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MEANING-MAKING AND DISCURSIVE INTERACTION OF THE FAR-RIGHT AND
MAINSTREAM CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL PARTIES: THE CASE OF POST-
REVOLUTIONARY ARMENIA

Master's Thesis

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I have written the Master's Thesis myself, independently. All of the other authors' texts, main viewpoints and all data from other resources have been referred to.

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FOREWORD

When I received the invitation for admission interview from the University of Tartu, a revolution in my homeland, Armenia, had just begun. On the day of the interview, I hardly could focus: all my thoughts were in the streets where hundreds of thousands of protestors gathered to reject the autocratic regime and establish democracy. Both missions were successful: Armenian citizens forced the autocrat to resign, and I got accepted to the University of Tartu.

With the Velvet Revolution came high hopes for democracy, equality, and growth. But along with those, radical and extreme right-wing groups rose to fight the post-revolutionary changes which they saw as anti-national. They received the support of political elites deprived of power.

I was alarmed by these new developments and started writing my thesis with a truly revolutionary desire to resolve the far-right “issue” in Armenia. But as I moved forward through exciting exploration and writing process my emotions settled down and ambitions became more doable. My supervisor, Andreas Ventsel, provided the support a student can only dream of.

The knowledge and training I received at the Department of Semiotics were not only applied to write this thesis but were put in practice on almost daily basis in my journalistic work in a hope to contribute to making Armenia a bit closer to being an open society. For that, I am grateful to the entire staff of the Department of Semiotics.

INTRODUCTION

The current thesis is a study of radical and extreme right political communities in Armenia after the Velvet Revolution which happened in the country in 2018. The revolution resulted in a rapid and unforeseen fall of the authoritarian regime which has been ruling the country for two decades. A new, more progressive force came to power bringing with it hopes for democratic changes for Armenia (Lanskoy, Suthers 2019; Feldman, Alibašić 2019; Zolyan 2018, Shirinyan 2018; Abrahamian, Shagoyan 2018). Emerging processes of liberalization and democratization in the country are, however, followed by a significant rise of the far-right manifested in both appearance of many new far-right political formations and in rise of visibility of old radical groups. The radical and extreme right political formations pose serious threat to minority populations and, by securing support from political elites and the media, they may influence the success of democratic reforms in the country.

I identify the radical and extreme right communities discussed in this thesis with Roger Griffin's term *groupuscular right*, a concept describing small, non-party political formations without any formal hierarchy. I analyze far-right meaning-making based on the data collected by non-participatory observation from social media pages of selected groupuscules in November 1-30, 2019. The analysis has two main aims. Firstly, I discuss the construction of otherness in the far-right discourse and the place of conspiracy theories and narratives about the queer community in Armenia in that discourse. I built my argumentation on the scholarship of Tartu-Moscow school of cultural semiotics and later successful application by semioticians at the University of Tartu of the cultural semiotic framework for the analysis of far-right political discourses. Secondly, I follow the circulation of certain specific stances both in the far-right discourse and in the discourse of three major conservative political parties of Armenia, including the former ruling party. I analyze the transformation of the far-right claims in the communication of mainstream politicians using

the notions of resemiotization. Using Lotman's concept of self model and building on the example of Istanbul Convention I show contradiction in standpoints of the mainstream conservative parties

Results obtained in this work may contribute to research on the rise of the far-right in post-Soviet countries, particularly those that experienced liberalizing turn. The semiotic approach adopted in the thesis allows to examine overlaps in meanings of seemingly disconnected political communities and pinpoint to ideological ties not manifested in any formal alliances.

1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In this chapter I present the research aims of the thesis and research questions. I will then discuss relevance of the work for studies in far-right politics in Armenia and other post-Soviet countries that have recently gone through democratic turn. I will also address shortly potential implications that this research may have outside of the context of any specific country.

1.1. Aim of the research and research questions

This thesis adopts a cultural semiotic approach to provide qualitative analysis of the conservative and ultraconservative discourses in Armenia after the Velvet Revolution of 2018. The work consists of two main sections. In the first section I follow the discourse of radical and extreme right communities, specifically aiming to analyze their discursive construction of otherness in the model comprised of self, boundary and other (Sonesson 2000). I observed social media pages of four groups of activists, and I use the notion of groupuscule i.e., small political entities striving to undermine liberal democratic system (Griffin 2003), to describe their structural organization and meaning-making strategies.

In the second section I aim to track the specific extreme and radical right claims and narratives in the major political parties' discourse. Except for the ruling Civil Contract, all three major parties in Armenian politics are conservative in a sense of general inclination towards preservation of existing social and cultural norms. All three parties have also utilized nationalism. I follow overlaps in umbrella topics and messaging between the mainstream conservative parties and the groupuscular right and use the notion of resemiotization to analyze the evolution of specific claims from temporal kinds of meaning-making (such as a talk at a protest) towards more durable kinds (such as legislative proposal). Thus, this thesis aims to answer two research questions:

1. *How does the far-right in Armenia construct the otherness?*
2. *How specific claims from far-right discourse transform in the discourse of mainstream conservative political parties?*

The first research question helps to describe the main discursive strategies applied by the groupuscular right in Armenia; it allows to confirm that far-right political formations pose threat first of all to minorities (Gordon 2020), as well as allows to explain the basis of the far-right activists' criticism of the post-revolutionary political elites. The second research question helps to describe the similarities between the discourses of the groupuscular right and mainstream conservative political parties.

The current thesis does not address the problem of perception and interpretation of the topics and narratives of the groupuscular right by their audience or the general public. The work also does not discuss alleged sponsoring of the groupuscular right by certain mainstream political actors, leaving this question for another investigation to explore. The thesis also does not discuss possible changes in political life of Armenia after the war with Azerbaijan in fall 2020.

1.2. Relevance of the work

Armenia, a country governed by a semi-authoritarian regime for two decades, has adopted an anti-corruption and pro-democracy agenda after the Velvet Revolution. However, the country also experiences a significant rise in activities and visibility of the far-right communities and organizations. As in other post-Soviet countries, specifically in Georgia and Ukraine, the far-right rise happens in the context of conservative, Orthodox Christian societies after a crucial liberalizing turn (Gordon 2020:7). 2020 Freedom House special report points out that while the rise of the far-right poses threat to incipient democratic transformations in general, it hits first of all vulnerable communities (2020:2). In Armenia, it is the sexual minorities that have become the main target of the far-right actors thus being exposed to both hate speech and physical violence.

In general, discourses of otherness often turn into discourses of exclusion, and, depending on circumstances, ethnic, religious or other groups discriminated against upon a given feature may become the “prototype of alterity” (Nöth, Santaella 2007). From the position of the groupuscular right the otherness is a fixed feature, a close-to-natural fact, while in reality, as Nöth and Santaella put it, it is “nothing but a discursive position” (ibid.). Authors point out that the studies of marginalization should be therefore a priority for human sciences. This thesis is an attempt to complement the knowledge about the radical and extreme rightism and the process of marginalization of queer people in a traditionalist society. In this work, queerness is understood as gender identity outside of heterosexuality and socially defined dichotomy of the woman/feminine and man/masculine. Additionally, while the development of the far-right movements in Europe after World War II has been thoroughly investigated (including by Roger Griffin whose work forms a part of the theoretical framework of the current thesis), not so much has been written about the respective processes in those post-Soviet countries that went through democratic revolutions since the turn of the second millennium.

The research on semiotics of culture conducted by Tartu-Moscow School scholars has proven to be an effective tool to study extreme right communities (see, for example, Madisson, Ventsel 2016a, 2016b, 2018, Damčević, Rodik 2018). Using the notion of otherness, which has been central for the cultural semiotic paradigm (Sonesson 2000), I discuss the narratives of the groupuscular right. A thorough analysis of these narratives can be important for better understanding the groupuscular right discourse and for combating hateful and, when it is picked up by mainstream politicians, potentially *dangerous* speech (Maynard, Benesch 2016). This speech is often directed against the vulnerable groups of population and able to undermine democratization processes. Furthermore, some narratives (such as the conspirological discourse around Council of Europe Istanbul Convention discussed in chapter 6) are travelling from country to country across Europe (Ketelaars 2019, Damčević, Rodik 2018:37-38). Therefore, the findings of this thesis might be relevant for further research outside of the context of post-revolutionary Armenia.

Finally, research has been conducted on the influence of extreme and radical right movements on policy making, direct or indirect (i.e. through influence of radical right parties on

other parties; Kyung 2015, Mudde 2007:277-292). However, the realm of impact of far-right movements on mainstream politics, as well as mechanisms of that impact still remain underexplored. The current thesis will take a closer look at the semiotic mechanisms of travelling of radical and extreme right stances to the parliamentary pedestals by analyzing the circulation of specific claims and topics both in groupuscular right and mainstream political discourse. The work thus aims to contribute to more comprehensive understanding of how mainstream conservative parties adopt radical narratives and statements, and how the latter transform in the mainstream discourse.

2. METHODOLOGY

In this section I will elaborate the method of data collection and justify my selection of groupuscules and political parties to observe. I will also provide short contextual information about the selected groupuscules and political parties.

2.1. Data collection

To collect data for this thesis I performed non-participatory observation of seven Facebook pages and accounts of right-wing activists on November 1-30, 2019. This period was chosen due to intense coverage that right-wing activists and initiatives received in press and social media. The month was characterized by a series of scandals in the media around the topics of national identity and queer rights which dominated the public discussion. Due to these developments the government was accused of being unable to form the agenda of public discussions around post-revolutionary reforms and giving way to manipulative narratives endangering the wellbeing of minority groups. Some of these scandals were triggered by right-wing activists I observed (such as huZANQ uZANG case discussed in chapter 6). Activists organized protests and actions during the whole month, which although of small scale, served as spectacles to be broadcast online. Topics of these protests reached the level of parliamentary discussion. Furthermore, criticism of educational reform by political parties turned into weeks of protests that right-wing activists also joined. Eventually, Prime Minister Pashinyan had to address the Parliament with an emotional speech about the scandal around a transgender athlete, declaring that “this person is under my personal defense”. His speech managed to stop the nationwide wave of hate speech directed to the athlete but did not address the issues of queer rights at large.

