid-19 pandemic has been managed, which have repeatedly gone beyond respect for the constitutional rights of citizens and freedom of conscience. In response to this, on 15 May 2021, a multi-thousand-strong “Great March in Defence of the Family” took place in Vilnius Vingis Park, organised by a newly formed public organisation - the Lithuanian Family Movement (LŠS) which according to various estimates attracted more than 15 000 participants. On 10 August, a rally was also organised in front of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania (LRS), mainly against pandemic restrictions, which was followed by violent clashes with the police in the evening, later described as “riots”. On 10 September the LŠS also organised a numerical rally in Cathedral Square. These events, as well as other smaller ones, attracted a lot of public and media attention.

However, while previous protests were usually met with silence and ignorance by the authorities, even before these events took place, the mainstream media were quick to portray their organisers and potential participants in an exclusively negative light, not shying away from spreading untruths, ridiculing them by name-calling, and threatening them with sanctions and social ostracism. They have been accused of “pro-Russian attitudes” without serious evidence, marginalised, ridiculed and even demonised. Apart from a brief and rather abstract greeting to the families by the President of the Republic of Lithuania, Gitanas Nausėda, and a brief meeting between the speaker of the LRS, Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen, and the leaders of the LŠS in the courtyard of the Seimas, the ruling coalition has made no efforts to establish a dialogue with the participants in these protests, or to even listen to them, let alone to consider their demands. Although the protesters respected the rules of public assembly and acted within the framework of the law, the mainstream media constantly emphasised the supposed illegality and futility of these protests. On the other hand, representatives of the Vilnius City Municipality have repeatedly and openly violated the constitutional rights of

citizens to peaceful assembly, either by denying permits for some of these protests or by creating other significant obstacles to their occurrence (courts of various instances have repeatedly found the Vilnius City Municipality's actions to be illegal, and sometimes abusive, after the fact, but these decisions have had no meaningful legal consequences for the officials responsible). The police were also involved in these value struggles, restricting citizens' access to rally sites, etc. All this, as well as the demonstrative display of anti-riot police forces and equipment on the streets on the days of these events, when there was no necessary justification for it, was apparently intended to discourage for a long time the citizens' willingness to protest, and to "interfere in politics" in general, as it could have proved dangerous and unsafe. In spite of this, a significant number of Lithuanian citizens from various cities and towns participated in the above-mentioned mass protests criticising the government in the spring and autumn of 2021, either in person or by watching their direct webcasts. This was perhaps the first time that the difference between the immediate personal experience of protesters and the image of them created by influential journalists and famous opinion makers in the pro-government media was so stark. Their undisguised political engagement and biased presentation of information undoubtedly played a role in the fact that the ratings of the major media outlets plummeted to unprecedented lows (Jaruševičiūtė-Mockuvienė, 2021).

The results of these protests have been mixed. Although they did, at least for a while, stop the adoption of controversial laws on family policy and substance use in the LRS, their systematic suppression and negative representation in the media have had an impact on the perception of civil society's ability to influence the political process. The 2022 Civic Empowerment Index, which measures the public's actual and potential activism, sense of influence and assessment of the risks associated with civic engagement (Pilielinė visuomenės institutas, 2022), shows a significant increase in the number of those who do not know what to do in the event of a political, economic, or local issue and a decrease in those who would actively take action in such situations. Of particular relevance is the finding that, compared to 2020, there has been a decline in citizens' belief in the power of the public to influence important political decisions. In contrast, public authorities have regained the influence that was "numbed" in the eyes of the population during the pandemic, with an increase in the influence attributed to members of the Parliament, mayors, municipal councils and other "officials". Respondents also identified more risks associated with civic engagement, such as suspicions that the politically active person is a self-serving impostor or an inadequate freak. Or the greater risk of being attacked, defamed, bullied, or having one's reputation

tarnished or ruined. Some respondents even saw the risk of losing their job, and considered threats of reprisals as likely.

