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# Unfamiliar concepts as an obstacle for critical thinking in public discussions regarding women's rights issues in Latvia. Reflective thinking in the 'fake news' era

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**Abstract:** In Europe it is now out of the question to express any doubts regarding the prevention of violence against women. The majority of the Latvian population also condemns the physical abuse of women; however, the Istanbul Convention which deals with this matter was not ratified here. A number of factors were at play, the most significant of which was pressure exerted through the direct influence of a campaign that had been organised by opponents of the broadest understanding of human rights. Such pressure was exerted on decision makers (MPs and political parties), with indirect impact on the population via social media and the news media outlets. Campaigns by interest groups which spread opposing views are not unusual in a democratic society; however, in this case there was no discussion between the opposing parties. The public domain was not open to an interaction of views and beliefs based on arguments and critical thinking, as the argument of the opponents rested entirely upon their beliefs, whereas the supporters of the convention relied upon valid proof. This article looks at the reasons behind the failure in terms of group communication to establish a constructive discussion on a topic that was so essential to Latvian society: one which served to combat and eradicate violence against women. It also seeks to establish whether the use of an irrational form of convincing technique contradicts the logic of critical thinking, and whether the emergence of unfamiliar and/or incomprehensible concepts on the agenda of a public discussion may serve to put the brakes on the constructive discussion of women's rights issues which is so essential today to Latvian society as a whole.

**Keywords:** women's rights, Istanbul Convention, logical fallacies, barriers for critical thinking, fake news

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*Des concepts inhabituels en tant qu'obstacle à la pensée critique dans les débats publics au sujet du problème des droits des femmes en Lettonie. La pensée réflexive dans l'ère des informations fallacieuses (fake news)*

**Résumé :** Toutes les discussions concernant la prévention de la violence faite aux femmes restent hors de question en Europe. La majorité de la population lettone condamne également l'abus physique des femmes, toutefois, la Convention d'Istanbul qui traite de ce sujet n'a pas été ratifiée ici. Plusieurs facteurs entrent en jeu, le plus significatif étant la pression exercée par l'influence directe de la campagne qui a été organisée par les opposants des droits de l'homme dans son sens le plus large. Une telle pression a été exercée sur les preneurs de décision (parlementaires et partis politiques) avec un impact indirect sur la population par le biais des médias sociaux et privés. Des campagnes par des groupes d'intérêts qui diffusent des opinions contraires ne sont pas inhabituelles dans une société démocratique, toutefois, dans ce cas, il n'y a eu aucune discussion entre les parties qui s'affrontent. Le domaine public n'était pas ouvert à une interaction entre les opinions et les croyances basée sur des arguments et la pensée critiques, puisque l'argument des opposants reposait entièrement sur leurs croyances alors que les défenseurs de la convention comptaient sur des preuves valides. Cet article examine les raisons de l'échec en matière de communication de groupe pour établir une discussion constructive sur un sujet aussi fondamental pour la société lettone, celui qui a servi à combattre et à éradiquer la violence faite aux femmes. Il tente également d'établir si l'utilisation d'une technique de persuasion irrationnelle contredit la logique de la pensée critique, et si l'émergence de concepts inhabituels et/ou incompréhensibles sur l'agenda des débats publics peut servir à freiner une discussion constructive sur les problèmes des droits des femmes qui est tellement essentielle à l'ensemble de la société lettone.

**Mots-clés :** droits des femmes, Convention d'Istanbul, idées de logiques fallacieuses, obstacles de la pensée critiques, informations fallacieuses

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## **Introduction**

Critical thinking is classed as being reasonable and reflective thinking which is focused upon deciding what to believe or to do (Ennis, 1996), which means not only stopping at the fact that one's beliefs are true but also requiring the seeking of alternative hypotheses or explanations, and seriously considering other points of view on the topic. A critical approach to the flow of information can ensure understanding and guarantee a state in which one's conviction that one is well-informed actually matches reality. Almost everyone will benefit from learning how to think more critically, and not only logically, because critical thinking is a means for separating truth from falsehood and reasonable from unreasonable beliefs. Unfortunately, interpersonal communication is not merely an exchange of opinions among analytical individuals. It also embraces communication among interest groups, including the process of media communications. Here the determinant is the