I chose Facebook as a platform for observation due to its popularity: although some groupuscules have also Twitter and Vkontakte pages, those are not nearly as active as Facebook pages. YouTube was not chosen due to limitation to only video content, while on Facebook I observed both video and textual content (in video content verbal text uttered in the video mode was what interested me, I do not analyze visual meaning-making in this thesis). There were two sets of pages: that of groupucular right activists and initiatives, and that of mainstream conservative politicians. In case available, I also collected manifests and self-descriptive texts on websites of the initiatives and parties, as well as used statements made regarding important events outside of selected period of observation (such as regarding the attack in Shurnukh village in 2018 which resulted in a large wave of hate speech against queer community).

I outlined four groupuscules formed both before and after the revolution: Veto, Adekvad, Kamq, Liberation Movement. The selection was based on the high frequency of coverage in news outlets and activeness on Facebook. The Liberation Movement is led by people who are engaged in two other groups, namely, Informational-Analytical Center “Luys” and Initiative for Protection of Christian Value System and Traditional Family. Because the activities and members of both groups do not differ significantly from that of the Liberation Movement, I will not consider them separately in this thesis and my choice of the Liberation Movement is not motivated by any special characteristics of this title per se.

Using the concept of groupuscule and theoretical framework of cultural semiotics I studied umbrella topics and most common narratives among the groupucular right in post-revolutionary Armenia. All groupuscules are critical of the new government which is perceived as liberal. And all of them reveal strong opposition to the “Western values” as well as sympathy towards Russia. The data I collected shows that the groupuscules are united in their strong opposition to queer community (consequently, they are united in support of traditional gender roles), and conspirological discourse is characteristic of the groupucular right in Armenia. The two most popular such narratives are conspiracy theories about George Soros and Istanbul Convention. Both of these narratives fit into the framework of New World Order conspiracy theories (Madisson 2016a).

Furthermore, I selected three political parties representing the most significant conservative political forces in the country: Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), Prosperous Armenia (PA) and Armenian Revolutionary Federation also known as Dashnaktsutyun (ARF). If in the case of the groupuscules I was outlining main topics based on collected data, in the case of political parties I was following parties' statements to see if they respond to or adopt the above-mentioned topics. Thus, I collected statements (both official and those from individual party members), interviews and other texts mentioning the topics of queer rights, George Soros or Istanbul Convention narratives during November 1-30. The statements were collected from official websites of RPA and ARF which provide extensive archives of press publications, statements and Facebook posts of party members. In case of PA, the party does not have an active website, therefore I used Google advanced search to find press publications and manually collected data from Facebook pages of top three party officials: PA leader Gagik Tsarukyan, secretary of PA bloc in Parliament Arman Abovyan, and PA leader in 2015-2017 Naira Zohrabyan. Press publications I collected were not limited to statements of those three politicians but also, based on search results, included texts by other PA members, most often Gevorg Petrosyan, an MP who has been a hero of several scandals around queer rights. All together I worked with data comprised of over 400 posts by the groupuscular right and around 50 posts, interviews and speeches by politicians.

2.2. Research material: names and brief introduction to groupuscules and parties

In this section I will provide short contextual information about the groupuscules and political parties mentioned in this thesis. I observed Facebook pages of the following groupuscules and accounts of their leaders/most active members (there is often no clear-cut hierarchy in the groupuscular structure):

a) *Adekvad*. The initiative was founded by Artur Danielyan and Narek Malian. The latter then left it to start his own initiative, Veto (see below). Danielyan was a member of Civil Contract party which came to power in Armenia after the Velvet Revolution. However, he left the party before the events of 2018, according to him, because of ideological differences. Danielyan studied

in Moscow and London; in Armenia he was appointed as director of a factory. Currently, he is not known to hold any business or political position apart from Adekvad.

In May 2019 Adekvad was registered as a political party. At the inauguration ceremony Danilyan declared that Adekvad is yet another fake, “decorative” political party in the fake political “theater” of Armenia. Adekvad allies call them a “congregation” and are the only groupuscule I observed which released detailed self-descriptive texts (see more on Adekvad ideology in section 3.4). I observed Facebook page of Adekvad and Danielyan’s account.

b) Kamq. Kamq was founded by Vahagn Chakhalyan, an Armenian nationalist activist from Samtskhe–Javakheti region of Georgia. The region has a large Armenian population, and Chakhalyan was advocating for its bigger autonomy from Tbilisi. He was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment in 2009 for possession of firearms and ammunition, and hooliganism. He was released on amnesty in 2013. After the Velvet Revolution Chakhalyan founded Kamq to combat multiculturalism and globalisation influence in Armenia. Kamq is concentrated on fighting Istanbul Convention as embodiment of decadence of the globalist West and the threat to Armenian culture. They often organize street protests and petition-signing actions. They claim 50,000 citizens signed petition against the convention, however, the content of the convention is misrepresented by Kamq during signature-collecting events: people are asked to sign the petition against gay marriages rather than against domestic violence.

On November 1, 2019, Kamq activists interrupted the rehearsal of modern dance performance huZANQ uZANG. On the next day, self-described Istanbul Convention fighter and former president Robert Kocharyan’s supporter Narek Sargsyan attacked the dancers by running into the performance territory and pouring brilliant green dye on dancers (the dye, *zelyonka*, has become a popular tool to attack political opponents among the Russian pro-government fighting squads (Backer, Olszanecka 2019); in Armenia this was the first such attack). On November 3, Kamq members came back to the performance territory to perform a frankincense burning ritual to “kick out the evil forces”. The chain of events was covered extensively in the press and went viral in social media.

I observed Kamq page on Facebook as well as the account under the name “Vahagn Chakhalyan”. Chakhalyan has several accounts, however, the content is usually repeated on those.

c) *Veto*. Adekvad co-founder Narek Malian left the group to start his own initiative, *Veto*. Malian is a PR specialist who worked as advisor to the former Chief of Police. Malian taught PR in Yerevan State University and authored detective novels about PR specialists. Nearly all *Veto* messages and activities are constructed around conspiracy theory about liberal billionaire George Soros. Malian uses his ties among former politicians and journalists, as well as his knowledge in PR to promote the activities of his group. He is the only activist I observed who talked about a possibility of a political career in the future when asked about it by a journalist. However, no statements or actions were taken by him or other *Veto* members to enter the institutionalized political scene.

d) *Liberation Movement*. This initiative is one of the many minute formations uniting a group of activists advocating for so-called traditional values and systematically attacking the queer community. People in this group exhibit deep religiosity and have ties among Armenian clergy as well as among Russian pro-Orthodox Church activists. They disseminate both the narratives about Soros and the Istanbul Convention. The attacks on queer community include hate speech in the online sphere and real-life protests and actions.

Liberation Movement activists, together with Kamq members, interrupted the rehearsal of the modern dance performance huZANQ uZANG on the grounds of it being a “lesbian” and “satanist” event. Members of the Liberation Movement are the only groupuscular community in my selection that was active before the revolution. As the Liberation Movement Facebook page is not updated regularly, I observed only the account of one of the leaders of the movement, Hayk Ayvazyan.

I observed the following political parties:

a) *Republican Party of Armenia (RPA)*. The party ruled in Armenia for two decades. It is characterized by national-conservative ideology (Zolyan 2018, Danielyan 2014:59). It had more than 165,000 members, which comprises around 6,5% of the entire electorate in the country.

However, the party failed to make it to the 5% threshold at the parliamentary elections after the revolution.

b) Prosperous Armenia (PA). One of the biggest parties in the country was elected as second largest force in the Parliament in the 2018 as well as in 2017 and 2012 elections. It is formed around the figure of oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, one of the richest men in the country. It is self-described as a center-right party.

c) Armenian Revolutionary Federation or Dashnaktsutyun (ARF). This is the oldest party of Armenia founded in 1890. It has a significant influence in Diaspora and is represented in all major Armenian communities in Diaspora. Historically, ARF had nationalist-socialist ideology. Currently, ARF is characterized by nationalist-conservative ideology (Danielyan 2014:88). Before the revolution it was in coalition with the ruling RPA. In 2018, it failed to make the 5% threshold at the parliamentary elections.

3. ARMENIA: BETWEEN THE EXISTENTIAL THREAT AND DEMOCRATIC CHANGE

In this section I will provide a brief overview of the historical context and current narratives of existential threat in Armenian public discourse. I will also discuss the Velvet Revolution and the hopes of not only economic, but cultural change that it created.

3.1. The nation under existential threat

Armenians are united by language, religion, and shared history. Armenian script was created in the 5th century AD, bringing with it a rich tradition of written literature. The Kingdom of Armenia was the first to adopt Christianity as a state religion (301 AD). Armenian Apostolic Church separated from the rest of the Christian churches after the Council of Chalcedon in 5th century and became largely national, meaning that it is tied to a specific ethnicity: it practices in Armenia and diaspora communities. Armenians lost statehood in 11th century AD. In 13th century Armenians formed the Kingdom of Cilicia, which existed until late 14th century. For hundreds of years after that, Armenians existed divided between Ottoman, Persian and Russian empires.

The history of the nation is dominated by the narratives of struggle against powerful invaders, first of all, the Turks. The culmination of centuries of oppression by imperial powers was in 1915 when the Ottoman Empire orchestrated a mass killing of Christian populations, first of all Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks. The genocide took lives of 1,5 million Armenians and forced many more to flee; nowadays, more ethnic Armenians live in the Diaspora than in the Republic of Armenia itself. The fear and anger, fueled by Turkey's refusal to acknowledge that genocide was ever committed against Armenian and other Christian populations, remain vivid in mass

consciousness. These feelings are further reinforced by the fact that Turkey keeps its borders closed for Armenia, the two countries have no diplomatic relations.