Conflicts over civic power and growing hostility between political opponents are by no means a new phenomenon. In a comprehensive study of eight cases of civil society formation in Europe in the 19th century, political anthropologists Nancy Bermeo and Philip Nord concluded that, in many of the countries analysed, civil society had worked its way to recognition by operating outside the law. That is to say, what mattered in these processes was not the official role given to citizens by the state, but their active participation and their ability to win the rights they wanted, in spite of unfavourable circumstances and obstacles (Bermeo, Nord, 2000). This struggle has involved the use of a wide range of resources, from the institutional to the symbolic, including the unconventional. This would suggest that civil society cannot do without a public space open to democratic debate, and that suppressing problems and conflicts rather than acknowledging and resolving them does not improve the situation, but on the contrary only weakens citizens' conviction that they have at least some capacity to act publicly and that their action will bring about the desired changes. This situation is particularly worrying in post-Soviet countries which, like Lithuania, have declared their desire for political change towards democratisation and the strengthening of civil society since the *perestroika* launched by M. Gorbachev.

The constant obstacles to organising eventually encouraged protest organisers and participants to find other ways to express their discontent and criticism of the government. For this purpose, unconventional or openly counter-conventional symbolic political tools were spontaneously discovered in early 2022 and exploited as quite effective. Major national festivals, commemorations and other public events marking them suddenly became an arena for openly displaying negative attitudes towards those in power, which since these commemorations were broadcast on national television and watched by a large number of viewers, either live or on record, could no longer be suppressed or ignored by the political elite, despite the considerable efforts to marginalise or ridicule them *post factum*. Against this background, the aim of this article is to take a closer look at the official commemorations of the three most important national dates

in 2022 - January 13¹, February 16² and March 11³ - and the forms of civic discontent that were expressed during them. Since, in addition to the political issues at stake, these events and the public opinions expressed during or immediately after them also reflected the relationship of the competing political forces to historical memory, the state itself and the vision of its further development, it was important to examine the messages sent by the two confronting sides in the field of historical politics.

The category of symbolic politics was used as a theoretical framework for the study. Taking into account the specificity of the development of post-Soviet countries, the topic of (re)construction and use of some topics of cultural memory in solving current socio-political problems becomes particularly important for the analysis of the interaction between symbolic politics and social protest. Symbolic politics is a particular form of political communication, which is not primarily focused on rational reflection of reality, but on suggesting desired meanings to the audience by means of visual and emotional effects. It deliberately exploits certain aesthetic-symbolic resources to legitimize or question power (Поцелуев, 1999: 62-76; Поцелуев, 2012: 17-53). The symbolic politics approach focuses on representations of political actors in public space (including the media), which may differ from the non-public, but therefore no less real side of politics. The field of action of symbolic politics is not limited to the circle of the ruling elite, but its researchers are also interested in how other social agents and groups operate in this field, how they exploit and use national symbols common to all in order to discuss about possible change, or how they propose or accept new signs, created from below. Thus, although the symbolic politics implemented by the state is by no means limited to and does not exhaust the themes of the historical past, it is often characterised by a specific interpretation, representation, mediation and

¹ During the night from January 12th to 13th of 1991, Soviet paratroopers occupied the Vilnius TV Tower and the building of the Radio and Television Committee. 14 people were killed and about 700 people were injured during mass protests. The events of January blocked the way to coup d'état and restoring Soviet power in Lithuania. The Soviet army, the MIA regiments and the KGB were used for this. Many Lithuanian residents participated in the events of January. They thwarted the coup d'état, defended their own legitimately elected government and the country's independence.

² On the 16th of February 1918, the Council of Lithuania (elected in 1917 September) proclaimed the restoration of an independent State of Lithuania, governed by democratic principles, with Vilnius as its capital.

