

Using parliamentary corpora to study political agenda: Attention to human rights in Lithuanian Parliament in 2020-2021

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Abstract

In this paper we demonstrate how corpora of parliamentary debate transcripts can be used for studying changes of political agenda. Employing dictionary-based computerized content analysis we investigated changing attention to the topic of human rights in the Lithuanian Parliament in the period of 2020-2021. Results of the analysis revealed that attention to the topic of human rights during the analysed period increased considerably when two focusing events – fraudulent elections in Belarus in 2020 and the influx of migrants from Belarus to Lithuania in 2021 – took place and became the focus of public debates. The study also showed that changing public political priorities resulting in electoral success of parties mobilising support for those newly emerging priorities had effect on increasing advocacy of human rights topic on the parliamentary agenda by representatives of the Freedom Party which entered the Seimas with the explicit agenda of advocating for radical changes in public policy related to human rights.

Keywords

Parliamentary debates, human rights, political agenda, Lithuanian Parliament

1. Introduction

Parliamentary data have been used to study political attention in a multitude of contexts [1], [2]. However, transcripts of parliamentary debates have been used quite seldom for this purpose. More often employed alternatives are analyses of parliamentary debate topics or agendas (minutes), legislative acts (debated or adopted), oral and written questions to the government, and interpellations [3]. This is primarily the result of the still existing difficulty of analysing large amounts of textual data. Though machine learning methods and topic modelling approaches have been shown to be useful in analysing large textual datasets

originating in the political field, these methods suffer from either the need for large human pre-coded resources (supervised) or interpretational difficulties (unsupervised): How many topics to retain? How to interpret the substantive meaning of the topics that were retained?

This paper demonstrates the usefulness of parliamentary debates transcripts in analysing changes in the parliamentary political agenda. Moreover, we approach the analysis of political attention in the parliament via dictionary-based coding methods of computerised content analysis [4]. Though it is rightly argued that dictionary-based coding methods are high on pre-analysis costs compared to topic modelling approaches [5], they have two distinctive merits. First, they allow rigorous analysis when one or several topics are

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investigated and their vocabularies can be comparatively easily constructed (that is, the vocabularies of speaking about these topics are quite distinctive in terms of the concepts and words used). Second, they allow capturing more easily what legislators do not say [6] and, in turn, indicate which topics are excluded from the political agenda. In contrast, unsupervised topic modelling can only capture topics that are being talked about in the debates (at least for some periods).

In terms of substantive goals, we study discursive references to the topic of “Human rights” in the Lithuanian Parliament (the Seimas) in the period 2020-2021. The choice of the study topic was primarily based on the relative easiness of constructing a dictionary of appeals to “Human rights” in parliamentary debates. The political discourse on human rights has a distinctive vocabulary as specifications and definitions of different human rights are included into various national (constitutional texts) and international documents (international documents).

However, the choice of the topic was also based on the grounds of usefulness for the analysis of political agenda changes. Different theories try to explain why specific topics appear on and disappear from the political agenda. This paper demonstrates how focusing events and changes in public political priorities affect the parliamentary agenda. Some scholars argue that focusing events – or disasters, crises and sudden, shocking events grabbing the attention of political elites and societies – can be critical in bringing specific issues to the fore of the political agenda or making them salient. Birkland [7] claims that focusing events “can reveal current and potential future harms, mobilise people and groups to address the policy failures”. However, other scholars argue that not all focussing events lead to agenda change. DeLeo et al. [8] maintain that “entrepreneurs seek to flood the policy debate with their preferred construction of the problem and its solutions to deny agenda space to other actors”. Notwithstanding theoretical arguments with regard to influence of focusing events on political agenda changes, in the analysed period two focusing events – fraudulent elections in Belarus in 2020 and the influx of migrants from Belarus to Lithuania in 2021 – took place and were massively discussed in the public sphere during the analysed period. These two events may be closely related to the discussion of various aspects of human rights, therefore, we expect that

parliamentary agenda will be affected accordingly.