relational and social context, where a polarisation of opinions plays a significant role, one which is primarily a product of persuasion instead of compliance rather than the intellectual activity of a critically thinking individual. Moreover, group decisions often become more extreme than the predisposed judgment of an average individual (Wallach et.al., 1962, p. 85). Therefore, when critical thinking is involved, a conflict may emerge between the active, critically thinking individual and the passive group in which any polarisation of opinion is generated by its internal leaders. This finding is not new. However, it has a new meaning in what we euphemistically call the 'fake news era' that we live in today. Group pressure is especially heavy in regard to a reflective individual in a situation in which incomprehensible concepts require understanding. This can also be observed in this case, in which the concept of violence against women was suddenly replaced by new terms such as 'social construction of gender' or 'genderism theory' (terms that were brand new for many), and society in general was persuaded that established Christian society was actually being destroyed under the pretence of protecting women's rights. The history of humanity has proven that irrational arguments such as these (under certain circumstances) are used either to place ideas in people's heads or for the purposes of expressing propaganda. They are applied when certain opinion owners strive to impose their views on the majority of people in society at all costs, and this 'someone' seemingly expresses the group's interests. Such attempts to impose one's opinion become especially dangerous today when the established news media, where the traditional information gateways which used to be controlled mainly by professional, educated, impartial journalists, are disappearing, and such controls are being taken over by an unedited cacophony of online news that also includes certain opinion groups. This is happening now as informing the public domain is taken over by verbal activists who represent interest groups that are sometimes platforms for extreme views. This article looks at one of these examples.

The online news delivery and dissemination format known as social media has infiltrated almost every aspect of modern society (Burns, 2017, p. VII). It allows users to create profiles through which they can share user-generated or curated digital content (Burns, 2017, p. 6). Moreover, sharing content - a process which effectively amounts to circulation - is a popular activity on social media sites. The more supporters one has (the larger the group of the like-minded), the larger or broader is the circulation (in terms of dissemination opportunities). Social media content is not reviewed before publishing (as is the case with professional media outlets) because the quality of the content is no longer being evaluated and disseminated by the journalist or publisher but is instead being assessed by users who are often supporters of polarised opinion groups. Moreover, they circulate (pass on) only that information which matches their own views or interests. This means that there is no longer a journalist to act as a mediator which, in the case of professional media outlets (more or less), is someone who tries to fulfil the function of critical thinker between the reporter of facts or opinion (in the digital information

space) and the recipient, and this is why social media achieves much greater, deeper, and more drastic polarisation of public opinion than has previously been observed.

US President Donald Trump began publicly using the term 'fake news' in 2016 to denote manifestations of facts, which he saw as being unfavourable to him rather than being false, untruthful information. With this act he himself took a further step into the arena of unreliable information. His forceful criticism of professional media outlets which had shaped the foundation of verified and accurate reporting of facts now served to place them in the same basket as information flows which are unreliable and unverified. 'You're the fake news,' Trump said to CNN reporter Jim Acosta, and started repeating the phrase on Twitter (Wendling, 2018). That marked the beginning of the 'fake news' era in mass communication, which means that from then on no information would be reliable, ie. true, and the reader, viewer, and listener could no longer rely on the media.

By being hyperactive on Twitter, Donald Trump clearly shows that he wants to annul the role of the journalist as a mediator of society's critical thinking (providing the filter for critical thinking). By doing this he is destroying the watchdog function of the media which used to be a significant element of its mission in a developed democracy. In this way he (as a representative of power) tries to speak to the audience directly, without mediators, without the help of journalists or the traditional media and in the absence of critical analysis. Consequently, the 'fake news' era not only serves as a dissemination of unverified facts on the internet but also as a devaluation of the role of the traditional media and of journalists by creating the illusion that all of the participants of the mass communications process operate in an equally indiscriminate manner in regard to unverified facts and, therefore, the audience should not rely on the traditional media as a reliable source of information. There is also the important fact that, without any verification serving to filter journalistic facts in the public domain today, 'falsehood is also diffused faster than the truth', with this occurring around 70% faster than accurate or verified facts. 'The degree of novelty and the emotional reactions of recipients may be responsible for the differences that have been observed' (Vosoughi et. al., 2018). Due to the fact that unverified information is mainly disseminated by people rather than bots (ibidem), this sensationalism 'makes false news more popular and more highly favoured than accurate news' (Wrede, 2018), and 'fake news' is also being produced and disseminated by people who do not realise the consequences of their actions.

It can be seen that 'fake news' stands for biased news management which is implemented via social media or the traditional media for certain purposes. In order to exclude the factor of individual critical thinking, 'fake news' production uses a wide range of barriers to hold back critical thinking, with a range of proofing errors (in the form of verbal fallacies) predominating, creating barriers to critical thinking and not allowing any objective analysis of facts to help form judgments. For the purpose of tracking down such influences on public decision-making and analyzing the process of accepting opinions as these influences are being exerted by 'fake

news', a specific situation was chosen in the public domain in Latvia. This was at a time at which the so-called 'content analysis' of the Istanbul Convention was taking place, during the public discussion of the text (May 2016, and between January-March 2018).

This international document is aimed at preventing domestic violence against women and children. It is the Council of Europe's convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Latvia, like the Czech Republic and Bulgaria, signed the convention at the government level in the spring of 2016 but failed to ratify it in parliament two years later. Formally, the Latvian parliament, government, or social classes are willing to publicly support women and children against domestic violence, but they are still failing to sign and ratify this convention.