³ Lithuanian Independence Restitution Day is commemorated March 11, when the *Act of the Restoration of Lithuania's independence* was signed in 1990 by the Supreme Council - the Restorative Seimas.

narrativisation of the national history, including recent event, in order to achieve certain political goals (Джонсон, Малинова, 2020: 15-41).

SIMBOLIC SIDE OF POLITICS

The concept of politics as a symbolic act was perhaps first proposed in the 1970s by the US political analyst Murray J. Edelman (Edelman, 1964). However, the topic gained more popularity a little bit later, especially after it was applied to the study of post-socialist and post-Soviet societies (Торбаков, 2018; Johnson, Малинова, 2020: 15-41; Малинова, 2015; Малинова, 2011: 106-122; Малинова, 2014: 344-353) or the processes of Eurointegration (Krumrey, Jacob, 2018). This was due to the very nature of the official ideology of communist regimes, which sought to penetrate not only the public but also the private lives of people, and the fact that the transformation of the symbolic system has become one of the key features of post-communist transitions (Gill, 2013). To this, could be added the sensitivity to signs, symbols and other verbal-visual associations and their semantic nuances developed by societies under totalitarianism, which stems in part from the then-developed “Aesopean language” as an arsenal of expressions of political and societal discontent, exploiting a variety of cultural texts. It is also important for the present study that, unlike other authors who emphasise the conservative-pragmatic aspect of symbolic politics, Edelman emphasised its class-conflicted character more strongly (Edelman, 2002). However, he was rather sceptical about the potential of civil societies in Western democracies to exploit the space of symbolic politics to their advantage. In his later works he was already straightforwardly referring to it as a “political spectacle” and was convinced that the production of this spectacle and everyday political activity were essentially the same, although the claim to their difference served to legitimise the official actions of the government (Edelman, 1971: 33-35). Thus, he also saw it as a powerful instrument of manipulation of public opinion aimed at consolidating and increasing the power and influence of the ruling circles.

Other authors have also seen symbolic politics as a “language game”, a kind of “political drama” or “staging”, played out in front of the passive spectators of this “political theatre” (Sarcinelli, 1987: 239-241). Political theatricality has been defined by the German political scientists Thomas Meyer and Martina Kampmann as “an activity that uses the body of the politician and/or his/her media images to produce certain desirable effects for the audience” (Meyer, Kampmann, 1998: 32). The theatrical discourse aimed at eliciting certain strong emotional reactions

from the audience (laughter, tears, seriousness, pride, mourning, anger etc.) is realised through carefully thought-out staging devices. Here, the visual dominates over the political messages precisely because of the corporeality of the politicians as actors. Political-symbolic strategies make use of existing or create new myths, rituals and cults of personality (including the cult of the prominent politician), which, while integrating society, also raise the level of irrationality (mystification) of political discourse. For this reason, symbolic politics can be more effective than conventional propaganda as an attempt to inculcate people with certain ideas by agitating them with a certain “truth”. However, its function is not simply about the production of ideological constructs: by creating new meanings, elites themselves operate within the framework of socially defined meanings and are forced, at least in part, to submit to their internal logic, which means that artificially created and deployed symbols or myths simply will not endure, or will be subjected to the challenge of constant questioning.

As mentioned above, scholars do not see symbolic politics as the opposite of “real” politics, but as a specific aspect of it, perhaps most clearly manifested in the politics of history (van Dijk, 2010: 16-17). However, if symbolic politics is usually used to realise the international interests of countries or inter-party competition, why can it not also be used by the other, opposing side - the organisers and participants of social protests? In this way, major national dates also become a window, or rather a slit, for the expression of social discontent and, using the already established ceremony and scenery of such events, to remind people of themselves and of their otherwise repressed or ignored political aspirations. In this way, symbolic politics is used not only as a tool in the struggle for political power, but also as a statement of the right to control the “moral capital” of symbols shared by all, and as an expression of disputes over the interpretation and evaluation of past events and personalities, as well as an expression of the modelling of a desirable future. Thus, the national holiday/memorial, as a powerful political symbol that creates and maintains a collective identity of “we are the ones who remember it (and in the same way)”, turns into one of the most important tools of this struggle. In this way, the usual *agonal* character of politics is also exploited culturally and ideologically, channeling the accumulated energy of social protest in a direction to which the opponent is not always able to find the most adequate response at the time, as we will see in the examples discussed below.