After the World War I, in 1918, an independent state was established for a short 2-year period before Soviet union took over the South Caucasus. With Soviet decay and Perestroika, Armenia was stormed by large-scale protests. First in 1987 in Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous oblast (officially part of Azerbaijan SSR) and then in Yerevan itself hundreds of thousands took the streets demanding to rejoin Nagorno Karabakh with Armenia. Moscow feared a dangerous precedent: it refused to redraw borders, announced curfew and sent tanks to calm down the tensions in Armenia. Azerbaijan responded by ethnic pogroms in Armenian-populated city of Sumgait. Soon, the two neighbors became intolerant towards each others' presence: hundreds of thousands of people were forced to leave their homes as ethnic tensions both in Armenia and Azerbaijan became severe. In 1991, after years of protests, Armenia declared independence from the Soviet Union. Shortly after, war with Azerbaijan broke out, in which Armenia took over Karabakh and seven regions of Azerbaijan. The ceasefire was established in 1994, and the conflict remained frozen up until recently. In September-October 2020, the war broke out again. This time Azerbaijan succeeded, taking back the seven regions and parts of Nagorno-Karabakh itself. Armenia was shaken once again not only by the defeat, but also by the fact that Turkey provided crucial military and diplomatic support to Azerbaijan thus renewing fears of Turkish aggression.

Turkish threat, history dominated by narratives of struggle and oppression from greater powers, calamities of recent decades (devastating earthquake in 1988, war, poverty of 1990s) – all these phenomena create and reinforce Armenia's perception of itself as a nation under an existential threat. Armenia was and still is conceived by its people as a nation under a constant danger of assimilation and extinction. This thought underlies general public discourse, but it is especially strong driving force of nationalist movements in modern-day Armenia (Rutland 1994:840). Most of these movements are of ethno-nationalist kind; they believe ethno-national belonging is a duty which importance is greater than any individual-level phenomena. The crucial part of fulfilling that duty is seen in the preservation of proper Armenianness – what is often referred to as “traditional values” and implies certain type of lifestyle. Preserving proper

Armenianness for nationalist movements serves the purpose of preserving Armenia as a nation against constant existential threats (Shirinian 2016).

3.2. The Velvet Revolution

The narrative of constant existential threat and subsequent need to preserve so-called Armenianness has been part of Armenian political discourse – both mainstream, and far-right – for decades now. But the Velvet Revolution drastically changed the political life.

In April-May of 2018, mass protests against the ruling Republican Party of Armenia and its widely unpopular leader Serzh Sargsyan took place. The ruling elites were seen as deeply corrupt and the entire movement was aimed towards internal change. Thus the movement was different from similar uprisings in Georgia in Ukraine where protests resulted in changes in geopolitical orientation of these countries. In Armenia, foreign policy was not seriously changed: having the conflict with Azerbaijan, Armenian opposition leaders did not believe they could afford serious revision of geopolitical orientation and cause Moscow's anger. The protests were dispersed in nature and took place not only in the capital city, but also in small town across the country. By blocking the streets and refusing to go to work or schools, small groups of people effectively paralyzed the entire country and forced Sargsyan to resign. The leader of the protests, long-time opposition figure Nikol Pashinyan, became the prime minister. Snap parliamentary elections were held soon, and Pashinyan-led My Step bloc received 88 of 132 seats. This is a constitutional majority, and My Step does not need opposition votes to make nearly any type of decision.

Not everyone in Armenia was protesting merely government corruption. The revolution formed expectations of not only economic, but also cultural changes. During one of the daily evening gatherings of protestors at Yerevan's main square, future member of parliament and then human rights activist Maria Karapetyan spoke from the stage: "We are creating a new culture for ourselves, new social relations [...]. I'd like to address my last, most important thought to my sisters [...] who fought hand in hand these days both for changing the government in Armenia,

and for their equal rights in public space. Long live, sisters!”¹. On March 8, 2019, couple of months after being elected prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan walked the streets of Yerevan giving flowers to women and asking: “What do you think about defending women’s rights in Armenia? Did you know that March 8 [...] movement started for equal labor rights for women and men?”². For the first time, the topic of gender equality was prioritized by the government and the topic of human right in general started occupying more and more place in the wide public discourse.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hq1YwEEOHDU&ab_channel=Factortv

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxSKg_l9CE0&ab_channel=a1plus

4. THE FAR-RIGHT: WHAT IS IT?

In this chapter I will discuss briefly the studies on extreme and radical right movement in Europe after World War II. I will concentrate on research done by Cas Mudde and Roger Griffin. I will also discuss studies on far-right in Armenian context and will provide a short overview of semiotic research on the far-right.

4.1. Far-right in post-war Europe

No matter right or left, extremist political views deal with rejection of the values and practices of democracy whatsoever, and radical views – whether right or left – deal with serious systemic changes in the existing order (March, Mudde 2005:24-25). The concept “far-right” has been widely used in mass media and academic literature in recent years, being often quite vaguely defined. This vagueness partially comes from the usage of far-right as an umbrella term for a whole spectrum of political parties and movements. In this text the term far-right is used to designate two types of political formations: extreme and radical right (Kopeček 2007:284). Both on the far-right end of the right-left continuum, these ideologies differ in their perception of democracy. For the *extreme right* it is characteristic to have an explicit ideological link to fascism and reject democratic state (Hainsworth 2008:12). The common features of the extreme right ideology are nationalism, xenophobia, racism, anti-democratic sentiment and support for a strong state (Hainsworth 2008:68). Looking meticulously for all five features to classify a political formation as extreme right would be essentialist, rather one should pay attention to themes, issues and style to recognize the extreme right discourse (ibid.). What is different in *radical right* ideology is that these people are not anti-democratic per se but reject the liberal democracy: they “do not want to overthrow democracy, they want to weaken liberal checks on pure majoritarian rule” (Mudde 2011:7)³. What

³ While “far-left” can also be conceptualized as an umbrella term for extreme (that reject democracy) and radical (that demand crucial changes in existing political order) left, ideologically the left, obviously, differ. Far-left ideas

makes both these ideologies right-wing is the rejection of fundamental principles human equality. The extreme right emphasizes the inequality of individuals in terms of nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, etc. (Carter 2005:17-18). The radical right presents the self as homogeneous and the other as corrupt and dangerous (Mudde 2011:7), and homogeneity implies the impossibility to grant equal rights to deviants from the homogeneous self, for example, to minorities. For the far-right communities considered in this thesis the *self* is the nation which is represented in “ethnically based, exclusionary” manner (Hainsworth 2008:11). To understand the relations of the extreme and radical right political formations to the concept of nation one should discuss the ideology in the frame of which these movements have been studied for many decades: fascism.

Roger Griffin defines fascism as a “revolutionary form of populist nationalism” (Griffin 2000:165; Griffin 2003:41). Fascism sees the state of the nation as decadent and strives for a revolution as a way to the rebirth of nation in its full — and pure — glory. In the first half of the 20th century, this ideology recorded notorious success. But after 1945, the environment in many parts of the world was hostile towards overt fascism making declaration of sympathy towards fascist regimes of the past almost a taboo. In fact, in the decades following the World War II many countries gradually built legal framework for prohibiting fascist parties: from banning parties as such to posing restrictions on their ability to participate in elections (Finn 2000) which is not always practiced without difficulties due to the fact that electoral rights are fundamental principle of democracy (Navot 2008). These developments did not eliminate fascism from societies; instead, it transformed itself to be able to survive in the hostile milieu. Classical mass parties were not a possible format for fascism to exist in (hardly could they attract any sizable support), therefore, they transformed into a multitude of small organized groups of militant activists without any formal ties to regular political parties that Griffin terms *groupuscules*: “The radical right planets of Europe’s interwar political system have broken into countless asteroids” (Griffin 2000:169). These processes are at the basis of contemporary far-right movements in Armenia (see more on groupuscular nature of Armenian far-right communities observed in this thesis in the section 6.1).

deal with economic inequality and stand for major redistribution of resources from elites; they see global structural causes of national socio-economic problems, but also advocate for international unity and solidarity being adepts of internationalism as opposed to nationalism (March, Mudde 2005:25).

4.2. Semiotic research on the far-right

Intersection of semiotics and studies on extreme or radical right ideologies is not new. Some scholars used semiotic analysis of literary texts to approach the question of fascism as ideology (see Hartnett's analysis of Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, 1993). Umberto Eco discussed fascism by outlining a list of features of what he calls "Ur-Fascism" ("Eternal Fascism"). The list is comprised of quite a diverse set of standpoints from cult of tradition to selective populism (Eco 1995).

In recent years, the number of studies which adopt semiotic approach for analyzing far-right ideologies and groups has been growing. Madisson and Ventsel applied the concepts of Tartu-Moscow school and cultural semiotics in a number of articles to explore extreme right meaning-making. They combined Roger Griffin's concept of groupuscule with Yuri Lotman's notion of semiosphere to analyze *groupuscules as semiospheres* (2018, see below). This approach allowed introducing two other concepts of cultural semiotics, namely, self-description and self-model, to analyze how online extreme right communities identify themselves (2016b). Madisson described the semiotic logic of signification of conspiracy theories and used the concept of code-text to explain how conspiracy theories create interpretational frameworks for connecting unrelated events in extreme right communication (2014, 2016a). Damčević and Rodik also used the concept of self-description to analyze communication of Croatian right-wing communities in the semiosphere of Facebook. They discuss how idealized self-portraits of right-wing Facebook pages are built and what role textual fragments containing hate speech, such as fascist salute *Za dom spremni*, play in that process. They argue that the idea of Croatianness is central to the self-description which is built on the opposition of self and other, and hence any element that does not fit this self-description is excluded (Damčević, Rodik 2018). Furthermore, Makharashvili used Lotman's concepts of culture and anticulture to explore the construction of "Georgianness" and the opposition of self/other in the Georgian extreme right discourse (2020).

Rheindorf and Wodak discussed recontextualizations and resemiotizations of extreme-right ideology in Austria. They followed the transfer of the far-right discourse into mainstream

discourse through a process of “semiotic reinterpretations” of far-right ideas (Rheindorf, Wodak 2019).