It should be noted that Latvia really needs the Istanbul Convention to be ratified. Before 2011 there were a large number of obstacles in Latvian legislation that hindered the protection of victims when it came to domestic violence and to punishing the culprits. The convention would help to better protect people from violence, implement rehabilitation measures, improve forensic medicinal competence levels in this area, and to prepare for the potential issues after receiving people from other cultures into the country. Moreover, there is no protection for women who are being humiliated by their husbands in society, as this is believed to be the woman's fault. Latvia is the only country in which more than half of respondents agree (57%) - followed by 45% in Lithuania and 40% in Malta - that violence against women is often provoked by the victim (Special Eurobarometer 449, 2016).

## **1. Methodology**

For the purpose of determining whether or not publications raised barriers against any critical thinking analysis of logical errors in communications, argumentation in the Latvian media was varied out to analyse the discussion of the content of the Istanbul Convention. The period studied was May 2016 (the time at which the Latvian minister signed the convention) and between January and March 2018 (the time in which the convention's contents were discussed, ending on the day on which the convention was to be signed in parliament), which is when parliament actually refused to ratify it. The traditional methods of using logic and analysis in the spread of propaganda which were developed under the guidance of Professor Yasin Zaslavsky (published by Moscow University in 1978) were used as a basis for the study. This publication summarises the disinformation techniques and methods that have been used by analysing and criticising their use in Western media. As can be seen through today's critical lens, these systematised methods may still be used while distancing the analysis from the context used by Zaslavsky (1978). Moreover, a

descriptive, quantitative research study of 333 respondents (which represents a part of society in the Latvian internet environment) was used for the purpose of analysing the reflection of public opinion. A questionnaire was developed which asked respondents to evaluate the process of the discussion, plus its developments and the main conclusions that were reached. The average age of respondents was 35.6 years, the survey was conducted in July 2018, and it was disseminated via Twitter and Facebook.

## 2. Analysis, findings, and results

### 2.1. *The Spectrum of public opinion in Latvia in regards to the content of the Istanbul Convention*

Two opposing views prevailed in Latvia regarding the essence of the Istanbul Convention during the study period: a) support for the convention, and b) refusal to accept the convention. The key position in this dispute was taken by the mass media, which should have ensured the pluralism of opinions in the public domain, encouraging argumentative discourse by proposing a ‘rational-critical public debate’, in the Jürgen Habermas ‘Coffeehouses’ style. Women’s rights are a serious topic, one which applies to all social classes, and also one which may affect just about anyone. This is even more strongly the case in a situation in which a decision is made for which the outcome (in the shape of a law) may have a significant level of impact upon the future quality of life in society. However, Latvian society lacked a critical analysis of the contents of Istanbul Convention. The media proposed only official information and opinion interviews in both periods.<sup>1</sup> This was implemented by: a) the traditional media (using the gatekeeping approach); b) social media (using information cascades); and 3) public forums, meetings, and demonstrations (in the form of isolated opinions).

### 2.2. *Information locks to outline the content of the convention*

The three leading dailies that were of national importance during the study periods displayed no interest in or an indifferent attitude towards the women’s rights issues being proposed by the Istanbul Convention.<sup>2</sup> The same approach was shown by the relatively passive public service media (radio and television) when it came to explaining this document. This diffidence when it came to the outline may be explained either by: a) the typical attitude of society to documents that are ‘lowered in from the top’ (the EU or European Council); or b) feminist issues with which Latvian society is not familiar (14% of respondents deny the existence of such subjects and the related issues). At the moment at which the convention’s text was

<sup>1</sup> In May 2016, when the signing of this international document was due to take place at a government level and in (January-March) 2018 when a public discussion of the convention’s content took place in the media and the final vote was due in parliament. From this point on these two periods are referred to as ‘the first period’ and ‘the second period’.

<sup>2</sup> Latvijas Avīze (LA), Diena (D), & Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze (NRA).

due to be signed (May 2016), the number of articles on the Istanbul Convention in the three leading dailies was: two (LA), one (D), and nine (NRA). A conservative nationalist newspaper (the NRA) was the only one to publish eight articles: which detailed an extremely negative attitude towards the convention during this period,<sup>3</sup> sharply criticising the convention's content and its ratification. It positioned itself as the revealer of sensation in terms of contents in the document that other media sources allegedly failed to notice. Moreover, it acted on the basis of two consistently-used principles: by limiting the number of informative reports the emphasis was placed on a large volume of opinion interviews regarding the Istanbul Convention, which were conducted with influential individuals who were opposed to its ratification and who were neither human rights experts nor women's rights experts. Due to the fact that this case concerned the biggest dailies in the country one might expect a critical and analytical opening of the information locks or gatekeeping (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009), which is one of the media's central roles in public life; the process of determining which events get published and what the content and nature of the news will be, explaining how and why certain areas of information are published by the media (*ibidem*). An analysis of publications proves that none of the leading newspapers looked at the matters that were being tackled by the Istanbul Convention either deeply or analytically. The same result was shown by the results of the survey, according to which the main dailies (in paper form and online) were not used as the source of information in regard to the Istanbul Convention. Only 2.8% of recipients obtained information on the convention from *Latvijas Avīze*, 2.4% from *Diena*, and only 2% from NRA. The leaders here were internet media sources, which do not work based on the gatekeeping and watchdog logic. When the gatekeeping function diminishes, society sees an increase in the amount of information that is available from a wide variety of other sources. A weakening of gatekeeping has led to extraordinary audience fragmentation, in which some people only seek out content from like-minded sources who share the same political and social beliefs. In this case the most popular information sources were blogs (25%), and the websites of authorities and organisations (16.9%), followed by Twitter (9.2%) and Facebook (7%).