The analysis of the three major commemorations/national festivals of 2022 was also based on the above-mentioned T. Meyer’s concept of symbolic politics as “theatre”, which raises questions of social rationality and the moral responsibility of politicians, and which is particularly suited for the analysis of societies that

are confronted with acute socio-economic and identity problems (Meyer, 1992). In these societies, symbolic politics is often used in place of the development of democratic capacities and skills, and banal political conformism tends to portray any alternative to the system as the result of the action of “hostile forces”, as a “nonsense” or a “utopia”. Lithuania, like other post-Soviet countries, would be a fairly typical case of these tendencies. For this reason, in addition to sources such as public speeches by politicians, broadcasts of these events, TV reports or discussions of them in official and social media, etc., participatory anthropological research (with the exception of the March 11th ceremonial session at the LRS, which was seen by TV) was chosen as a significant method of analysis. I hope that this dual experience as a direct participant in the events in question and as a researcher of symbolic politics has helped to me to notice and better understand some of the semantic and symbolic aspects of the events that took place, which are otherwise harder to understand.

ACTUALISING THE MORAL CAPITAL OF THE SAJŪDIS IN THE SYMBOLIC POLITICS OF THE PROTEST MOVEMENT

COMMEMORATION OF JANUARY 13TH 2022

Defenders of Freedom Day, commemorated annually on 12-13 January, in 2022 was also supposed to take place according to the usual scenario that has existed for many years. But due to the limitations of the covid-19 pandemic more of the events took place in open spaces. The main commemoration of 13 January and the annual Freedom Prize award ceremony took place in Independence Square in front of the Seimas and was broadcast live on the national television LRT. However, unlike in previous years, access to the square was partly blocked. And the access to the square centre, where the tent with the Heads of State was set up, was only possible with a permit. Spectators were separated from those gathered in the square by new metal fencing (also used for riot control, first demonstrated during the encirclement of the Seimas and the Government Palace on 10 September 2021, when the rally was held in a different place - the Cathedral square) and two police bands lined up on the outside and inside. This arrangement and, as it later turned out, the busloads of riot police personnel packed in the surrounding courtyards, made the participants anxious from the outset and did not contribute to creating a festive atmosphere befitting the commemoration. The demonstrative

physical exclusion of the ruling elite from the crowd increased tensions, and the bitter reproaches directed at the small group of elite who were surrounded, such as “I was on duty here back in that January, and now you are going to keep me fenced in like an animal?”

Noise became the only way for the crowd to express their dissatisfaction that day, and they took advantage of it, especially during the speeches of unpopular politicians. The loud, spontaneous, incessant chants of “shame shame shame”, or the shouting and whistling, which intensified especially during the speeches of V. Čmilytė-Nielsen and prime minister Ingrida Šimonytė, completely drowned out their voices, although the LRT broadcast succeeded in giving the impression that they were not. Meanwhile, the performance of the President of the Republic of Lithuania or the other speakers did not provoke such a fierce wave of discontent. However, contrary to the subsequent explanations by politicians to the media about “those who had gathered to be horrified”, the victims of January 13th were universally honoured with a minute of silence. Therefore, the indignation of the ruling coalition against the alleged desecration of the memory of the heroes of January 13th was not true. The vocal protest during the ceremony was clearly directed at two particular politicians who were most associated with the choice of measures to manage the pandemic, which led to the segregation of citizens, the disregard of the Constitution and the laws, as well as with the ruling coalition’s foreign policy, which was considered detrimental to the country, also with the growing censorship and restrictions on freedom of expression, and with the supposed economic crisis.