4.3. Armenian far-right: “figure of the homosexual” and narratives of Eurasianism

During the last two decades, Armenian political landscape has been leaning to the right. Danielyan mentions that in Armenia leftist ideas were not usually translated into voting preferences, and not a single leftist party has been elected since 1999 (Danielyan 2014:88). Up until 2018 Velvet Revolution, Armenia had two authoritarian leaders, both coming from Republican Party of Armenia (RPA). In the last years of its rule RPA faced severe crisis of legitimacy over widespread corruption, economic concerns and losses in 2016 April war with Azerbaijan. Political scientist Mikayel Zolyan⁴ notes that it was then that RPA developed the quasi-ideology of “nation-army” which was characterized by increased use of militarist rhetoric by the government (Zolyan 2018:98-100). Political scientist Nerses Kopalyan agrees that the policies of authoritarian governments in Armenia before the revolution were not shaped by ideological goals and were characterized by “presence of artificial ideology” (Kopalyan 2018). He writes that RPA “utilized the ultra-nationalism of historic hero Garegin Nzhdeh to formulate a center-right party that extolled security and patriotism over all other social issues” (ibid.). Therefore, it is difficult to draw neat ideological “borders” and put the Armenian political parties and initiatives accurately on right-left continuum. However, the militarism and “quasi-ideology” of RPA created a suitable context for emergence of far-right movements. Freedom House special report on rising Eurasian far-right states:

Eurasian far-right groups have emerged in contexts distinguished by common features, including the long-standing presence of ethnic-nationalist discourses; military conflicts that are open to exploitation by radical nationalist groups; and the instrumentalization of movements by domestic and international actors that see them as useful tools in their various political struggles (Gordon 2020:1).

After the revolution, the far-right strongly opposed themselves to the newly formed government, creating a more vivid and visible movement.

⁴ Political scientists Mikayel Zolyan and Hamazasp Danielyan cited in this chapter both were elected MPs in December 2018.

The post-revolutionary leader Nikol Pashinyan himself is characterized as a center-right politician (Kopalyan 2018). His My Step bloc, however, adopts a “big tent” ideology: rather than having one ideological axis, it unites MPs with left, centrist and right approaches. Nerses Kopalyan noted in an interview to me that My Step covers nearly entire political spectrum, and the only spare niche where one could maintain more or less successful opposition to the ruling bloc is the far-right⁵. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that after the Velvet Revolution, when political leaders were forced to step down by mass protests, mainstream conservative parties started incorporating more and more of far-right standpoints. There appeared rumors about the mainstream conservative parties supporting far-right groups, first of all, Adekvad and Veto. While the character of that support remains outside of the scope of my analysis, I follow the incorporation of far-right rhetoric by the mainstream political parties in chapter 7.

Both before and after the revolution, the far-right in Armenia have been characterized by fixation on the topic of sexuality and queerness. Shirinian writes that Armenian right-wing nationalist see Armenia as part of cultural context of the East and inherently different from the West, whose liberalism “encroaches upon the national sovereignties” (2020:3). Armenian nationalists are “invested in preserving a particularly Armenian nation, they often see Armenian culture as sitting comfortably within a ‘Eurasian’ civilization with which it shares values and dispositions, and is radically different from Western civilization” (ibid.). This discourse borrows significantly from Russian narratives of Eurasianism.

Shirinian describes (2020:5) modern-day Armenian right-wing nationalists as those who imagine Armenia within civilizational boundaries of Eurasia and outside Europe. A lot in their understanding of this imagined geographical and cultural division is borrowed from Russian nationalist philosopher Alexander Dugin. It was through Dugin’s work that the narratives about New World Order penetrated Russian discourse (Yablokov 2020). Dugin was one of the main thinkers promoting Eurasianism and anti-Western conspiracy theories after the collapse of Soviet Union, and he remained close to Kremlin up until the Ukrainian crisis in mid-2010s.

⁵ Kopalyan also noted that given that Armenian society is quite conservative, there can be no sizable far-left political power. The full interview in Armenian: <https://anchor.fm/mediadotam/episodes/ep-ei7ac1/a-a2v6h74>

Shirinian points out that right-wing nationalists see the West as an imperialist power that imposes cultural colonization. They also see the queer and feminist communities as main actors promoting Western imperialistic goals in Armenia: “[...] what was a political-economic concern becomes trapped within discussions of cultural. The targets, thus, become LGBT and feminist activists rather than CEOs of mining companies, shareholders, oligarchs, and other ruling elite” (2020:8-9). This emphasis on culture is also why Russia is not seen by right-wing communities as an alien colonizing power: during the Soviet Union, Armenia along with many other Soviet republics, was incorporated by the state into a mutual cultural belonging space, and this legacy prevents the far-right from seeing Russian influence as an alien one. According to Shirinian, right-wing nationalists “constructed the hypervisibility of the figure of the homosexual” and successfully used it to mobilize support.

These nationalists were drawing on already tense feelings of political, economic and social crises in the nation that they congealed into this figure, making it an appealing avenue through which much of mainstream media can explore these anxieties. As such, many Armenians express these various feelings of crisis – from unemployment and underemployment, election fraud, massive emigration, economic corruption and so on – as forms of moral perversion (*aylandakutyun*) that are felt as national annihilation (Shirinian 2016: xvii).

After the Velvet Revolution, the far-right efforts towards constructing hypervisible “figure of the homosexual” only intensified.

5. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter I will describe the concept of groupuscule in more detail. I will provide overview several concepts that were of key importance for this work. Most of these concepts stem from Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics, and they were relevant for answering both research questions stated in this thesis. The last concept, Rick Iedema's notion of resemiotization, was used to answer the second research question.

5.1. The concept of groupuscule

Griffin defines groupuscules as small political entities “formed to pursue palingenetic (i.e. revolutionary) ideological, organizational or activist ends with an ultimate goal of overcoming the decadence of the existing liberal democratic system” (2003:30). Groupuscules are autonomous organizations but have very few active members and there can be turnover in membership. Leaning towards political extremism, they usually have minimal public visibility or support. However, they have a potential to influence political life through their ability to easily establish connections with other groupuscules which are “sufficiently aligned ideologically and tactically to complement each other's activities in their bid to institute a new type of society” (ibid.). Griffin states that groupuscules reinforce each other and acquire characteristics of rhizome. He borrows Deleuze and Guattari concept for acentered non nonhierarchical. Thus, groupuscular right are characterized by Griffin as non-hierarchical and centerless movements with fluid boundaries which establish networks — whether formal or informal — both on national and international level (Griffin 2000). Rhizomatic structure makes groupuscular right virtually immune to control by democratic institutions (Griffin 2003:46).

Lewis (2018) recorded mutual appearances and joint interviews of English-speaking alt-right YouTubers and performed network analysis of this data; her visualizations allow picturing the structure similar to groupuscular rhizome. However, some nodes on her visualization are bigger than others, which means they have more connections, references and hence more importance in the network. This illustrates the problem with Griffin's model which was pointed out by Madisson and Ventsel (2018) who criticize the model for depicting only the "ideal hypertextual system" where there's no place for the interpreter. They point out that by attributing rhizomatic characteristics to groupuscular network Griffin ends up applying technical features of the Internet on the groupuscular right. But on practice once an interpreter is introduced to this model, the information is "organized by core ideas and values that are dominant on the horizon of interpretation of a particular reader/viewer" (Madisson, Ventsel 2018:8). This means that an ideal rhizomatic structure with no hierarchy is not practically possible: a given interpreter will be more receptive to the type of information either confirming her previous beliefs or coming from an authoritative source. While agreeing that groupuscules have less rigid hierarchies than extreme right parties, Madisson and Ventsel stress that in a system with an interpreter there will appear "meaning-hierarchies" (2018:9). Authors propose Lotman's concept of semiosphere as a more accurate model to explain groupuscular right as a meaning-making system. Distinguishing individual semiotic units and describing interaction of core and the periphery of the system, semiosphere allows the explain complex connectivity of the groupuscular right and the hierarchical relations this system, unlike rhizome, has (2018:11-13). I was able to see this hierarchical structure in Armenian groupuscular right. In fact, my choice of social media profiles to observe for this thesis was dictated by the fact that Narek Malian, Vahagn Chakhalyan, Hayk Ayyvazyan and Arthur Danielyan not only pose themselves as leaders of their respective groupuscules but are also accepted as such by the members. Although there is often no formalized distribution of positions within their organizations, these people are opinion-leaders, their Facebook posts and interviews tend to be widely shared and commented in the groupuscular network. Furthermore, Malian and Danielyan are treated as important figures within the groupuscular right due to their previous closeness to the powerholders and personal connections in mainstream media field: they are seen as activists able to grab the attention of the general public.

It should be noted that groupuscules are not necessarily extreme right but can also be on the left end of political continuum (Bale 2002, Mathyl 2002) and their ideology itself can be less rigid than that of traditional political parties (Coogan 2002:12). Bale notes that formation of groupuscules allows individuals and groups to “maintain internal social solidarity and sustain ideological purity in a hostile social environment” (2002:25).

5.2. Tartu-Moscow school and semiotics of culture

Culture has been defined in multiple different ways across disciplines. The current thesis uses the definitions of culture provided by scholars of Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, specifically Yuri Lotman and his co-author Boris Uspensky. Along with the concept of culture, I use two other key concepts of Yuri Lotman’s scholarship: semiosphere and self-description.

5.2.1. Culture

Since 1960s, Lotman defined culture as “the sum of non-hereditary information” (1967:30) which people collect, store and transmit further. Even items of material culture, such as tools of production, always have two functions. On one hand they serve mostly as practical necessity, especially for contemporaries. On the other hand, they carry in themselves the experience of past labor activities, and therefore serve as means for storing and transmitting information. This second function is especially relevant for descendants: Lotman explains that an archeologist, for example, has little practical need in ancient items of material culture, but can extract valuable information from them.

In 1970s, Lotman, together with Boris Uspensky, developed this idea and defined culture as “non-hereditary memory of the community” (1978:213). More precisely, culture is “a record in the memory of what the community has experienced” (1978:214), therefore it is always connected to past experience and is perceived not at the moment of its creation, but always post factum. This memory operates by as a system of semiotic rules which allows human experience to be transformed into culture and then get stored, redistributed or “forgotten” among the myriads of

texts created by a human collective. Hence, texts from cultural memory can serve as resources for building self-descriptions — and eradicating phenomena not recorded in the memory of the collective. This is how self-models, i.e. meta-level idealized image that a human collective draws of itself, are built.