Consequently, instead of an open discussion forum in the public domain, online mass communication led to 'extreme possibilities in regard to decentralisation and fragmentation' (Bimber, 2003, p. 47) by offering information cascades. These are based on poor thinking, and a confusion of sources of information comes from a shared belief as opposed to coming from a traditional news source which is applying established professional norms that pre-filter inaccurate or biased information. Such a polarisation of group opinion mainly excludes the principle of critical thinking because everyone seeks and finds like-minded people, avoiding discussion or denying any opposing opinion. Such a polarised communication of opinions is

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<sup>3</sup> Specifically, a negative article with content that displayed a point-blank refusal to approve the convention without substantive argumentation or proof against it.



typical of not only Twitter and Facebook but also of blogs. Blogging has had such a significant impact on journalism that it is worth exploring it separately (Bradshaw, 2018, p. 9); however, in this case blogs functioned as stops for information cascades and made an impression of seemingly verified, critical sources even though most of them expressed one or the other opinion and facilitated an exchange of information of the same profile in a cascade water mill. This means that information cascades can be used for accurate and inaccurate information indiscriminately. In this case we can observe an unlimited number of digital media sources that openly (such as with a church or a political party) and covertly (such as with anonymous interest groups) reported the same content in regard to the Istanbul Convention from sources of various names; however, the content of the reports was basically the same. It can be seen that the opinions of supporters of the convention was shaped mainly by the liberal magazine, *IR* (12.8%), whereas the opposing opinion was formed by information cascades where the tone was set by interest group websites (16.2%) and blogs (13.8%).

Sharing content is a popular activity on social media sites. The more sensational the published content, the greater the reader activity when it comes to passing on the material without critically exploring it. Unfortunately, it is not possible to systematically summarise the sources that cause the most ‘forwarding activity’ in order to gain an exact impression of the kind of source that generates waves of verbal agitation. Nevertheless, this effect exists and the failure to sign the Istanbul Convention in Latvia in 2018 makes one think that: either 1) the traditional media sources have lost their classical watchdog function (Downie & Schudson, 2009) and do not encourage the mission of critical thinking;<sup>4</sup> or 2) this media development stage is long gone, as the presence of social media proposes an entirely different toolset for the logic behind presenting news and opinions. Three strategic fact-selection narratives may be observed here: systemic, identity, and issue narratives (Mowiana, 2016). Such ‘opinion forming mechanics’ contradicts the classical logic behind critical thinking. Neither does it continue the ‘brainwashing’ tactics of the 1930s, as it focuses on triggering excitement and anxiety in society instead of being based on ideas and their indoctrination into our consciousness, so that, thanks to the anxiety that is being generated, the public is not interested in seeking out discussion but rather prefers emotionally to lean to one side or the other.

### 2.3. Content polarisation

In the process of discussing the content of the Istanbul Convention, two diametrically opposed standpoints were observed in the Latvian media space. One was for the immediate signing and further ratification of the convention in parliament, whereas the other one was against supporting it. Supporters of the ideas

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<sup>4</sup> If anyone can be a journalist, then journalistic privilege suddenly becomes a loophole that is too large to be borne by society (Shirky, 2008, p. 71). The functions are: offering analysis, offering social empathy by telling people about others in the world with different lives and viewpoints, serving as a public forum, and offering a venue for mobilisation around political programmes and perspectives (Schudson, 2008).

behind the convention did not make an effort to explain to the public the need to sign this document, as they believed that 'the agitation around the convention was improper - in this case they have made a mountain out of a molehill' (Mēs izskaidrosim, 2016), and 'it is very difficult to express your opinion about imbeciles. They have proven that they do not like and do not accept European human rights, democracy, or values. Their statements are legally unclear, inadequate, and deeply questionable' (ibidem). This rhetoric expresses loud and clear their resentment and their wish to stop any discussions before they can even get started. In contrast, opponents of the convention were much more active, using the intense logic of emotional influencing in their argumentation instead of critical analysis.