The physical and symbolic divisions between elite and citizens, capital city and provinces, the privileged and the so-called “poor people”, government loyalists and “marchers”, which were demonstrated on that day, contrasted sharply with the memory of January 13 and the political message that society and its elected government can be united in solidarity, especially in the face of the new geopolitical challenges. This contrast was particularly hurtful and upsetting for those participants who still vividly remember the events of January 1991 and who were active participants in them. Meanwhile, the outrage in the mainstream media against the “shouters” and “whistlers” (Landsbergis apie..., 2022) also raised questions about who should own the memory of those fateful days - the representatives of the authorities who were alienated from the people and who monopolized the memory of the Sąjūdis, or the people who resented it?

Thus, the efforts of condemnation and *shaming* of the protesters (*Media and Public Shaming*, 2013) prevailed in official discourse. The blame for this unpleasant incident is placed exclusively on the protesters (LRT Forumas, 2022). They

have been widely subjected to derogatory epithets referring to their supposed “stupidity”, “ignorance”, “bad manners”, “provincialism”, “working for Putin”, etc., as opposed to the images of “enlightened”, “highly educated” and “higher-income” pro-governmental loyalists. This rhetoric ridiculing and dehumanising political opponents is essentially the result of years of systematic and consistent objectification of them, depriving them of their right to an authentic voice and will, to articulate political attitudes that they would be able to formulate and express on their own, without the help of perceived external forces. Meanwhile, the well-known political scientist Prof. Ainė Ramonaitė, on the basis of her research on the collective portrait of the protesters, has noted that some of them were disillusioned voters of the liberalised TS-LKD, and others are the losers of the post-Soviet transformation, who are only now accumulating enough resources to express their discontent (Profesorė apie protestų dalyvius..., 2022).

This symbolic conflict has also revealed the growing toxicity of the political field, where elected politicians do not take any responsibility or blame for mismanagement (Гельман, 2019), and do not even recognise the right of citizens to express their dissatisfaction and criticism, choosing instead not to be heard and to cancel out their opponents. It is not surprising that with this distorted perception of social reality, one is constantly made to feel extremely insecure, and to defend oneself with great fear against the “enemies” and “traitors” seen everywhere. On the other hand, this symbolic clash also revealed the growing polarity of the assessments of the origins of the Second Republic of Lithuania. The attempts of the ruling elite to monopolise the moral capital of the Sąjūdis era and the “defenders of freedom” stood in stark contrast to the already well-established narrative of the commemoration, which emphasised the unity of society and the elite in the struggle for freedom. This was the main source of the indignation of those present, expressed in the only way available to them at the time: the noise raised to drown out the hypocrisy emanating from the rostrum, perceived as blasphemy.

COMMEMORATION OF 16 FEBRUARY

The commemoration of 16 February took place before the tensions had subsided. There was a large police presence in the Old Town of Vilnius. This time, fences restricting the movement of passers-by crossed Pilies Street, where the most important and traditional event of the celebration - Vytautas Landsbergis⁴ speech

⁴ Vytautas Landsbergis (born 18 October 1932) is a Lithuanian politician and former Member of the European Parliament. He was the first Speaker of Reconstituent Seimas of Lithuania after its

from the House of Signatories balcony - was to take place. Although the street was not physically blocked, some of the spectators had to undergo selective checks of their personal belongings by police, and some of them had their anti-government posters taken away. The crowd in front of the House of Signatories -was tense, with large numbers of government supporters gathered together, some of them fighting, swearing or behaving aggressively and insolently towards some of the protesters. The order of the ceremony, created by theatre director Eimantas Nekrošius, which began shortly afterwards, is the same every year: trumpets, national anthem, Reading of the Act of Independence of 1918, announcement of the names of the signatories and applause for each of them. The only unexpected element of the celebration was the appearance of former President Dalia Grybauskaitė on the balcony of the House of Signatories, which may have helped to psychologically relieve the tension in the crowd. The highlight of the event - Vytautas Landsbergis' speech, interrupted by shouts, applause and chants from supporters and opponents alike - focused on the currently fashionable green issue, internal and external threats. His manner and rhetoric resembled a sermon. Later, the speaker, who is qualified as a musicologist, began to "conduct" and accompany the musical pieces traditionally performed on this occasion, attempting to build bridges with the interwar period and the epoch of the nation state.