On the other hand, researchers also contend that changes in political leadership (during elections or due to changes in government composition) may have a significant stimulus for agenda change. Carmines and Stimson [9] introduced the concept of “issue competition” that reflects the idea that parties compete on which issues should dominate the party political agenda. As Walker and Waterman [10] assert, elections affect people’s attitudes towards social issues since political campaigns frame social issues or put more emphasis on some issues rather than others. Party political agenda is most important during the election time, as parties that dominate this agenda are bound to win elections. In Lithuania, the campaign of the parliamentary elections of 2020 could be distinguished by the emergence of the Freedom Party, which produced comprehensive human rights discourse appealing to LGBT+ rights, advocating for the legalization of same-sex partnerships and liberal regulation of the spelling of non-Lithuanian names on passports and similar. Since the Freedom Party has also become a member of the governmental coalition, we expect that representatives of this party will engage in human rights related discourse in the Seimas floor proceedings more frequently than representatives of other parties.

To sum up, the paper focuses on how the 2020 Seimas elections (in particular, electoral success of the Freedom Party) and two focusing events (namely, fraudulent elections in Belarus and the crisis of migration influx from Belarus), influenced the political attention of the Lithuanian parliament to the topic of human rights.

2. Related work

Human rights issues were scrutinised globally by adopting various perspectives, including securitisation and discourse theories. Scholars employed securitisation theory to examine how some social issues are securitised to bring extraordinary measures to deal with an assumed threat. Securitisation of COVID-19, HIV/AIDS, Zika migration, and other social or health issues were thoroughly studied, focusing on how securitisation of an implied threat empowers parliaments and governments to exploit extraordinary measures often limiting individual freedoms ([11], [12], [13]). Others looked at the language used to produce a narrative justifying

political measures taken or being avoided. Molnar et al. [14] assert that parliament members use metaphors of war and fear to justify decisions taken at parliaments that limit human rights and undermine democracies. Furthermore, the role of parliament members in shaping human rights or contestation of human rights issues is another spectrum of studies focusing on parliamentary debates as a platform for agenda-setting and policymaking [15]. Voluminous studies focus on the parliament as an avenue to contribute to the human rights agenda, as an actor to promote human rights and frame the human rights agenda or oversee the executive authorities ([16], [17]).

References to human rights in the Lithuanian parliamentary debates were already studied in the context of COVID-19 pandemic and it was found that the Parliament elected in 2020 “devoted much more time to discussions concerning human rights” [18]. However, this study only covered the period of the year 2020, and results could only show that general appeals to human rights (by the whole parliament) increased in August 2020, which coincided with the focusing events related to fraudulent elections in Belarus in 2020. In this study we extend the period for an additional year (thus, covering another focusing event related to the crisis of migration influx from Belarus in 2021) and distinguish between discourses of different parliamentary party groups (factions). The latter design improvement allows us to study changes in parliamentary discourse related to issue competition and changing party political agenda. Green-Pedersen [19] studied party manifestos of Western European parties in the second part of the XX century and found that changes in societal values and priorities had important consequences for party competition as the content of the agenda of party competition changed. In general, issue competition and party political agendas were mostly studied in the context of elections employing analysis of textual data retrieved from party documents and mass media. Analysis of parliamentary debates was rarely used for the purpose of studying changing structure of party issue competition. This study contributes to the understanding of changing party political agenda as important societal changes (changing value priorities) bring into the power political parties which advocate support for issues that previously were at the margins of the political discussion. In the Lithuanian context, the 2020 Seimas elections could be seen as a manifestation of changing party political agenda since a party advocating for radical changes in public policy

related to human rights – the Freedom Party – emerged on the political scene and was successful in winning 11 seats (almost 10 %) in the newly elected parliament, consequently, entering the governmental coalition. Therefore, it is important to investigate if the presence of the Freedom Party in the Government also produced changes in the content of the parliamentary debates, that is, brought previously marginal topic of human rights to the fore of political discussions of the Seimas.