The argumentation followed by supporters was as follows:<sup>5</sup> 'the initiative should be supported', 'an additional tool in the fight against domestic violence', 'does not contradict constitutional norms', 'a framework that will protect women from violence' (Barkans, 2016); 'the document is mainly aimed at preventing violence against women', 'they should not hesitate to ratify it', 'the convention speaks against violence against women', 'it does not look good', 'Latvia is the last to sign this convention', 'a great honour to sign this document', 'I believe that common sense will win', 'it is advisable to ratify the convention' ('Stambulas konvencijas ratifikācija atlikta', 2018). Opponents of the convention expressed the following opinions: 'the convention hides a deeper meaning which may have an effect that is not noticeable at first glance', 'it hides a secret aim', 'it forces a foreign ideology and social norms upon us', 'the convention proposes the concept of the "social construction of gender"', 'it threatens the norms of Christianity', 'it threatens the sovereignty of our state', 'the norms that contradict traditional values' (Požarnovs, 2017); 'the convention represents the ideology of radical feminism', 'it opens up a road to legalising same-sex marriage', 'distancing will take place from traditional family values' ('Stambulas konvencijas ratifikācija atlikta', 2018). It is Latvian church bishops, the minister of justice, and five political parties which see a convention for the eradication of domestic violence in Latvia as 'a trap that will chase us into Satan's claws' and it is 'the death knell for society' (Mēs izskaidrosim, 2016).

Opponents of the Istanbul Convention included powerful political and religious groups,<sup>6, 7</sup> which began a 'countercampaign' during the document's signing process by meeting politicians and trying to convince them to refuse to ratify the convention. They started an agitation campaign on the Facebook page, Support Your Bishop,

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<sup>5</sup> A list of quotes from newspaper articles and online publications.

<sup>6</sup> The political groups include the Latvian Minister of Justice who, before the signing of the document, outsourced to a private legal company the job of researching the Istanbul Convention when that company had already expressed its dislike towards improvements in the area of women's rights within the country and towards the standpoint of the Istanbul Convention itself.

<sup>7</sup> The religious groups include Zbignevs Stankevics, an archbishop of the Catholic Church, and Janis Vanags, an archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia.

engaged a Christian radio station and conservative media, and set up Istanbul Convention opponent groups in WhatsApp group chats and text message chains. Between 6-11 February this news circulated its output across Latvia. This output was emotional: 'I finally read it! It gives me the creeps!'; it urged people to act: 'Be active! Vote against the Istanbul Convention'; and asked everyone to do it right now: 'Forward it to everyone you know because the vote ends at midnight!' (Strausa & Spiņģe, 2018). The campaign was successful. There was no need to rush the signatures; however, as a result of deliberately-caused stress in this period (between 6-13 February 2018) a total of 10,000 signatures were collected and submitted to parliament as a form of national protest against the Istanbul Convention. Then the church leaders went to parliament to convince MPs to vote against the ratification of the convention - and they succeeded. As a result, parliament refused to ratify the convention as the majority of MPs voted against it. Even the Latvian Academy of Sciences was involved in the campaign. The academy's opinion was used by both of the opposing parties at the same time and it was a self-contradictory message (Zinātnieki nesaskata, 2018).

Latvia may refuse entirely to ratify the Istanbul Convention. It has no statute of limitations or deadline within which it should be ratified. However, this case seems interesting as a source of analysis of public rhetoric as the news generating technique used by the convention's opponents is very similar to the 'fake news' production factory. It should be noted that the content structure of arguments being used by opponents to the Istanbul Convention in Latvia was almost simultaneously and identically used elsewhere in eastern Europe such as, for instance, in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. They experienced analogous discussion processes at the time: 1) with church opponents in the role of the advance guard (Katoliki i drugiye, 2018; Pod davleniyem tserkovi, 2018; Eto popytka uzakonit', 2018); 2) with active media engagement and the convincing of politicians (Bulgaria and Slovakia, 2018; and 3) with the involvement of the local science academies in order to attach scientific legitimacy to the refusal to ratify the document of the Istanbul Convention (Czech Republic: 'Round Table Meeting in Parliament', 2018; Bulgaria and Slovakia, 2018).

### 3. A refeudalisation of the public domain<sup>8</sup>

Severe polarisation in terms of 'for' and 'against' were displayed in a discussion of the document in the media space during the first period.<sup>9</sup> Supporters of the Istanbul Convention (the Ministry of Welfare, public organisations, and NGOs) mainly expressed their opinion formally, without additional argumentation. For the most part they used only EU survey results. The opponents of the Istanbul

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<sup>8</sup> The term 'feudalisation' originates in 'New feudalisation' (Habermas, 1962 :285).

<sup>9</sup> The period being analysed consists of two parts: May 2016 and January to March 2018 (referred to here as the first and second periods).

Convention often used offensive techniques when it came to convincing their supporters, as described below.