The annually recurring ritual of the "balcony ceremony" at the House of Signatories consistently creates a dramatic impression of public political action. Already in the 1980s, the French politician and political scientist P. J. Schwarzenberg identified four main theatrical roles of politicians, which can be seen as a synthesis of the political and theatrical logics of action: *the hero saviour*, *the gentleman everyman*, *the sympathiser*, and *the father of the nation* (Schwarzenberg, 1980: 19). However, unlike Meyer and Kampmann, this author did not take dramatic theatre as the starting point of his theory, but show business. For him, the political actor is an identifiable rather than an entertaining figure. This is also

independence declaration from the Soviet Union. In 1993, Landsbergis led much of Sąjūdis into a new political party - the Homeland Union (*Tėvynės Sąjunga*). It gained a landslide victory in the 1996 parliamentary elections. Landsbergis served as Speaker of the Seimas from 1996 until 2000. He ran, although unsuccessfully, for president in 1997 (coming up the third after receiving 15.9% of the votes). He has written many books on a variety of topics, including a biography of Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, as well as works on politics and music. He is a founding signatory of the Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism and a member of the international advisory council of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation. On 25 June 2022, the Lithuanian Seimas officially approved the bill regarding V. Landsbergis' recognition as "the head of state". The decision made by coalition dominated by the party founded by him proved to be unpopular among the public and is considered controversial. Although he has not held any official positions for many years, his informal influence in the state remains enormous.

evident in the case of the “balcony ceremony”, where the main character of the drama - V. Landsbergis - every year plays the role of the “father of the nation”, attempting to contain and embody the memory of the first and second Lithuanian Republics. This helped create and maintain a personal myth of Landsbergis.

Political myths, as the literary sociologist Andreas Dörner puts it, are complexes of signs or “extended symbols” (Dörner, 1996:48). In order to remain effective, they must not only be recounted periodically, but also continuously enacted as ritual dramas where “good” forces fight and defeat “bad” ones. The importance of political ritual in mobilising politicians’ supporters is thus obvious (*Collective Emotions...*, 2014). According to the American historian G. Mosse, in modern societies that have displaced religious traditions of power and authority, a new style of politics is emerging in which “any political action must be transformed into a spectacle” (Mosse, 1975: 18). In this style, a kind of “political liturgy”, consisting of a complex of rituals performed within the framework of political (or civil) religions, plays a central role (Rivière, 1988; *Political Religion...*, 2019). It does not simply tell the story of power, but it is personified and “performed” in a certain, emotionally and aesthetically convincing way, along with a direct, bodily representation of its ranks and statuses, and hints at their “higher” meaning in the institutional hierarchy of the state, as we can see in the case of the yearly “balcony ceremony”.

However, as with the commemoration of January 13, the already established procedure of the political spectacle performed from the balcony of the House of Signatories during the commemoration of February 16 has been challenged symbolically in 2021. Not only were slogans and chants against the balcony speakers heard, but also posters depicting Romualdas Ozolas⁵ were displayed. In this way, the protesters questioned