For any act of communications to happen, individual participants need to be *different*, i.e. possess different information. Lotman states, that if one possessed the totality of all information, communication would be meaningless. Therefore, any system develops towards more complexity and more *uniqueness* of individual participants of communication, which also makes communication more difficult (Lotman 1978:17). Culture exists to overcome this difficulty: it is the meta-level structure, a “supra-individual intellect” which unites different individuals.

For Lotman, these two definitions of culture (as a “supra-individual intellect” and “non-hereditary memory of the community”) are not in contradiction. In fact, they are logical continuation of each other. Upon defining culture as “collective intellect and collective memory” in the short article “Memory in from culturological perspective” (“Память в культурологическом освещении”), Lotman continues specifying that culture is a “supra-individual mechanism for storing and transmitting certain messages (texts) and developing new ones” (1992:200). That is, culture is a meta-level structure where texts can be preserved (memorized) and made irrelevant (forgotten) or relevant (remembered) in different époques.

5.2.2. Culture: self and other

Before the theory of semiosphere appeared in 1980s, Lotman already had a model of cultural space divided into self and other — a much more rigid division in which the self constructs otherness as a space of chaos, the realm of non-culture; if the *self* is organized, the *other* lacks any form of organization (Lotman 1975). To illustrate this idea Lotman brings the example of antiquity which saw barbarians as unorganized, uncivilized other, despite the fact that the label “barbarian” unites a multitude of collectives some of which had way more ancient culture (Lotman 1975:97, 2005:212). Any culture is defined only as an area separated from the non-culture, wherein non-

culture can be manifested in not sharing a certain way of life or behavior (Lotman, Uspensky 1978:211).

Culture is understood only as a section, a closed-off area against the background of nonculture. The nature of this opposition may vary: nonculture may appear as not belonging to a particular religion, not having access to some knowledge, or not sharing in some type of life and behavior (ibid).

In the texts by far-right groups and conservative political parties I observed for this thesis, attribution of individuals to external nonculture is usually done by accusing them of not sharing traditional values. The concept of Armenian traditional values is ill-defined and vague but allows to exclude individuals who deviate from the traditional gender norms, i.e. do not share “some type of life and behavior”.

5.2.3. Semiosphere

The distinction between culture as “internal organization” and other spheres as its “external disorganization” is one of the core dichotomies of Lotmanian scholarship. Is it strongly connected (Salupere 2017:78) to another important dichotomy: the opposition of semiotic and nonsemiotic/extrasemiotic spaces. Semiosphere – a concept proposed by Lotman in analogy with Vernandsky’s biosphere – is *the* semiotic space, i.e. a space where meaning-making is made possible. Outside of semiosphere lies the nonsemiotic/extrasemiotic space, which however should not be understood as a space where there is no semiosis. Lotman specifies: “‘Extracultural’ sphere often appears to be the sphere of others’ culture, and extrasemiotic sphere – the sphere of others’ semiotics” (cited in: Salupere 2017:78).

The space of semiosphere is an abstract one, but it is nevertheless a specific sphere possessing characteristics “assigned to the enclosed space” (Lotman 2005:207). It is characterized by several attributes. First, semiosphere has a boundary which isolates it from external spheres. This boundary is “represented by the sum of bilingual translatable “filters”, passing through which the text is translated into another language (or languages), situated outside the given semiosphere” (Lotman 2005:208-209). Semiosphere cannot contact external texts; for that to happen external texts need to be translated in one of the internal languages of a semiosphere (i.e. semioticized). The

boundary points act as “sensory receptors” which perceive external stimuli and translate them into a language which is perceivable for internal nervous system (ibid). The boundary has a function to separate semiosphere (by marking their borders) and simultaneously to connect them (by performing translation between them).

Second attribute of the semiosphere is irregularity. It is characterized by internal dynamic processes which means that the space of semiosphere is not homogeneous, it has core (often not one but many nucleuses) and periphery. The core hosts dominant semiotic systems. One of many nucleuses may rise to the level of self-description and thus produce meta-language describing the entire semiosphere. In this case a level of ideal unity is build on the real irregular semiotic map (Lotman 2005:213-214). Structures in the core are organized rigidly while periphery is “less organised and more flexible” (2005:214). Peripheral structures which are not described (description is a form of structuring, Lotman 1978:22) or are described with inadequate metalanguage develop more quickly. Over time the core can be pushed to the periphery, and periphery can become the new core.

5.2.4. Self-description

The concept of self-description was borrowed by Juri Lotman from cybernetics where it is understood as a form of self-organization of a system, defining system against the environment and a mechanism for organizing communication (Madisson 2016b:205-206). Lotman viewed self-description as a form of self-organization of a semiotic system. Self-description increases the rigidity of the structure and slows down its development (that is why periphery of semiosphere develops faster than the rigidly organized core). Self-description creates an “idealized self-portrait of a culture”; it’s a process of “secondary structuring” which, by contributing to more standardized and rigid organization, results in elimination of “wrong” texts from the cultural memory and canonization of “correct” text. Thus, a simplified model of historical process is being created and declared as normative (Lotman 1977:142-144). In extreme cases these metasystems may become so rigid that they nearly lose ability to connect to the real semiotics system that they claim to describe. Lotman points out that even in such cases “the authority of 'correctness' and 'real

existence' remains with [them], and the real layers of social semiosis in these conditions are transferred completely into the realm of 'wrong' and 'non-existent'" (1978:22). These can include not only individual texts, but "whole layers of cultural phenomena" (Madisson 2016b:207). Self-description can create a self-model or self-modelling texts of the culture which help to "identify certain dominants in it, on the basis of which a unified system is built, which should serve as a code for self-knowledge [самопознания] and self-decoding of the texts of the given culture" (Lotman 1971:170).

The aforementioned concepts borrowed from Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics (culture/cultural memory, self and other, self-description, semiosphere) are closely connected to each other. In this thesis they are used to analyze how the queer community is denied belonging to the nation; they are depicted as not corresponding to correct self-description. Queerness is at the periphery, at bilingual/polylingual border of the semiosphere thus carrying the mixture of inner culture and outer sphere on disorder and chaos.

5.3. Resemiotization

Rick Iedema proposed the concept of resemitotization to describe how meaning is changed in different contexts. Resemiotization is a process, a "stream of events/flow of object" that moves from temporal kinds of meaning-making, such as talk or gesture, to more durable kinds, such as printed reports, material objects etc. (Iedema 2001:23-24). As this process unfolds, certain metamorphosis take place: meanings get into more specialized discourses and obtain more resistant materiality. This is an intersemiotic process, and Iedema's writing stems from Jakobson's research on intersemioticity (see, for example, Jakobson 1966).

Iedema brings several examples of resemitotization (2001, 2003). One example is a series of events – from a meeting between a client and architect to creation of a plan and construction process – that happen for a building to be built. The first meeting is resemitotized into meeting minutes, then into printed reports, then into a plan and a model, and eventually, into a material object of a building. That is, a temporal kind of meaning-making, a talk, is eventually resemitotized into a more resistant materiality, a building. Another example is recontextualization

of a teachers first interaction with a child, then acquisition of a test result, and, finally, creation of a written report. Each step in this sequence of events serves as a basis of interaction at the next step being also “institutionally isolated from the interaction practices that generated them in the preceding events” (Mehan 1993, cited in Iedema 2001:25). The recontextualization of, for example, a talk into a more durable mode also makes the meaning in the next step less negotiable (ibid.). The process moves “towards increasingly durable semiotic manifestations, while at the same time increasingly distancing itself from ‘the social interaction that created it’”. It is important to note that transition to each next step in in this process also creates discrepancies, and resemiotization never produces exact likeness (Iedema 2001:32-33).

As I already mentioned, Rheindorf and Wodak used the concept of resemiotization to analyze the travelling of far-right discourses into the mainstream, thus resulting in normalization of the far-right discourse (2019). Similarly, in this thesis the notion of resemiotization is used to follow the process of transformation of the far-right ‘talk’ into a less negotiable, more ‘durable’ mode of legal document created by mainstream conservative politicians.

6. CONSTRUCTION OF OTHERNESS IN THE GROUPUSCULAR RIGHT DISCOURSE

In this section I discuss the ideological stances of the far-right in post-revolutionary Armenia and discuss their structural organization and activities using the concept of groupuscule. I will provide an overview of main activities of the groupuscular right as those are manifested in Armenian context. Then, I will analyze how the groupuscular right construct *otherness* using hostile claims against queer community and portray the post-revolutionary political elites as part and parcel of the alien *other*.

6.1. Groupuscular right in post-revolutionary Armenia

As already mentioned, groupuscules are far-right, neo-fascist formations (never well-established political parties). These are formations comprise a network-like structure with a small, often inconsistent membership. All these features are present in the far-right communities I observed.

Among the groupuscular right as a network of small political formations where fascism survived in the post-war period, overt support for the Nazi regime or declarations of sympathy towards führer are generally avoided (although I have seen occasional memes sympathizing Hitler shared by Adekvad members). However, one could still recognize in these communities the characteristic ideas of fascism (although in various degrees of intensity): the nostalgia for idealized past, complaints about the decadence of the nation, calls for revolution to overcome that decadence and rejection of egalitarianism and democratic order per se. One of the four political formations I discuss in this thesis, Adekvad, is a vivid example of neo-fascist ideology. In September 2019, Adekvad formally registered as a party. In his speech on that occasion Adekvad's leader Artur

Danielyan stated that they are just another fake, decorative party, because the entire political system of Armenia has been just a theater⁶.

“I am convinced that the new world revolution is inevitable, it will happen regardless of anything, both in China, where the theater is minimized, and in America, where there is an overdose of theater. It is our desire that the revolution begins in Armenia, and there are preconditions for that. I repeat: revolution will happen”⁷.

The Velvet Revolution which happened in Armenia in 2018 Danielyan saw as fake and orchestrated “revolt of the idiots”. Praising the authoritarian regimes of China and Iran, he predicted the creation of meritocracies which will come to replace democracies and that the victorious march against political theater of democracy will start in Armenia (from the same speech):

No matter how much external forces label us and divide us [...] we are homogeneous, much more homogeneous than any European country. I would even argue that we are one of the most homogeneous countries in the world. And therefore, we have the capacity to lead the [world] revolution ideologically. [...] Humanity, the human soul will be saved as a result of a process which will start in Armenia.