Finally, though political debates in the parliament traditionally were considered by many legislative scholars to be “cheap talk” [20], more recent studies employed speeches of the parliamentary debates in analysing prominent topics and distinct discursive patterns of legislative debates ([21], [22], [23]), as well as to investigate evolution of political agenda topics and explain changes of political attention [5]. Thus, a study of parliamentary debates transcripts is an appropriate source for analysing changes of political agenda and changing patterns of attention to the topic of human rights in the Lithuanian parliament. Further, since parliamentary debates produce a lot of textual data, we employ computerized analysis. Current trend of political studies, where texts are used as data, is to employ unsupervised topic modelling ([5], [24], [25], [26]). However, this method suffers from problems related to choosing the number of topics to retain and their interpretation. Moreover, it only makes possible to study what is being said and not which topics are excluded from the discussion, which is especially important in studies of political agenda changes [3]. Therefore, we employ a more traditional dictionary-based computerized approach to content analysis, as it allows to study topics that can be unequivocally defined and have easily identifiable vocabularies [4]. The topic of “Human rights” may be considered as having such qualities [27].

3. Data and methods

3.1. Corpus

As our data source, we used transcripts of the Seimas plenary debates from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2021. This period is somewhat equally divided into two subperiods representing the last year of the 8th term of the Seimas (2016-2020) and the first year of the 9th term of the Seimas (2020-2024). Data were 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 – 2021-12-31) and the type of document (“Stenograma”), and the search engine retrieved a total of 219 transcripts in MS Word (*.docx) format.

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. The retrieved data is available on the Dataverse repository of the Lithuanian Data Archive for Social Sciences and Humanities (<https://hdl.handle.net/21.12137/WVXN4V>).

The debates were divided into speeches, and the speeches of the Speaker of the sitting were eliminated due to their procedural nature. Speeches of non-MPs were included, as they may have been given by ministers or some other important political actors who may have significantly influenced the Seimas' political agenda. Speeches of MPs and ministers were assigned to positions and opposition and factions. Information about MPs' membership in factions is provided on the official website of the Seimas (www.lrs.lt). Membership of ministers in factions was determined using the information on which party delegated ministers to the Government.

Table 1
Corpus characteristics

Term, year & month of debates	Number of speeches							
	Total	Position	Opposition	LVŽS	TS-LKD	LSDP	LRLS	LP
8 term: 2020 01	814	395	375	347	189	55	47	--
8 term: 2020 03	1198	325	685	238	296	100	103	--
8 term: 2020 04	1584	436	970	279	444	109	133	--
8 term: 2020 05	2644	1031	1364	796	680	165	214	--
8 term: 2020 06	3583	1574	1805	1322	823	178	203	--
8 term: 2020 08	62	7	49	4	21	8	2	--
8 term: 2020 09	1446	428	778	385	357	95	106	--
8 term: 2020 10	739	247	369	190	157	59	63	--
8 term: 2020 11	368	147	181	119	85	25	33	--
9 term: 2020 11	1016	359	298	164	285	41	43	31
9 term: 2020 12	2224	1122	999	465	890	186	148	84
9 term: 2021 01	889	394	372	152	260	50	81	53
9 term: 2021 03	1543	771	677	287	578	125	102	91
9 term: 2021 04	1890	809	980	450	618	233	106	85
9 term: 2021 05	1585	764	690	287	609	139	77	78
9 term: 2021 06	1935	969	811	313	736	104	143	90
9 term: 2021 07	258	134	124	51	110	19	11	13
9 term: 2021 08	253	118	135	41	102	22	14	2
9 term: 2021 09	1693	788	807	261	660	170	79	49
9 term: 2021 10	928	409	456	116	345	73	37	27
9 term: 2021 11	1886	896	834	234	647	113	147	102
9 term: 2021 12	2046	969	968	217	682	169	120	167

Note: LVŽS – faction of the Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union; TS-LKD – faction of the Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats; LSDP – faction of the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania; LRLS – faction of the Liberal Movement of the Republic of Lithuania; LP – faction of the Freedom Party.