⁵ Romualdas Ozolas (1939–2015) was a Lithuanian politician, philosophe, activist, writer and pedagogue who taught at Vilnius University. At the primary stages of Sąjūdis Ozolas was a key figure of the National Movement that glued things together. He was well-known, had ties with various discussion groups, and had a well-grounded political vision. In 1989 Soviet Union legislative election Ozolas was elected People’s deputy with support of Sąjūdis. He would remain as a People’s deputy until Spring of 1990. He was elected to Supreme Soviet of Lithuanian SSR once again in February 1990. From 1990 to 1991 he served as Deputy Prime Minister of Lithuania together with Algirdas Brazauskas in Prunskienė Cabinet. In 1992, he was elected to the Seimas and served until 2000, when Lithuanian Centre lost almost all its representatives in Seimas after 2000 Lithuanian parliamentary election. He and his supporters formed the Lithuanian Centre Movement in 1992 (it would become political party, the Lithuanian Centre Union, in 1993) and was its chairman until 2000. From 2003 to 2007 he chaired the National Centre Party (NCP), since renamed the Lithuanian Centre Party (LCP) in 2005. Ozolas was against Lithuania’s membership in the European Union as he believed this was incompatible with the country’s vision of independence.

the established symbolic structure of the celebration and Landsbergis' claim to the role of the "father of the nation", and at the same time, as an illegitimate usurpation, they rejected the auto-myth created by Landsbergis as "the founder of the Sajūdis" and "the only liberator of Lithuania from Soviet totalitarianism", contrasting it with the name and the face of the person, who is considered to be the "true father of the Sajūdis". However, since various provocations were already expected this time, both the organisers of the event and their supporters were prepared to counter these challenges by means of symbolic politics, so they remained local, unsystematic and less visible in the crowd.

11 MARCH COMMEMORATION AT THE SEIMAS

The great state dates invariably bring to the rostrum of the Seimas Historical Hall people whose words would not otherwise find their way into the public space, but whose thoughts, due to the order of the ceremony, cannot be avoided or drowned out on that day. Previously, the speeches of Vytautas Vyšniauskas, a philosophy student, a prominent Soviet dissident Catholic nun Nijolė Sadūnaitė and partisan Jonas Kadžionis-Bėda, who criticized the current political situation, were widely discussed in the Lithuanian public space, and they provoked a considerable resonance, which was a stark contrast to the narrative of "Lithuania as a history of success" deployed by the political elite on the occasion of March 11. The opportunity to use the established political ritual to express opposition sentiments publicly was also created at the commemoration of 11 March 2022, when the platform was given to a speaker delegated by the Signatories' Club, the lawyer Zita Šličyte, who was one of the founders of the second Republic of Lithuania and co-author of the text of the Constitution. Her speech, which criticised the genderist policy that is being implemented against the will of the majority of citizens, caused a real stir in the historic Seimas hall. Some of the outraged participants, mainly parliamentarians from the ruling coalition and ministers, including Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė, left the hall during the event. This was a repetition of the drama of the January 13th protests. But in reverse, this time, a symbolic distancing from the opposition representative, refusing to listen to her. Her words were also perceived as outrageous and blasphemous, attacking the atmosphere of the celebration and the prevailing ideological discourse. The speaker was subsequently attacked fiercely in the mainstream media and on social networks, and was subjected to bullying, intimidation and harassment attempts. Her speech even led to a pre-trial investigation initiated by the Tolerant Youth Association, which

equated the mention of “pederasty” and “homosexualisation” with “hate speech”, discrimination and incitement against sexual minorities (Platūkytė, 2022) (later, the prosecutor’s office closed the investigation after failing to find the elements of a criminal offence (Lietuvos Respublikos Prokuratūra..., 2022).

Z. Šličytė’s speech and the subsequent attempts to “cancel” her in the public sphere raise the question why political opponents are still allowed to use the platform of major national holidays and commemorations to express critical sentiments if they are clearly contrary to the dominant political discourse and inevitably cause scandal? The dissonance in meaning that has been observed can be explained by the fact that those in power, irrespective of which parties they represent, are still forced to admit the “founding fathers” of the second Republic to these celebrations, and to put up with the unpredictability of the speeches they make and the implied critical charge. This is done for the symbolic legitimacy and continuation of the political system. And the perceived undesirable side-effects of this decision are then attempted to be counteracted in the mainstream media and pro-government social media as the result of the speaker’s supposed lack of understanding of political reality due to his or her advanced age or disengagement from public affairs. However, as the example above shows, the „founding fathers” of the Second Republic have already been persecuted, which would indicate a growing ideological opposition to the values and political aspirations of the Sąjūdis era.

