Evolution of the Political Agenda during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Analysis of the Seimas Debates Transcripts

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Abstract

This paper analyses debates of the Lithuanian Parliament (the Seimas) during the first and the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (covering the period from January 2020 to January 2021), attempting to establish how the previous and the newly elected Parliament discussed certain aspects of the pandemic and its containment. For this purpose, the authors automatically extracted the transcripts of all the debates that took place in the Seimas during the period under study (https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/documentSearch/lt) and devised a content analytic dictionary covering two broad themes: "COVID-19 pandemic" and "human rights." In addition, the first theme was divided into subtopics covering: 1) general references to the pandemic, 2) references to public life restrictions, 3) references to medical measures of fighting the disease, and 4) references to distance learning/working. The results after an automatic and expert analysis showed that the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and mass protests after the presidential elections in Belarus resonated strongly on the Lithuanian parliament's agenda, as substantial increases of search terms related to "pandemic" and 'human rights" topics were detected in the floor debates. On the more specific level, the study revealed that the Parliament's debate during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was dominated by the subtopic of "public life restrictions" and the subtopic "pandemic in general" was at the centre of Parliament's interest during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords 1

Political agenda, COVID-19 pandemic, coronavirus pandemic, Parliamentary debates, the Seimas, content analysis, human rights, public life restrictions, framing

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken all the societies around the world in terms of economic and political stability. Disasters, crises and sudden, shocking events grabbing the attention of political elites and societies are considered by many policy analysts to be "focusing events" that open windows of opportunities for introducing or reforming public policies. These "little pushes" draw the attention of the people and politicians to issues that lie in people's minds but receive little attention [1]. Coronavirus pandemic can undoubtedly be considered a focusing event as it has been able to spark the heated debates over solutions and remedies to the problem. Importantly, UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) stressed that the "COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time and the most significant challenge the international society has faced since World War Two" [2], thus highlighting its distinctiveness and importance at the global level. These are defining features distinguished by [3], who characterised focusing events as phenomena of utmost importance in setting political agenda.

The paper focuses on the debates in the Lithuanian parliament (the Seimas) during the first and second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, and analyses how the previous and the newly elected

Parliament discussed the various aspects of the pandemic and its containment. We attempt to test the policy learning approach [4], which contends that "understanding processes of policy learning" helps to evaluate policy change in response to disasters. Busenberg defines learning "as a process in which individuals apply new information and ideas to policy decision" [5]. The paper scrutinises the ability of members of parliament (MPs) to learn from the past and use a window of opportunity opened by the pandemic to change the political agenda after the parliamentary elections.

The paper also studies discursive references to the topic of "human rights" in the parliamentary debates, as it is among the most critical "concomitant issues" (the other being, for example, "business support measures") in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. However, this aspect has been less analysed and little attention has been paid to it "despite a commitment to human rights and health, the World Health Organisation and others have been virtually silent on how rights and pandemic management go together" [6]. Thus, the article seeks to investigate if the frequency of references to pandemic topics correlates with the increases or decreases of references to respect for human rights on the floor of the Parliament during the COVID-19 crisis.

For this purpose, the authors devised a content analytic dictionary covering two broad themes: "COVID-19 pandemic" and "human rights". By tracing general trends of discussion of these two topics, the authors wanted to determine how important they were at separate periods in MPs' speeches. In addition, the first theme was divided into subtopics covering: 1) general references to the pandemic, 2) references to public life restrictions, 3) references to medical measures of fighting the disease, and 4) references to distance learning/working. The necessity of distinguishing and analysing subtopics of "pandemic discourse" is based on the idea that the discourse is not monolithic but has many subtopics ([7], [8], [9]). Moreover, it is crucial to trace when certain subtopics emerge on the political agenda, since only then a more specific explanation can be given as to why they arise. Focusing the analysis on subtopics makes it possible to automatically identify better what is changing (and, possibly, why) on the political agenda.