### 3.1. *Generating of public restlessness*

The first of the offensive techniques used by the convention's opponents is a statement which involves a degree of sensationalism,<sup>10</sup> one which aims at achieving surprise, confusion, and a revelation to the public that they have uncovered a well-hidden truth. This is referred to as the newspaper scare effect, because sensationalism involves the publication of an extraordinary event or a discovery that stirs a very large degree of interest in society and guarantees the resonance of public opinion. Moreover, the public has 'a psychological need to consume sensational news' (Andrunas, 1978, p. 69) like a long-awaited lunchtime dessert. The sensationalism within the context of the Istanbul Convention was triggered by the expert lawyer who was involved by Latvia's conservative Minister of Justice when (after two weeks of studying the convention) she declared that the Istanbul Convention contained explosive and/or conspiratorial content that may serve to undermine stability in Latvia's society. This undermining effect was focussed in an externally unassuming, bureaucratic text which was allegedly hiding a detonator that may look like the protection of women's rights to a bystander but was actually: 'a strange document' which would result in a 'confusion of genders', would 'eradicate the role of the mother and father in the family', 'destroy the traditional family', and 'destroy the balance' as 'there would be no more fathers, mothers, girls, or boys'. Therefore, this 'neo-liberal convention' 'is harmful to Latvia' (Veidemane, 2016a). It can be seen that this sensationalism had seemingly discovered hidden hostile aims in the document in the form of a conspiracy by European bureaucrats (the authors of the convention itself) which were aimed against Latvian society, the Latvian nation, and traditional family values because a 'spirit of evil is behind it and this is why it is an attack on the core of the human identity' (Avotiņš, 2018b).

This discovery makes the public anxious: 1) it creates an impression that the document was analysed critically ; 2) makes one feel threatened as the danger is not understandable but apparently it exists. The effect of such a sensational discovery is ensured by the argumentation approach which the disinformation technique characterises as 'hiding lies behind a cover of credibility' (Andrunas, 1987, p. 71), where the order of cause and effect has been reversed. Opponents claim that the 'implementation of the convention obliges one to change the way in which they think by preparing the ground for same-sex marriage', 'the convention forces its ideology upon us' (Paparde, 2016). This sensational discovery has no fact-based arguments on its side as it is based on the so-called 'assumption error' when the public tends to accept a claim if it is expressed by a competent, convincing individual who points out that there was no need to discuss the proof as the thesis

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<sup>10</sup> 'If a dog bites a person that is not news, whereas if a person bites a dog that is news and also a sensation' (Media Sensationalism, 1968); (Zasursky, 1978, p. 7).

proposed 'goes without saying', and that those who requested proof were incompetent or naïve. Such pseudo-argumentation is very common in, for instance, politics. In order to defend a false but emotionally powerful assumption, another step is required which is a 'manoeuvre of avoidance' during which criticism is ignored and the course of the conversation is changed rapidly and deliberately by attacking the opponent with reproach, and replacing primary facts with secondary ones instead of substantiating one's opinion: 'the state now obliges us to incorporate study material on social gender roles in the educational system... international human rights documents serve to guarantee parents the right to educate their children according to their religious and philosophical beliefs. The requirements of this convention will make one ignore parental rights. Isn't that emotional abuse?'; 'why are women's rights separated from children's rights and family rights? That's not fair.' (Stankēvičs sola, 2018) This is how opponents of the convention practise 'shaping a certain negative attitude towards processes which are difficult for average members of society to understand' (Zasurskij, 1987, p. 4). Which means that public confusion is achieved by replacing the terms 'women's rights' or 'violence against women' with the 'social construction of gender' which would allegedly destroy 'girls and boys', and 'mums and dads' (Veidmane, 2018 a), and an inconsistent, simplified explanation of feminist ideas. The survey also shows that 34.6% of respondents agree that the majority of Latvian society does not really understand what this convention is about and 33.7% believe that political parties take advantage of this agitation around the convention. It should be emphasised that only one of the Latvian parliamentary parties supported the ratification of the convention and that the other five opposed it. This can be explained by the populist desire of these parties to please the various church groups due to the fact that the emotional effect intensified when the Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Adventist, and Orthodox church leaders joined the 'no' movement with their statements by driving the anxiety effect further into the public domain with the help of the technique of 'appealing to authority' (Vlasov, 1987, p. 30). With the help of *argumentum ad verecundiam* it can be seen that church leaders created an impression that the discovery that had been made in connection with the text of the convention was a sensational truth even though none of them were human rights or women's rights experts, and they failed to prove this claim with arguments (facts).

The advance guard of the opponents of the convention were joined by the leader of the Latvian Catholic Church (10.3% of respondents saw him as being the leader of the opponents to the Istanbul Convention, while the leader of the Evangelical Lutheran Church received a score of 6.3%, and the head of the Orthodox Church achieved a rating of 2.8%), followed by the conservative political parties (with scores of 11%, 4.2%, 2.5%, and 2.5%), and public organisations (11.2%). Moreover, Zbignevs Stankevics, the Catholic archbishop, also tried to scientifically prove his opinion regarding why the Istanbul Convention should not be ratified in Latvia. His arguments included statements along the lines of: 'in May 2017, European conservative intellectuals and scientists came to the conclusion that something had to be done to save Europe' as Europe was being 'threatened by sinking', with 'the