This information is available in the Government coalition agreements. Information about the number of speeches per month by the factions analysed in the paper (the overall number of speeches per month and the number of speeches by position and opposition MPs per month) are provided in Table 1 below.

3.2. Dictionary for the computerized content analysis

For the purpose of analysing references to “Human rights” in the speeches of members of the Lithuanian Parliament (MPs), we consulted the Lithuanian Constitution, other national and international legal documents related to ensuring human rights (such as, for example, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights). The search terms included in the dictionary are provided in Table 2 below.

3.3. Methods

The computerised content analysis was performed with the *quanteda* (version 3.0) package [28] available in R language and environment for statistical computing and graphics [29]. First, we constructed *quanteda* tokens object from the corpus removing

punctuation marks (Unicode “Punctuation” [P] class), symbols and separators (Unicode “Symbol” [S], “Separator” [Z] and “Control” [C] classes) and retaining numbers as well as not splitting words that are connected by hyphenation.

Then we proceeded with the search of dictionary terms using the `quanteda` function `tokens_lookup`. If any of the search terms were identified in the speech, the speech was marked as containing a reference to the “Human rights” topic. Then we aggregated the results by month (and Seimas term), counting how many speeches per month contained references to the “Human rights” topic. Speeches were also aggregated by MPs’ membership in factions and belonging to the position or opposition.

Table 2
Corpus characteristic Dictionary of search terms related to “human rights” topic

Search Terms	
žmogaus teis*	sudar* partneryst*
žmonių teis*	partneryst* institut
diskriminac	partneryst* *registr*
diskriminuo	projekt* kaip partneryst*
diskriminav	prilygin* partneryst*
patyč*	santuok* partneryst*
neapkykamos kalb*	civil* partneryst*
vaiko teis*	partneryst* įstatym*
vaikų teis*	partneryst* įteisin*
lyg* galimyb*	gyven* partneryst*
nejgal* teis*	išbrauk* partneryst*
moter* teis*	partneryst* koncepc*
pažeidžiam* grup*	institut* ar partneryst*
kankinim*	palaik* partneryst*
teisės viršenyb*	partneryst* laikotarp*
LGBT*	neutral* partneryst*
prek* žmon*	partneryst* model*
saviraiškos teis*	reglamen* partneryst*
saviraiškos laisv*	partneryst* nuostat*
žodžio laisv*	partneryst* pagrind*
teis* gauti info*	partneryst* reglamen*
teis* rinkti info*	siūlom* partneryst*
žiniasklaidos laisv*	partneryst* *regul*
žiniasklaidos teis*	*regul* partneryst*
Stambulo konvenc*	partneryst* ryš*
teis* į sveikatos apsau*	partneryst* santyk*
asmen* partneryst*	partneryst* sąvok*
įteis* partneryst*	partneryst* sudar*
partneryst* ar santuok*	partneryst* teisin*
diskusij* apie partneryst*	*prilygin* partneryst*
partneryst* form*	sąvok* partneryst*
faktin* partneryst*	partneryst* užtikrinim*
registr partneryst*	įteisin* partneryst*
partneryst* gyven*	*galvo* apie partneryst*

a Asterisk in search terms refers to stemmed patterns.