CONCLUSIONS

According to discourse analyst Teun A. van Dijk, the specificity of symbolic power, and thus of symbolic politics, is primarily linked to the activities of power elites to manage and control access to public discourse by other groups. This power is exercised through the symbolic capital it accumulates, which is used to socially construct and maintain discursive structures that ensure their political dominance by controlling the “consciousness of the audience” (van Dijk, 2010: 16-17), as the cases of the three major national holidays and celebrations briefly discussed above illustrate. However, these events also testify that the process of accumulation of symbolic power in Lithuania is unfinished and not complete, as it is still challenged by alternative interpretations of the Sąjūdis epoch presented by its former leaders and active participants. The mass protests of 2019-2022 thus become an illustration of how the Sąjūdis period and the political values and programming of Lithuania’s development are still being used to question, reject, and construct a vision that is contrary to the newly established political discourse and its order,

including ritual. Which contrasts the increasingly hollow ritual of commemoration with a living testimony based on the power of moral authority, and the memories of civic communion and sacrifice for public causes with the increasing degree of exclusion between political power and society.

During the protests in question, both sides of the conflict sought to question each other's right to public political expression, also through the means of symbolic politics linked to the memory of events of the recent past. Since some of the participants of the Sajūdis era are still alive and still capable of challenging the attempts of the current rulers to appropriate its moral capital, they have provided testimonies that contradict the publicly established official narratives and rituals and have resorted to symbolic protest actions.

The ongoing struggles for the right to control the symbolic legacy of the Sajūdis, as well as the lack of "feedback" in political communication, have fostered hostility and radicalisation on both sides of the conflict. The struggle for the appropriation of the memory and moral capital of the Sajūdis (as well as of the First Republic, from which it legally and symbolically derives) has become extremely significant over the past years, since, with the change of generations, the appropriation of this symbolic resource at the same time plays the role of the legitimisation of a particular political group. By denying political opponents the right to this symbolic resource, any legitimacy is also denied, thus symbolically eliminating them from the field of political competition.

Major national holidays and commemorations, as well as certain symbolic places, personalities and events, were creatively used by the protesters in 2022 as an arsenal of ideological tools, which greatly frightened the ruling elite. However, in the following years, it was already prepared for possible surprises: these commemorations took place in closed, fully controlled spaces, and the content of the political messages and symbols used during them was also controlled, so that there were no surprises. This strategy of neutralising opposition actions and messages was also aided by the use of Ukrainian freedom struggle accents in these rituals, such as those that dominated the major historical commemorations of the beginning of 2023, in particular the award of the Freedom Prize to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on 13 January 2023 (Čepaitienė, 2023). Thus, by drawing parallels between the freedom struggle in the 1990s and now in Ukraine, the memory of the Sajūdis has once again been attempted to be monopolised by those in power. The fact that the value conflict over the right to the symbolic exploitation of the recent past remains deep, irreconcilable and unresolvable was also revealed by the separate celebration of the 35th anniversary of Sajūdis on 3 June 2023 in the Seimas and in the hall of the Academy of Sciences, where

it was founded. The speeches made by politicians and public figures during these events continued to demonstrate the persistence of a diametrically opposed and even openly hostile perception and evaluation of these significant historical events in the political and cultural field. This would indicate a deepening chasm between the democratization aspirations that united the Lithuanian society and elites on the eve of the declaration of independence in 1990 and now, when the political elite tends to distance itself more and more from the citizens opting for the imitation of civil unity.

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