The article is structured as following: 1) discussion of related studies (see Section II), 2) description of the corpus containing the transcripts of the Seimas debates (see Section III), 3) presentation of the methods used in the study (see Section IV), 4) interpretation of the obtained results (see Section V) (5) conclusions and further research plans (see Section VI).

2. Related studies

Issue framing plays a crucial role in shaping the political agenda, as already Schattschneider noted that issue framing to shape the problem to meet the audience's expectations is one of the most critical aspects of agenda-setting [10]. Framing influences how the audience will understand the issue, what measures will be proposed to solve the problem and whether the public and decision-makers will accept them [11]. Furthermore, Druckman argues that issue framing helps the speaker provoke different audience reactions depending "on which aspect or dimension of the topic is emphasised" [12]. The concept of framing is also relevant for discourse studies since discourse is defined as "particular ways of representing particular aspects of social life" [13]. Therefore, scholars engaged in studying framing as expressed via topics and subtopics associated with the COVID-19 pandemic right after the pandemic spread worldwide.

There are already quite many studies published that analyse the contents of communications during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some scholars paid attention to the framing of COVID-19 by evaluating the impact of exposure to framed messages about the origins of COVID-19 [14]. Others analysed opinion framing regarding the use of "chloroquine" and "hydroxychloroquine" for the treatment or prevention of COVID-19 in tweets [15]. Still others studied framing of the COVID-19 pandemic in the media [16] and conceptualisation of the COVID-19 pandemic framing on Twitter [17]. Further, some authors aimed to understand Twitter users' discourse and psychological reactions to COVID-19 [18].

Also, attention to the topic of "human rights" during the COVID-19 pandemic was analysed by several researchers. [19] argued that transformations in many spheres of public life made "under auspices of public health" had an impact on the daily lives of people. The effect of a pandemic on human rights when analysing pandemic discourse was also scrutinised by [20]. Furthermore, [21]

focused on the discursive construction of many aid documents, which run the risk of further disadvantaging suffering populations if the policies and practices they prescribe are implemented.

Consequently, in this paper we aim to analyse patterns of appeals to two major topics - "COVID-19 pandemic" and "human rights" - during the COVID-19 crisis that started in Lithuania in March 2020. Importantly, contrary to most other studies we try to distinguish subtopics of the major topic "COVID-19 pandemic." Analysis of subtopics allows one to grasp the framing of the main issue better, that is, to analyse which aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic are discussed on the floor of the Seimas [12]. We identified four major subtopics of within "COVID-19 pandemic" theme: public life restrictions, medical measures of fighting the disease, distance learning/working, and general references to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, we resort to the analysis of debates on the floor of the Seimas as this – parliamentary – arena has not been studied in relation to the pandemic discourse. Political debates in the parliament are considered by many legislative scholars to be "cheap talk" [22]. However, more recently speeches delivered during the parliamentary debates were used to analyse prominent themes and distinct patterns of discourse in legislative debates ([23], [24], [25]) as well as to trace political agenda topics and explain changes of political attention [26]. Thus, a study of parliamentary debates transcripts might reveal patterns of (changing) political attention during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Dataset

As our data source, we used transcripts of the Seimas debates from 1 January 2020 to 1 February 2021. Even though the pandemic was first recognised in late February 2020, we included parliamentary debates from January 2020 in order to extend the comparative period. Data was automatically scraped from the official document search site of the Seimas: https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/documentSearch/lt. We entered the period (2020-01-01 – 2021-02-01) and the type of document ("Stenograma") (see Figure 1), and the search engine retrieved a total of 117 transcripts in MS Word (*.docx) format.

Figure 1: Query for debates transcripts retrieval implemented on the official document search site of the Seimas.