majority of these intellectuals coming from the West, especially from France', 'Europe is being carried away by ideas which will cut the ground from under its feet', 'Christians have a sharper eye', and the Istanbul Convention 'is a conspiracy in which the supervision of the enforcement of this convention around the world is being carried out by the structure known as Grevio' which is 'compose of ten women of whom only one is not ideologically engaged... the rest are either gender study experts or so-called "women's rights activists"', as a result of which those countries which have enforced the convention 'have a higher level of violence than Latvia' (Avotiņš, 2018a). This argumentation uses: 1) 'striking uncertainty' (he does not clarify which conference in May 2017 he is talking about, who the participants where, and of which orientation they may have been); 2) 'straw man' argumentation of the near ending of Europe as a result of the current political leadership; 3) *argumentum ad misericordiam* by requiring people to fear the consequences that the enforcement of the Istanbul Convention may allegedly cause in Latvia; 4) 'sticking a negative label' on ten women who developed the document of the Istanbul Convention by making one believe that they are not able (or should not be allowed) to develop a law that defends representatives of their gender from violence'. This series of proofs against the convention as released by the archbishop does not display any logic of critical thinking but is rather a use of the classic techniques which involve irrational argumentation: by making one believe that an uncertain *argumentum ad populum* exists which sees the Istanbul Convention as being an element in the decline of Europe (without clarifying any details). It is followed by a causal oversimplification of the reasons of this 'decline' and syllogistic fallacy regarding an interpretation of the social construction of gender that allegedly requires a liquidation of gender, an extinction of family, and finally a determination of the enemy which according to his claims are supporters of 'gender' ideology who, together with liberal European politicians, are striving to destroy the current world order (the fallacy of the inverse).

Consequently, the argumentation of the 'no' campaign against the Istanbul Convention used just about all forms of verbal fallacy and the most common tools involving irrational statements: 1) the use of emotional threats: 'it will destroy the traditional family', 'it will set women against men' (Strausa, Sprinģe, 2018); 2) emotional intimidation without logical argumentation: 'be active, vote against', 'do it now, don't put it off', 'retain precious Christian values', 'vote against same-sex marriage' (ibid); 3) the fallacy of division: 'ideology orientated towards equalising both genders is promoted behind good words', 'men and women are not the same, as they have fundamentally opposite missions in life'(Latkovskis, 2018); 4) the fallacy of accent: 'gender - this word is unnatural... it is aimed at tearing down the family as the main social cell by beginning on the inside. The consequences may be horrible. Our children may be subjected to gender ideology and, in the end, they will not understand whether they are men or women. It will involve the destruction of the fundamentals of society by creating a totalitarian, zombie-like society without values' (Veidemane, 2016b); 5) creating a sorites paradox with a two-level

narrative: ‘without men, the Latvian freedom fighters who, let’s face it, were mostly men, we would not have a free country today’ (Liepiņa, 2016); by making one believe that the ratification of the Istanbul Convention is a devaluation of men (as a gender) and that it contradicts the idea of independence that is the bedrock of the state; 6) quoting out of context: ‘the convention allegedly contains items which would allow it to be used to justify the project which aims to transform society using genderism ideology’ (Strausa, Springe, 017).

Consequently, the main slogans being used by opponents of the convention were emotional rather than rational, and were based on threats which would generate an atmosphere of fear: a) ‘they will chase us into Satan’s claws’; and b) this convention ‘is the death knell of society’. (Mēs izskaidrosim, 2016). Unfortunately, the response of supporters of the convention to these verbal fallacies was too modest. Perhaps they failed to find counter arguments to deliberately illogical statements, or they believed that common sense would win and therefore an open discussion in the defence of the text of the Istanbul Convention was not necessary. One could reproach the supporters for the lack of response and criticise the fact that the terms ‘gender’ and ‘social construction of gender’ were not translated accurately from English.<sup>11</sup> Along with this, there was an insufficient explanation in the public domain in regard to social constructivism and feminist ideology that does not contradict the rights of men and children. The contribution of a critical analysis to the public domain may have opened it up for discussions, as 88.7% of respondents claimed to have read the text of the document and 8.1% had only heard about it.

### 3.2. *Conditions for the feudalisation of opinion*

The Latvian parliament did not vote in support of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, and its subsequent revision was postponed indefinitely. The lack of critical discussion on the topic permitted the growing existence within the country of a deformed understanding of women’s rights. Moreover, Latvia is the only country in which more than half of respondents agreed that violence against women is often provoked by the victim (57%), followed by 45% in Lithuania and 40% in Malta (Special Eurobarometer, 2016) and, therefore, the issue of women’s rights is especially urgent here. The majority of respondents (75.1%) agreed that the belief that women held a distinctive role in society may serve to encourage violence against them. Only 10.1% of respondents believed that such circumstances are not typical of Latvia, that such processes only take place in other countries (5.1%), and that it does not apply to Latvia’s local society (9%).