Adekvad is the only groupuscule that registered itself as a political party. However, at the very registration event and ever since that, the members call themselves not a “party” but a “congregation”. The manifesto published on their website draws an idealized picture of early years of independent Armenia when there was a chance, albeit lost, to establish its domination in the region; the text calls for embracing the need to “accept the battle” and fight for that domination. Aside from revolutionary sentiment, Adekvad also sees equality as a possible option among animals, but in human society, where there is culture, equality is not possible. As we can see, *ideologically* Adekvad is an extreme right organization with quite clearly visible fascist worldview. But in terms of *political style* (Kopeček 2007:286) it resembles another kind of post-war rightism, namely, the populist radical right.

Populist radical right are not, strictly speaking, fascist because they do not strive to overthrow democratic order and do not explicitly call for revolution and rebirth. As mentioned above, the radical right embraces democracy but considers only one group of people full members

⁶ The creation of Adekvad party, Danielyan explained, was needed as a political instrument to cooperate with international partners.

⁷ <https://youtu.be/XIJ7SiWZZ48?t=1178>

of society. However, Griffin notes that “axiomatic denial of the universality of human rights predisposes it to behave against ethnic outgroups as violently as a fascist regime” (Griffin 2000:173). Being a “hybrid of ideological extremism and democratic constitutionalism” (ibid.), populist radical right is well adapted to the post-war world hostile to fascism. They fear first of all globalization as a process able to destroy identities and tradition, and the “purity of race” in the radical right discourse becomes the “purity of culture”. Thus the radical right present “reformist version of the same basic [fascist] myth” (Griffin 2000:174).

Kamq, Liberation Movement and Veto are all examples of populist radical right. On its website Kamq, fully titled as Kamq Social Initiative for Protection of Armenian Values, states: “For their personal and clan interests elites in Armenia have sacrificed the country’s economy to the aims of globalist capital”⁸. Then, Veto describes itself as a social-political movement created to fight the “Soros agent network” which finances anti-national and anti-statehood activities in order to “ruin foundations of our statehood, to destroy the anchors of value system.”⁹ Finally, Liberation Movement has not issued any form of a self-descriptive statement, its Facebook page simply states “Protect Nation, Faith, Fatherland and Family”¹⁰, and its activities are mainly concentrated on fighting the queer community as a deviant force undermining the national and religious homogeneity, and thus, strength. All three of these organizations gather for protests and actions and use the rhetoric of rights and freedom of speech (see more on far-right adopting multiculturalist discourse in Madisson, Ventsel 2016b). And all of them (including Adekvad) target queer community: in the narratives deployed by the far-right in Armenia the queer community plays a central role of the antagonist. And I will show further on in this chapter that this became one of the main mechanisms for combating the new government which is perceived as liberal and accused of supporting the queers.

There is no reliable data available about the memberships of these organizations. However, my observation of activity at their social media pages and during their protests shows that they have limited number of members. When talking about groupuscular right I use the words

⁸ <https://bit.ly/2QRu14X>

⁹ <https://veto.am/en/about>

¹⁰ https://www.facebook.com/pg/armenialiberation/about/?ref=page_internal

“member” and “ally” interchangeably as groupuscules do not have any formal membership or, at least, do not publish any such data. Instead, supporters’ base actively changes in almost all groupuscules, and the groupuscular right remain constantly mutating (Griffin 2003:44). So, while several key figures remain the same in the groupuscules, the larger network of supporters reveals active flow of people: “lone wolf” activists come and go, members change groups, and some people are active in several groups simultaneously. Some groupuscules, like Liberation Movement, do not organize protests alone, but some activist from this organization frequently join protests organized by others. Kamq also couples with other groupuscules and activists. Veto and Adekvad have more supporters which is partially explained by their alleged or known connections among former political elites. Despite the small size and amorphousness of the structure groupuscular protests or other activities (such as social media posts and campaigns) do not remain unnoticed, on the contrary, they receive disproportionately big coverage in the press. However, one should be skeptical about the presence of far-right activists in the press: while Armenia made significant progress in the World Press Freedom Index¹¹, the media outlets remain in severe dependence from owners most of whom are not business personas but politicians and political parties. The access the groupuscular right receive to the top media channels in the country is not conditioned by their size or relevance for the public interest but by the corporate interests of the media organizations, as well as the scandalous nature of their claims. Thus the frequent high visibility of far-right activists in the press is largely amplified, and it is not clear if this visibility transforms into support for their ideas among the general public.

Furthermore, the Internet allows not only creation of websites and social media pages by groupuscules, but also, due to affordability, creation and maintenance of small, partisan platforms positioning themselves as news outlets. Thus, during my observation I encountered two Russian websites promoting radical right content and frequently interviewing activists from the groupuscules I observed, namely, Adekvad, Veto, Liberation Movement and Kamq¹². Furthermore, Livenews.am website, which was founded by Garnik Isagulyan, former security

¹¹ <https://rsf.org/en/armenia>

¹² The websites are: News-front.info, which broadcast from Crimea and praises Russian annexation of the peninsula, and Rossaprimavera.ru, founded by Russian nationalist Sergey Kurginyan (of Armenian descent).

advisor to second President of Armenia Robert Kocharyan, became the main host of various radical right activists; journalists of Livenews.am attend the protests organized by the groupuscules not only as journalists, but also as participants.

I should note that relations of media outlets and far-right groups are not addressed in this thesis as it is a multi-layer problem which deserves separate consideration in further research.

6.2. The main activities of the groupuscular right

Groupuscules unite in them three types of activities: ideological, coordinational and protesting (Griffin 2003:42). Individual groupuscules may be concentrated on some types of these activities more than on others, but usually blend all three. I will elaborate each of these activities in a bit more detail as they are manifested in Armenian groupuscular right.

Ideological activities concern reaching out to the public by spreading ideological information. Adekvad is more concentrated on elaborating and disseminating ideology than other groupuscules. Its leader, Arthur Danielyan, writes in length to explain his view on history, philosophy and politics, as well as discusses conditions for building a great statehood. Adekvad's online series called *Killing Poghos* featured member Konstantin Ter-Nakalyan, head of a large online news aggregator Blognews.am, giving a speech to a younger member of the group about Christianity being the key to the past greatness of Armenia: "Our national rebirth is impossible without going back to our religious cultural roots and putting those on modern engine"¹³. Such speeches by members are not rare, and they are typical for the extreme right ideology (Griffin 1999:39). During the period of my observation, some Adekvad members, including Danielyan, were not in Yerevan: they had acquired a village house in Artsakh, a territory of dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and were renovating the house and planning the reopening of a collective farm which existed here in Soviet times. The members were praising the village life and discussing the rebuilding of past prosperity and greatness both through economic means (by reopening of the collective farm) and by ideological means (rebuilding the abandoned church and uniting with the

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/adekvadism/videos/2291920604431929/>

local high-ranked priests to bring the statehood and religion back together). Despite the “congregation” favors ideological elaboration over other forms of activities, it still engages in real-life protests and is tied by various connections to other groupuscules.

Coordination and linkage with other far-right formations is a necessary characteristic of the groupuscular network. As mentioned before, these ties may be of various character: membership, joint protests and campaigns, joint interviews and guest appearances in each others’ videos, etc. Groupuscules with less resources to produce video content and who are covered less frequently by major news organizations (Kamq, Liberation Movement) often share content from groupuscules whose leaders have the means and access to newsrooms (Adekvad, Veto). An example of mutual appearance is November 1st protest against Istanbul Convention where Veto and Liberation Movement representatives gave speeches, and the campaign #sutnikol (#lyingNikol, reference to PM Nikol Pashinyan) which Liberation Movement, Veto and Adekvad members all joined to via either Facebook profile picture frames or participation in real-live act of protest. One should also mention adoption of narratives and frameworks proposed by other groupuscules. So, Istanbul Convention, which is the central topic of Kamq activities, was first criticized by Hayk Ayvazyan from Liberation Movement. All groupuscules I observed adopted the same claims about the “real” aims of the document, and members of all groupuscules used Facebook frames “No to Istanbul” and “No to Istanbul Convention ratification”. Furthermore, Kamq concentrated nearly all its activities around fighting the Istanbul Convention.

Protesting. Griffin distinguishes groupuscular right extra-parliamentary social movements from regular grassroots activism, such as the civil rights movement (Griffin 2003:32-33). This distinction is also made by other researchers (Madisson, Ventsel 2018:13). During the time of my observation the groupuscular right engaged in different acts of protests ranging from peaceful demonstrations and petition signing to physical attacks. During protests it is also easy to observe the myriad of links connecting the groupuscular right. For example, in November all of the groupuscules I observed joined the protests against reforms in university curriculum organized by mainstream party ARF and appeared in a number of other protests together. Another example is Kamq and Liberation Movement allies together attacking and disturbing a modern dance performance on November 2 on the grounds of the event being “satanist” and the performers

“perverting” their homeland. On the next day, Kamq performed frankincense burning ritual and prayer at the place of the dance. Veto, in its turn, declared the dance performance an event funded by Soros and organized a mocking political performance at the same place on November 6. Every protest organized by groupuscules was widely covered in the media. In fact, protest served primarily for catching media attention and amplifying importance of the event as groupuscules are usually unable to gather big crowds. Many online and TV news outlets covered live these protests no matter how small the number of participants was; no fact-checking was provided for the claims made during the protests. It’s worth mentioning another specificity of Armenian media field which helps groupuscules get coverage. Due to the revolution itself, and many other mass movements before it, a strong tradition of street protest broadcasting was established in the media, although unlike online media, the TV channels, previously censored by the regime, adopted the practice only recently.

In summary, all groupuscules I observed are connected to each other through various linkages and engage in ideological dissemination and acts of protests. And although some groupuscules engage more in some activities than another, they usually present a blend of all three types of activities.