4. Results

Lyer [16] maintains that parliaments unreasonably are ignored as human rights players,

though their role in promoting human rights and maintaining oversight of international obligations has become as never vital. Moreover, their role in upholding human rights obligations and promoting human rights agenda is dependent on the engagement of parliament members in parliamentary debates, which is a primary platform for dialogue in democracies. The analysis of Lithuanian parliamentary debates corpus revealed clear fluctuations in attention to human rights issues, which were influenced by parliamentary elections and focusing events occurring before the 2020 Seimas elections and after them. The Seimas debates transcript analysis exposed differences in attitudes towards human rights despite both ruling majorities had to deal with the same public health crisis – COVID-19 pandemic – coined as a focusing event. Nonetheless, parliaments faced two different additional focusing events that impacted their activity, one of which was fraudulent elections in Belarus in 2020 before the 2020 Seimas elections and the influx of irregular migrants from Belarus one and a half years after the 2020 Lithuanian parliament elections. The relatively largest focus on appeals to human rights was related to events in Belarus, one of which directly affected Lithuania’s security framework (see periods of 08.2020 and 07.2021 in Fig. 1). However, in 2021 ruling majority’s appeals to human rights in reaction to the influx of migrants from Belarus and recurring pandemic waves was much more pronounced (see periods of 01.2021, 05.2021, 07.2021, and 10.2021 in Fig. 1) than attention to human rights topic by the previous government in 2020. Differences in appeals to the human rights of ruling majorities stand out in comparing parliamentary debates concerning Covid-19 pandemic management in the Lithuanian parliament. Relatively more appeals to human rights are recorded after the 2020 parliamentary elections than before them. Furthermore, unlike before the elections, the ruling majority was more united in appealing to human rights while discussing COVID-19 pandemic management measures or reviewing and adopting the approaches to migration crisis management. Interestingly, social democrats (LSDP) were not the most ardent advocates of human rights in the Seimas, though this topic is usually at the forefront of social democratic ideology parties around the world [30].

Overall, these results clearly indicate that focusing events mobilized all parties in adopting the resolution condemning fraudulent elections in

Belarus [31], which addressed human rights violations therein and appealed to human rights overall in the neighbouring country by urging sanctions for Belarus regime’s players and supporters in 2020 (see period 08.2020 in Figure 1) and almost unanimously supporting measures to cope with migration crisis [32] that were in large part related to regulating the rights of the migrants (see periods of 07.2021 and 10.2021 in Fig. 1). These results give support for the arguments of scholars contending that focusing events produce changes in political agendas.

Further, greater focus on human rights by the ruling majority and more rigorous activity in appealing to human rights in 2021 might be explained by the ascension to power of liberal parties, especially the new liberal party – the Freedom Party. They position themselves as parties that protect human rights and promote human rights agenda. Moreover, human rights issues were included in the Freedom Party’s programme and were advocated in the agreement of the ruling majority. Although some human rights issues did not appear on the government’s agenda, they were included into the ruling majority’s agreement and have been agreed to be supported by the liberal wing of the largest ruling party – the Homeland Union. Importantly, these developments had clear impact on the political attention in the Seimas debates. We can clearly see that representatives of the Freedom Party were