Political parties and church leaders managed to prevent the ratification of an international document in parliament with the help of an irrational influencing technique, managing to achieve the ‘re-feudalisation’ of power in which the illusions of the public domain are maintained only to sanction the preferred decisions of leaders. However, the survey results proved that those digital media

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<sup>11</sup> This claim was also used by the Czech and Bulgarian opponents to the text of the convention.

users who took part in it understood the essence of the convention as a document which was aimed at reducing violence in society against girls and women (33.6% of respondents), protecting girls and women from domestic violence and violence in the public space (28.6%), and encouraging gender equality (24.1%). A total of 38.4% of respondents believed that domestic violence against women was more common in Latvia than in the EU on average, while 13.2% of respondents agreed to this statement, and 7.6% stated that they did not have an opinion on this matter.

One of the reasons for the unfortunate political decision may be the absence of feminist ideology in the media and public discussion space, as gender is not understood as a social construct in Latvia.

The main claim by opponents to the convention that the concept of 'social construction of gender' is secretly aimed at destroying the traditional family, forbidding religious freedom, and accepting same-sex marriage (in contradiction to the Latvian Constitution and Christian values) was not one that was accepted by the majority of respondents who took part in our survey. A total of 59.9 % of them found the claim invalid, whereas 26.8% agreed to it. Opinions varied in regard to 'the destructive genderism ideology' and its harmful influence on Latvian society: 37.8% denied the existence of such a theory; 23.1% stressed that the claims of the 'no' movement were void and invalid; 24.4% were convinced that such an ideology existed and they denied the existence of traditional male and female sexes; 11.9% stated that it meant that this is what the 'liberal conspiracy against the conservative world' looked like.

The results of the study show that it is still relatively hard for society to combine faith and knowledge when it comes to describing and characterising a reality that legitimises one's actions. Therefore, it could be assumed that one of the greatest obstacles to any ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2018 in Latvia was the fact that the leaders of religious movements joined the 'no' movement and religious arguments were used against the convention instead of critical analysis and critical thinking.<sup>12</sup>

The act of anchoring a strategy in public anxiety (with the help of sensational discovery) in this case turned out to be the crucial disinformation technique. Thanks to selective facts being taken out of context and insignificant facts being replaced by significant ones (Zasursky, 1997, p. 6), opponents of the convention managed to create a negative stereotype of the content of this document which serves to defend women's rights, with this selective attack in turn ensuring the 'shaping of a polarised attitude' (ibidem, p. 4) towards it.

Stereotypes train one to fall out of the habit of critical analysis and they also serve to interrupt one when it comes to analysing events on one's own, which is

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<sup>12</sup> The same obstacles to ratification may also exist in the Czech Republic and Bulgaria.



when one may evaluate them critically. Instead stereotypes teach one to accept the information being offered without raising any objections (ibidem, p. 39). This means that the presence of stereotypes in the cascade of unverified facts and irrational argumentation issued by the digital media is one of the main obstacles to critical thinking and also one of the most basic elements of 'fake news'. What this means is that today merely supplying facts and critical thinking will not suffice to ensure good levels of awareness by society. A recipient's ability to evaluate the form of the information being supplied critically, to recognise the barriers for critical thinking and the presence of stereotypes in their understanding of facts, developments, and concepts that are difficult to understand is also a requisite.

### **Conclusion**

The objective of this research was to find out the reasons behind the failure to establish a constructive discussion on a topic that was so essential to Latvian society, one which served to combat and eradicate violence against women. The main reason was the public's inability to critically assess the false news disseminated about the Istanbul Convention due to lack of critical thinking.

The technique that was used by opponents of the Istanbul Convention - to replace the urgent issue with made-up threats - achieved a sensational effect in the public domain in Latvia, convincing both political decision makers and 20% of society itself that the convention should not be ratified.

It was observed that, between the facts and points of view on one side and the audience on the other side, we no longer had a mediator or journalist who could attempt to implement the function of critical thinking and deliver only verified and adequate information to the recipient.

Social media has refused to think critically. Instead it supplies the audience with, for the most part, group opinion rather than anything that may result from critical analysis. This means that a more severe effect is achieved in terms of public polarisation without the presence of a journalist's responsibility for verifying facts.

Information cascades are based on poor thinking and a confusion over the sources of information. In this case opinion about the essence of the Istanbul Convention also comes from a place of shared belief as opposed to coming from a traditional news source that applies established professional norms which pre-filter inaccurate or biased information.

The polarisation of group opinion, the spontaneous circulation of attitudes (provided and supported by social media) hinders or excludes the process of critical thinking in the public domain.

The number of sources on the Internet gives one the illusion that an unlimited number of views is being offered. This analysis shows that the growth of anonymous sources does not mean a polyphony of views but rather the circulation of

homogeneous content from various blogs which cannot be held to account and which do not encourage a critical analysis of the matter at hand.

The pluralism of opinion in the Latvian media space is nowhere near high enough at the moment.<sup>13</sup> This largely explains the possibility of pseudo-facts being manipulated in the public domain, as could also be seen in this case.

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<sup>13</sup> The 2016 edition of the Media Pluralism Monitor (CMPF).

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