The retrieved files had to be converted into textual data files (plain text format) to be processed with text analytic tools. It should be noted that the entire data set is in Lithuanian; therefore, it was essential to preserve the UTF-8 encoding for further processing. Information about the number of tokens per month and session are provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Information about the textual data collected for analysis

Term	Session	Month	Tokens
2016-2020	7th regular and 7th special	2020-Jan	134929
2016-2020	Recess	2020-Feb	0
2016-2020	8th regular	2020-Mar	195564

2016-2020	8th regular	2020-Apr	272607
2016-2020	8th regular	2020-May	455599
2016-2020	8th regular	2020-Jun	551573
2016-2020	Recess	2020-Jul	0
2016-2020	8th special	2020-Aug	22567
2016-2020	9th regular	2020-Sep	240905
2016-2020	9th regular	2020-Oct	110504
2016-2020 and 2020-2024	9th regular and 1st regular	2020-Nov	215267 (77015 and 138252)
2020-2024	1st regular	2020-Dec	401199
2020-2024	1st regular	2021-Jan	169536

4. Methods

Since debates on the floor of the Parliament produce rather voluminous amount of textual data we resort to computerized analysis. However, we do not follow the current trend of using topic modelling in analysis of political texts ([26], [27], [28]) as it is important to investigate not only what is being debated, but of equal importance is to trace what is not being debated on the floor of the Parliament [29]. Therefore, we employ a more traditional dictionary-based computerized approach to content analysis [30]. The latter method is more appropriate when the topics studied can be rather unequivocally defined and have easily identifiable vocabularies.

The search terms of the topic "COVID-19 pandemic" and its subtopics were developed consulting dictionaries available in other similar studies ([31], [15], [32]). The search terms of the topic "human rights" were also developed consulting dictionaries available in other related studies ([33], [34], [35], [36]). The resulting dictionaries for each subtopic of the theme "COVID-19 pandemic" and the theme "Human rights" are provided in Table A1 of the online Appendix (see https://osf.io/zqemp).

The analysis was performed employing a minor word search engine. Based on the compiled dictionaries, the sets of tokens (words) and combinations (phrases) that the program had to detect and the symbols that the program had to ignore were selected. This engine scans .txt file with text encoded via UTF-8 and counts the frequencies of different words in the whole set of documents at one a time. It should be noted that due to the faster operation of the program, the data was cleared of stop words before the calculations.

First, frequencies were calculated and ranked for each of the searched terms for each month under the analysis (January 2020 – January 2021). Then these frequencies were summed to the total for each subtopic and major theme. In order to account for the uneven number of sittings and length of debates during each month, the resulting totals of (sub) topic frequency were normalized by the total number of tokens in transcripts per month (see Table 1).