In the online environment, the affordances of hypermedia are used in full by the groupuscular right (Madisson, Ventsel 2018:7): the communication is complex and multimodal; two of four groupuscules produce their own video content. The groups I observed focus on homophobic claims, ideas of religious and cultural purism, ethno-religious nationalism. They are in strong opposition to the government (Liberation Movement existed before the revolution and was critical of the government at the time, other groupuscules were formed as opposition to the new government) and advocate rebirth of once powerful Armenian nation and state, however it is not specified which historical period they refer to: the strength from the past remains mythical. It is common to use the language of war, be it emotionally charged chants (“Good morning, dear Armenians, our triumphal march continues, join us!”¹⁴) or terminological, formal language (“The processes organized against Armenia are value-aggression and intervention. This is a war and our

¹⁴ This is the post Kamq leader Vahagn Chakhalyan made every morning in November.

response will be adequate.”¹⁵). Activists claim that Armenian nation is at war, and they are the fighters who are going to make sacrifices, but because their fight is for good, they are inevitably going to win. The characteristics of the enemy in that war may differ in different groupuscules, but it is usually some powerful evil force from culturally alien and decadent West.

The communication of the extreme and radical right (especially members of Kamq, Veto and Adekvad) was also marked by skillful usage of visual symbols. Fashioned after American alt-right, Adekvad, Veto and Kamq are branded thoroughly: they have logos, branded clothing, accessories, stickers, cups and other matter, and their leaders maintain respective styles. Veto’s Narek Malian often poses with cigars in the manner of American white supremacist Richard Spencer. Cigars are just one symbol the group uses to build the image of masculinity — something they believe to be in sharp contrast with their usual target — the queer community. Other such symbols are borrowed from biker subculture: for example, Veto joined #սոս_տղեր (#Be_man), a social media campaign and motorcycle rally organized in protest to Istanbul Convention ratification together with another groupuscule, Dark Ravens.

6.3. Conspiracy theories as mechanism of far-right meaning making

Armenian culture leans towards mythological thinking. For a long period of time the intellectual and political elites have cultivated symbols and narratives about thousands-years-old culture, one of the “cradles of civilization”. This eventually led to valuing of the mythological rather than chronological age: while Yerevan is proud of the ruins of fortress from VII century BC, almost all 19th-century and part of Soviet-era architecture has been demolished (either deliberately, or due to corruption and poor regulations) and replaced by chaotic urban development. Authoritarian regime of the RPA promoted “highly mythologized schemes of history” and was “accompanied by an ossifying of the mechanism of the collective memory and by an increasing tendency to contract [the volume of collective memory]” (Lotman, Uspensky 1978:217).

¹⁵ Citation from a speech by Liberation Movement member Hayk Ayvazyan <https://www.facebook.com/hayk.ayvazyan77/videos/2388733561236858/>

In the context of far-right discourse this general inclination towards mythological thinking manifested itself in widespread conspirological narratives. Conspiracy theory is a narrative constructed with the help of a code text (Madisson 2014; Madisson, Ventsel 2018:14-15). Code-text is a concept proposed by Lotman as an “intermediate link between language and text” characteristic for cultures with mythological orientation (Lotman 1988:35). Code-text is a text, “syntactically constructed whole” rather than a set of rules for constructing a text (ibid.). It may have no real-world textual manifestation and exist only unconsciously in storyteller’s mind “organizing his memory and suggesting to him the limits of possible variations of a text” (ibid.). Madisson and Ventsel explain: “code-text is an invariant system of relations which originate from the collective memory of a particular community and the main role of code-text is to put particular pieces of information into habitual templates of meaning” (2018:15). Code-text helps to organize the flow of information into the ready-made interpretational framework, i.e. connects various, often unrelated pieces of information into a conspiracy theory. In what follows I discuss two most popular conspiracy theories among the groupuscular right in Armenia, namely, those about George Soros and Istanbul Convention.

6.3.1. George Soros: enemy of the nation

Even though significant changes in political and social life brought by Velvet Revolution were a response to popular demand, they also created an atmosphere of uncertainty about the future. Lotman pointed out that “in various historical situations, the psychosis of mass fear gives rise to the recognizable pattern of ‘the mythology of danger.’ There arises the notion of some tightly knit, secret group, plotting against society” (Lotman 1991:792). Lotman discussed here the aftermath of periods of rapid technological progress, but one can apply this to any instant big change, such as revolution. In post-revolutionary Armenia conspiracy theories about how the new government really came to power, hidden forces supporting it and dangers the new elites bring with them became part of the radical right discourse. These narratives are highly “visible” in media sphere, in part due to the fact that numerous media outlets are owned by representatives of former governments and their associates. Veto led by PR specialist Narek Malian is one of the most vivid examples. It is concentrated on fighting the liberal billionaire George Soros and his “agents

network” in Armenia. Soros is depicted as a powerful foreign force with secret evil intentions, and *Veto* declared its mission to reveal those intentions and fight the powerful villain. Soros’s activities in Armenia are managed by the local branch of Open Society Foundations (OSF), part of a large network the billionaire has established all over the world. *Veto* spreads the conspiracy theory about Soros both online through social media and news outlets and offline through protests and political actions. They use the conspiracy theory to, on one hand, connect events and people to malicious conspirers, and, on the other hand, provide strategic framing (Zald 1996:262) for social and political changes happening in the country.

It should be noted that the conspiracy theory about Soros was not generated as a folk narrative but was specifically developed by campaign advisors of Victor Orban for 2014 Hungarian parliamentary election¹⁶. Interestingly, one could see in the theory itself how the existence of a known and named enemy puts it accurately in the frames of Schmittian definition of the political (Schmitt 2007). This conspiracy theory was created as a political tool and is used as such. Governments in Hungary, Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan all used it to construct an enemy; all three countries banned Soros-funded Open Society Foundations after a large-scale media campaign against it. In Armenia the governments for many years were eager to use the money provided by OSF and did not disturb their work. It is Malian, the “number one political advisor in the country¹⁷” as he presents himself, who is most consistent in his usage of the conspiracy theory. He and his organization adapt to Armenian realia the original narrative about a powerful American billionaire using his wealth and influence to destroy the local culture and statehood. Malian and his organization use this narrative to combat the new political elites. *Veto* website describes the organization’s aim as “fighting against Soros agent network operating in the state”.

Soros’ agent network, in the face of “Open Society Foundations”, has recruited and funded people with antinational and anti-state mentality; thus, forming a foreign agent network. This syndicate has spared no money and efforts to make heroes out of murderers and felons, to disgrace state pillars consistently: legal and educational systems, armed forces, the army included, the Armenian Apostolic Church. The aim is to ruin foundations of our statehood, to destroy the anchors of value system¹⁸.

¹⁶ See BuzzFeed investigation on the topic: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/hnsgrassegger/george-soros-conspiracy-finkelstein-birnbaum-orban-netanyahu>

¹⁷ Malian uses the Russian term *polittekhnolog* (политтехнолог) which refers to a range of occupations from campaign manager to PR specialist.

¹⁸ <https://veto.am/en/about>

Madisson and Ventsel discuss the two ways in which the enemy is communicated in conspiracy theories: enemy as non-own or anti-own (Madisson 2014: 282-284, Madisson, Ventsel 2020). Madisson derives her classification from cultural semiotics metalanguage. Non-own enemy comes from the chaotic, non-structured outer sphere of the culture which, according to Lotman, every culture constructs for itself (Lotman, Uspensky 1978, Lotman 1975). The anti-own enemy comes from the negative structure within a positive, right culture. Anti-own enemy is perceived as a highly organized network with significant power. Usually, non-own and anti-own types of enemies coexist in conspiracy theories (Madisson 2014:286).

Veto constructs a narrative where George Soros and his “agents” are the antagonists who combine characteristics of both types of enemies. On the one hand, Soros himself is a foreigner, he comes from outside, from the culture which is portrayed as a culture of perversion where unnatural practices destroyed traditional rules and norms (I will discuss in further pages the mechanism used to communicate this chaos of outer culture). Despite Soros being a concrete person, little is said about him or his work. His image is vague and unspecific, he is presented as almighty evil but concrete motivations behind his actions remain unclarified. The message remains that a powerful Western billionaire wants to destroy Armenian culture.

On the other hand, however, Soros is presented as the head of “agent network [that has] recruited and funded people with antinational and anti-state mentality”. This network is composed of people from within the culture, they are the negative structure, the anti-culture. Veto refers to them as “bastards of Soros” and calls so not only the employees of OSF, but also those who have received funding from OSF or just civil society and human rights defenders. These people are presented as malicious forces secretly weakening the state and culture from inside; they are called “betrayers” who sold themselves and adopted foreign values. An announcement on Veto website promises that “Veto will stick the label of a traitor on all those agents’ foreheads.¹⁹”

It is common for conspiracy theorists to use logic of signification characteristic for scientific discourse (Madisson 2014:292). That is, they try to present evidence to support their

¹⁹ <https://veto.am/en/page/soros-office-armenia>

claims and use generalisations. Furthermore, far-right often self-describe as citizen journalists (Madisson, Ventsel 2018:13) Similarly, I observed that Veto frequently uses the style of journalistic investigations: they present evidence in forms of photos, screenshots, documents, as well as claim they reveal hidden and publicly relevant information. For example, when it was announced that first crematoriums might be opened in Armenia soon, Narek Malian published a post on Facebook claiming that “the artificial agenda on crematoriums is a process fully directed by Soros’ office, which began years ago²⁰”. As proof he presented the fact that in 2013 OSF funded then university professor and now parliamentarian Hovhannes Hovhannisyan’s research on crematoriums. Malian’s text used an official language: “I hereby inform that there is a fierce fight against national traditions and the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church through this kind of campaigns sponsored by Soros’ office”. Along with his verbal message, Malian provided screenshots from the Hovhannisyan’s paper.

The practice of using screenshots from OSF website (OSF provides open access to information about the grants of the organization) as proof of ties of different actors with OSF is a popular practice among Armenian far-right activists. Although those screenshots do not really support the claims made by conspiracy theory proponents, because references in conspiracy theories are necessarily vague (Madisson 2014: 294-296), they have the potential of creating an image of factuality and credibility. This potential is derived from screenshot being an indexical sign which, like photographs, is bound to reality by the physical act of its creation (Pierce 1985:11). Malian’s Facebook post about crematoriums got republished in full and without fact checking by 13 news outlets, including the most visited news website in the country, News.am (which has been accused of hiding the real owner, allegedly a top official in the former government).