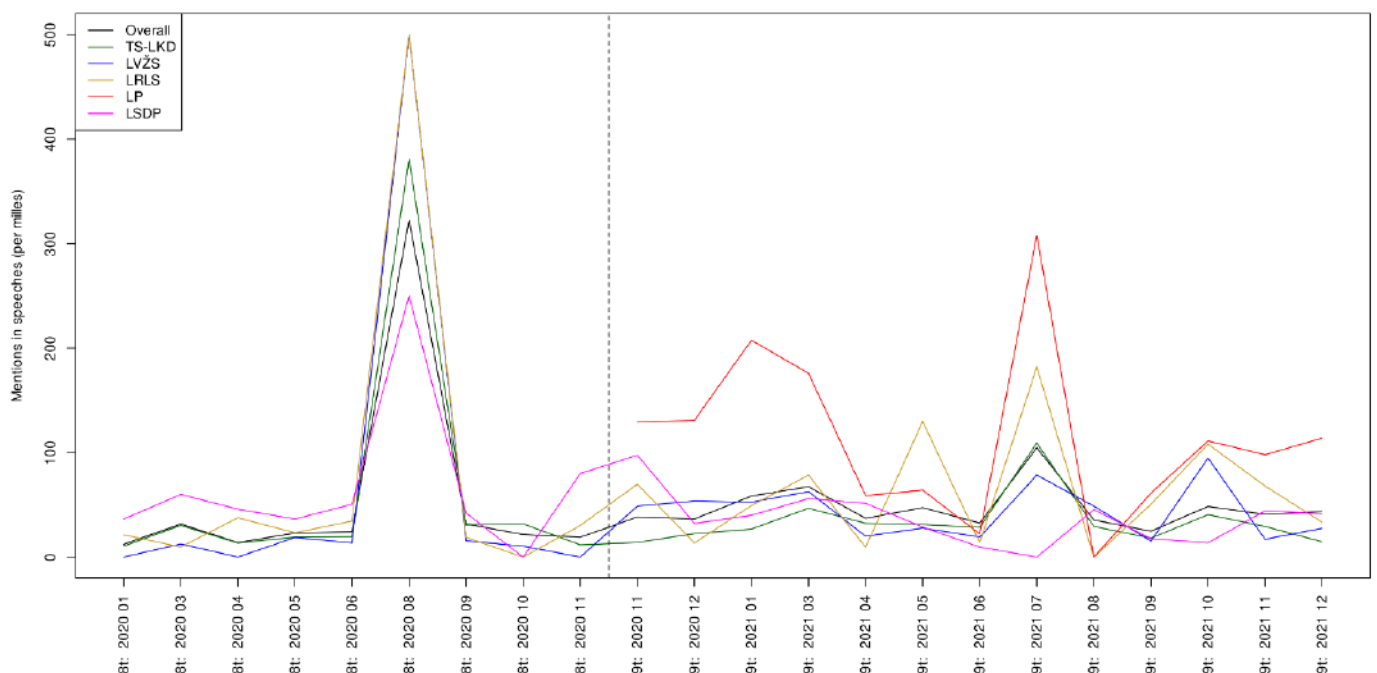
(and still are) the most ardent supporters of human rights topics after the 2020 elections (except for periods of 04.2021, 05.2021, and 08.2021, see Figure 1). These findings give support for the theories of changing structure of party issue competition that is produced by societal changes as reflected in shifting public political priorities.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the Seimas debates transcripts revealed that focusing events are a clear source of changes of political agenda. Attention to the topic of human rights during the analysed period of 2020-2021 increased considerably when two focusing events – fraudulent elections in Belarus in 2020 and the influx of migrants from Belarus to Lithuania in 2021 – took place and became the focus of public debates. This was clearly related to the nature of these events, as sizeable share of the discussions in the Parliament was devoted to solving or promoting various human rights issues.

The results of the study also provide support for the theory of party issue competition evolution resulting from societal changes and reflected in changing political priorities. Public value orientations change and (usually, new) parties grab opportunities to mobilise support for these newly emerging priorities. Representatives of the Freedom Party advocated radical changes in public policy related to human rights during the 2020 Seimas elections. Importantly, the topic of

Figure 1: Example figure Appeals to human rights in Lithuanian Parliament in 2020-2021



human rights stayed most prominently on the agenda of this party in the parliamentary debates ever after it became a part of the ruling majority. Therefore, we can witness a transfer of changes of societal priorities into the political arena and party agenda.

These results, in turn, showed that parliamentary debates corpora can be a useful resource for the analysis of political agenda changes and changing patterns of political attention to at least some topics. Also, they gave support for further use of a traditional dictionary-based computerized approach to content analysis for studying topics that can be unequivocally defined and have easily identifiable vocabularies (such as the topic of “Human rights” studied in this paper). However, this study was limited to quantitative analysis of general trends of “human rights” discussions in the Seimas. Future work could also employ qualitative discourse analysis in order to identify changes in the parliamentary agenda more precisely and provide more specific explanations of these changes.

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