5. Results

The World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020 announced that the outbreak of the COVID-19 disease had reached a global pandemic level and called on states to take urgent, targeted and drastic measures to stop the spread of the disease [37]. Although policy-agenda changes tend to be gradual and slow, focusing events engender faster and more substantial policy-agenda changes [38]. As Gerber points out disasters tend "to prompt policy learning and change because focusing events have a way of revealing systematic deficiencies" [39]. The COVID-19 pandemic meets the characterisation of a focusing event coined by [1] as our data (see Figure 2) show that the focusing event has grabbed political players' attention and emerged on the political agenda right from the start – March 2020.
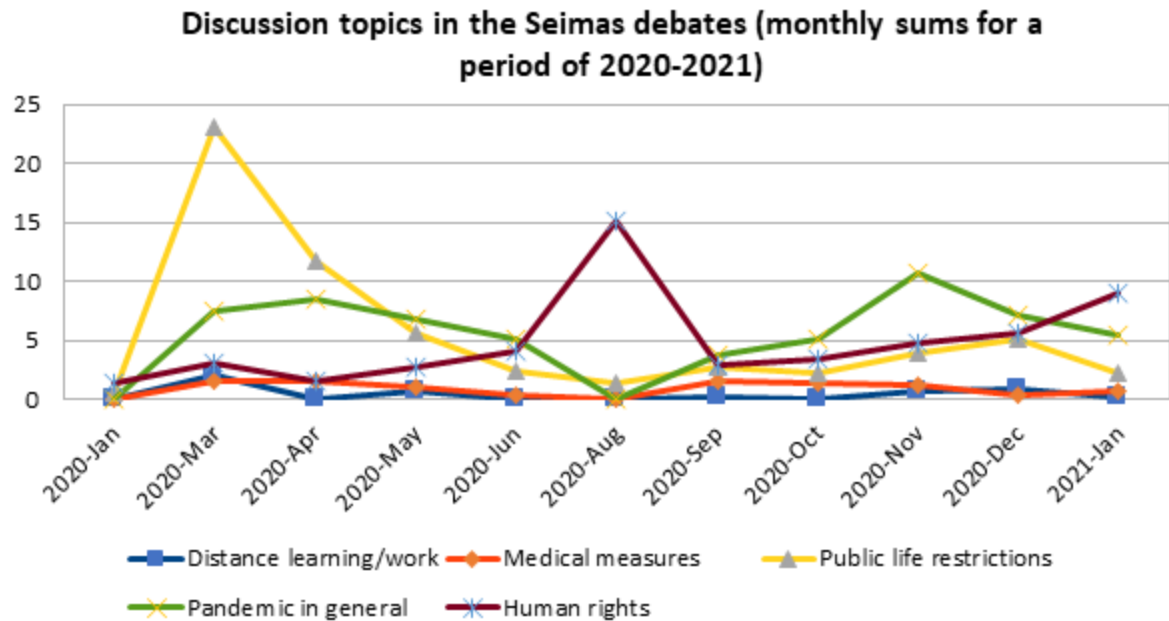
Figure 2: Discussion topics and subtopics in the Seimas debates (monthly sums for a period of 2020-2021).

The automatic analysis of parliamentary debate data also indicates that the most prevalent subtopic at the beginning of the pandemic's first wave was "public life restrictions" (see Figure 2). The subtopics of "distance learning/working" and "medical measures of fighting the disease" were little discussed at the Parliament during both the first and second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Measures involving the broadest possible utilisation of distance learning/work were imposed on many sectors (most prominently, on education) by both governments and never challenged by human rights intellectuals or people affected by these measures. On the other hand, although the wearing of masks was not much discussed in parliamentary debates, this issue was widely discussed in the society.

Interestingly, the newly elected Parliament during the second wave of the pandemic was more focused on general discussions of the pandemic than on "public life restrictions" (see Figure 2). The frequency of search terms found in parliamentary debates during the first and second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic under the topic "public life restrictions" indicates that the word "quarantine" was the most frequently used during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (218 search strings). In contrast, it was mentioned much less at the Parliament during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (101 search strings). The word "pandemic" frequency was also much more pronounced during the first than the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (448 and 235 search strings, respectively) at the Parliament. The parliamentary debate data revealed that the word "emergency" was also used much more often during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic than during the second one (108 and 21 search strings, respectively). To sum up, the automatic and expert analysis of the content of the parliamentary debates gives support for the conjecture that frequent referrals to strict measures taken in order to tackle the crisis helped produce support for policy agenda change at the Parliament.

The interplay between the discussions on the COVID-19 pandemic and human rights is of special interest in terms of what role human rights play in the debate on the COVID-19 pandemic and how human rights are constructed in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The previous Parliament devoted little attention to human rights before imposing strict confinement in March 2020 during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 2). In contrast, the newly elected Parliament devoted much more time to discuss human rights before setting further restrictions during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 2). Furthermore, "human rights" received more attention from the previous Parliament only in June after the imposed strict measures during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic faced criticism from human rights organisations concerning human rights violations [40]

as well as legal experts on possible violations of the rule of law in the country [41]. Moreover, the opposition also expressed doubts about whether the Government has not exceeded its powers by imposing quarantine in the country [42].

The data also revealed that the topic "human rights" was most pronounced in parliamentary debates in June and August 2020 as well as January 2021 during the first and second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 2). The greater focus on "human rights" during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic may be explained by policy learning – the ability of the politicians to amass experiences from past events. As Birkland and Schwaeble contend that "learning, over time, can accumulate among members of the policy community" [4]. Also, the significant changes in the composition of Parliament have affected the approach of decision making therein. Members of liberal parties with a strong focus on human rights on their party agendas have formed a ruling majority in Parliament with conservatives, thus articulating human rights issues more clearly among the members of the ruling majority. Therefore, those political parties make their partners engage in a dialogue regarding decision-making on the burning issues without leaving human rights aside.

A new study by Mykolas Romeris University [43] and the Ombudsman's inquiry [44] into the compliance of governing measures with human rights standards during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic have also provided information and material for instrumental and social policy learning. Furthermore, the coincidence of the start of the new Parliament's and the second wave of the pandemic offered human rights experts an opportunity to advocate for policy agenda change. Moreover, the previous Parliament on the initiative of the opposition parties organised a special session at the end of its work to hear human rights experts on COVID-19 pandemic and the problems it causes: "The second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, how Lithuania is ready to withstand it: problems and suggestions" [45]. Furthermore, like other countries, Lithuania felt gentle pressure from the U.N., as its leaders reiterated the call for the restrictions to be in line with the respect for human rights [46].

Finally, it is noteworthy that the topic "human rights" dominated parliamentary debates in August 2020. This can be explained by the response of the Seimas to the international events in the immediate neighbourhood. In reaction to the election fraud during the presidential election in Belarus, a special parliamentary session was convened to discuss human rights violations [47] (see Figure 2). This meaningful increase of attention to the topic of "human rights" on the Seimas agenda illustrates, once again, that significant, sudden, and massive events (focusing events) easily capture the attention of politicians and generate substantial changes in the political agenda.

6. Conclusions and future work

The automatic and expert analyses carried out support the agenda-setting theories contending that focusing events draw political actors' attention and have a considerable impact on the political agenda ([1], [48], [3]). The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and mass protests after the presidential elections in Belarus resonated strongly on the Lithuanian parliament's agenda, as substantial increases of search terms related to "pandemic" and 'human rights" topics were detected in the floor debates.

On the more specific level, the study revealed that the Parliament's debates during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic were dominated by the subtopic of "public life restrictions" and the subtopic "pandemic in general" was at the centre of Parliament's interest during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The other two topics - "medical measures" and "distance learning/working" - were at the margins of the "pandemic discourse." Therefore, our data analysis results indicate that "pandemic discourse" should not be considered as a singular topic. Instead, it is constitutive of different subtopics that emerge on the political agenda at different points in time and for different reasons. Thus, to provide better explanations of political agenda changes during the pandemic (and more generally), scholars should be as specific as possible in designing instruments for detecting those agenda changes.

Data analysis also showed that less attention was paid to the topic of "human rights" during the first wave of the pandemic. In comparison, much more attention was devoted to it during the pandemic's second wave. These findings provide support for the policy learning approaches ([4], [5]). Arguably, amassing past experiences and learning from the criticisms expressed by human rights experts, the newly elected Parliament devoted much more time to discussions concerning human rights. It was also

more cautious before making decisions regarding public life restrictions during the second wave COVID-19 pandemic.

Our study was limited to quantitative analysis of general trends of "pandemic" and "human rights" discussions in the Lithuanian Parliament. Future work should more specifically analyse who was talking about specific issues and topics. There are two most significant characteristics of MPs that may impact their preferences regarding topic selection: party identity and governmental status (ruling majority vs. being in the opposition). For example, representatives of opposition parties may be more inclined to speak about human rights than representatives from ruling majority parties. Also, qualitative discourse analysis should be applied to identify changes in the parliamentary agenda more precisely and provide more specific explanations of these changes.

7. Acknowledgements

8. References

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