In general, Madisson distinguishes two types of signification logic in conspiracy theories: mythological and descriptive. Mythological signification allows to transform the current events so that certain symbols from cultural memory can be recognized in them. For example, Malian declared on two occasions Veto’s fight against Soros as “the new Vardananq”, referring to the 5th-century heroic battle against Persia where Armenians fought bravely despite significantly smaller

²⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/narek.malyan/posts/3031616620199882>

army. Descriptive logic of significations in conspiracy theories present the conspirators as an extremely organized group with complex structure able to penetrate all aspects and institutions of a given society. This allows creating the feeling of danger (Lotman 1991:792) and drawing a picture of a binary world divided into friends and enemies, where everything is connected to everything else (Madisson 2014:290). Thus, all the scandals that happened in November 2019 were tied by Malian and other Veto members to the Soros' agents network. They protested the Istanbul Convention and reforms in university curriculum, criticized the movie about a transgender athlete and huZANQ uZANG modern dance performance with one and the same message: it was Soros' fund that was the real organizer of all this events, and the motivation for that was to destroy the statehood and social order.

One of the dancers in huZANQ uZANG performance was Yerevan Council of Elders (municipal parliament) member; her photo from the performance was shared three times on Malian's Facebook page, in two cases followed by sexual insults. Malian often uses vulgar style and the tone of ridicule as part of sensationalist language (see other examples of vulgar style in right-wing populist discourse in Ylä-Anttila, Bauvois, Pyrhönen 2019). Participation of the Council of Elders member served as one more confirmation of Veto claims that Soros' agents network has penetrated into the structures of the post-revolutionary government — a claim Veto frequently makes. Madisson points out that such claims are typical for conspiracy theories with anti-own type of antagonist (2014:284) and they lead to picturing the structures of one's own culture as weak and imperfect. Malian calls Armenian statehood attacked by Soros “our poor and weak statehood.”²¹ Vagueness of references and multiple contradictions are present in conspiracy theory about Soros. However, pointing out to those contradictions is not a cure-all pill because the narrative of the theory despite internal inconsistencies is kept together by its code-text (Madisson 2014: 292-294).

However, Veto's usage of this conspiracy theory essentially as a political PR campaign leads to certain specific characteristics. Thus, in that same announcement, Malian talks about the weakness of statehood but inevitability of his victory over the rich and powerful Soros. He presents

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/narek.malyan/posts/3020578034637074>

Soros and his network as greatly powerful but when talking about them often uses mockery and cynical humor. Malian does not try to gather devoted like-minded theorists who believe they discovered the malicious plan but struggles to acquire legitimacy from the public, appeals to his authority as former employee of police and current friend of powerful politicians. Moreover, in one interview when asked about it he did not exclude possibility of political career in the future²². These contradictions as well as a number of objective factors such as widespread usage of troll armies to create an impression of support in social media, makes it difficult (at least at this stage) to analyze interpretations and reaction on Veto's strategic framework.

6.3.2. Istanbul Convention: destroying the nationhood

On November 1, 2020 leader of Liberation Movement Hayk Ayvazyan and the leader of Veto Narek Malian were protesting together in front of Council of Europe office in Yerevan. The cause of the protest was the arrival of Council of Europe members for a meeting with Armenian officials regarding the ratification of “Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence”, most commonly known as Istanbul Convention. Malian announced that “the convention is being propagated mainly by beneficiaries of infamous Soros office, so-called ‘Soros bastards’²³”. Ayvazyan announced the ratification will result in teaching homosexuality as a norm in schools²⁴. The fight against this convention was initiated by Ayvazyan: he was one of the firsts in Armenia to speak about the conspiracy theory which effectively disrupted the ratification of the convention in a number of European countries. The narrative about the convention was woven by European right-wing activists and used as a political tool by governments and mainstream parties (Vassileva 2018). It was argued that the convention is created to destroy traditional families, introduce the concept of “third gender” to the legal system and legalize same-sex marriage. Ayvazyan and other right-wing activists adopted these claims and declared the convention a weapon of the European Union in the cultural war against Armenia. The very name of the convention, referring to the historical enemy of Armenia, was seen as a sign of

²² <https://youtu.be/26PvYota9Fk>

²³ <https://www.facebook.com/VETOArmenia/posts/2429348597333232>

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQ-rEJGiTuk&feature=youtu.be>

evil nature of this document. Despite the protest (not widespread) from right-wing activists, the government signed the convention in January 2018, months before the revolution. However, after the revolution, when convention was to be ratified, it turned into a matter of criticism of the new government: more democratic, liberal force was seen by the far-right as more Western, hence, more likely to support the “EU-imposed” cultural norms. Opposition parties, including the previous government which signed the convention, quickly joined the wave of criticism, but the leading role in dissemination was still played by the far-right, more precisely, by Kamq. Kamq engages actively in acts of protests and organizes petition signing against the convention. For nearly 8 months Kamq collects signatures from citizens in front of the Parliament buildings as well as travels around the country for that purpose. Members from all groupuscules I observed put their signatures; several right-wing parliamentarians from Prosperous Armenia and the ruling My Step bloc also joined the petition.

Armenia is the third worst country for queer people to live in according to ILGA-Europe LGBTI rights index²⁵. Extreme homophobia, hate speech such as death calls (specifically calls to “burn gays”) are widely common. Expressing homophobia is not a marginal claim to make, quite on the contrary. Mudde pointed out (although in relation to political parties) that populist radical right offers a simplified and radicalized version of the views shared by the majority of population (2011:10). This is especially true in the case of Armenia where nationalism and conservatism governed the mainstream discourse of the country for many years. Therefore, there often was a great deal of overlap between mainstream political and extreme groupuscular discourse. That is why radical right often claim ownership over self-descriptive model of culture: the discourse of traditional values and narratives within it are presented not only as the natural way of things, but also as the essence of Armenian culture, something with which “Armeniannes” can be defined with. Being the axis of conservative discourse, “traditional values” is a vague, ill-defined concept: it is usually associated with patriarchal way of life, patriarchal norms of “proper” family and household and strictly defined gender roles. In 2017, when Armenia was adopting domestic violence law drafted together with civil society representatives, Ayvazyan and his allies protested the law accusing it in destruction of family values. Months of criticism and effective exploitation

²⁵ <https://rainbow-europe.org/#8620/0/0>

of popular traditionalist sentiments in social media helped to gain support of parliamentarians. Eventually, the law was edited into the law for “restoration of peace in family²⁶” (as I write this text, the same process happens in Russia where the draft law was edited to restore the piece in family after the protests from radical right). The original draft of the domestic violence law was aimed at producing change and it faced serious resistance initiated but not confined to extreme and radical right groupuscules. The far-right succeeded in ensuring popular support and eventually pushed the government towards reshaping the law into repetition of cultural dominants without any real intent or mechanism to initiate change (I am not implying that radical right were the only reason for ruling party’s decision, but they were the key factor). Istanbul Convention faced even stronger backlash from the groupuscules I observed. Picked up by mainstream media and opposition politicians (some of whom advocated for it before the revolution), the topic became a nationwide debate. Parliament eventually postponed ratification hearings.

During my observation period Hayk Ayvazyan posted a series of collages depicting ministers, MPs, pro-government journalists whose photos were montaged with images of drag queens and gay couples. The title of the collages stated: “THEY are for Istanbul Convention” (Fig. 1). Ayvazyan consistently tried to connect the topics of Istanbul Convention and queer rights with the post-revolutionary government. On November 13, he shared information about alleged LGBT conference that took place days before that post: “According to our preliminary data, one of the organizers was RA [Republic of Armenia] parliamentarian hayrapetyan mkhitar”²⁷.

That is, in the far-right discourse the post-revolutionary government is linked by various means to queerness. This is done within the narratives of two most



Figure 1. An example from a series of collages shared by Liberation Movement

²⁶ <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docID=118672>

²⁷ Spelling is translated in accordance to the original; Ayvazyan and others often write names of their opponents with lowercase letters. <https://www.facebook.com/hayk.ayvazyan77/posts/2352457494864465>

popular conspiracy theories: about George Soros and Istanbul Convention. Meanwhile, queerness is a key component in construction of the other. Let me discuss now the mechanisms of communicating the otherness in far-right discourse.

6.4. Constructing the chaotic other: non-heterosexuals are denied belonging to nation

I will turn now to the mechanism used by the groupuscules to communicate the chaos of outer culture. The central place in it is held by the queer community. The queer people have always been marginalized and discriminated against in modern-days Republic of Armenia — from the very time of gaining independence in 1991. While in the 1990s the queer community was almost completely silent in the public discourse, the situation started changing as more people from the new generation of Armenians were gradually changing their attitude. But the process of rising visibility of the queer community came at a cost: regular hateful speech, outbreaks of violence and harassment, as well as general strong opposition of the mainstream culture to the queer minority. Furthermore, after the Velvet Revolution of 2018, the queer issues became one of the hottest debates in the country. Both right-wing activists and political parties have been accused of manipulating this topic for the benefit of their political agenda via means provided by the post-revolution chaotic media field. So, they repeatedly blamed the new government in promoting homosexuality solely on the ground of representing more democratic political agenda. This is overt manipulation, however, a closer look to these texts reveals deep cultural roots of such anti-gay rhetoric.

Belonging to a community, in this case, a nation presented as an ethnic unity, is not granted only on the basis of biological heredity or legal dedication: “Belonging cannot be reduced to formal citizenship or linguistic or racial affinity but involves an affective dimension which has to do both with self-identification and others’ recognition” (Persson 2015:259). Persson described the dominant anti-gay narrative constructed in the Russian media where queer minority is not granted acceptance: it is described as a) endangering the nation’s demographic growth; b) being a small but powerful and hostile element; c) being a symptom of decadent modernity of the West to which Russia is opposed as an alternative “special path” (“особый путь”).

Much from this narrative has been adopted by the Armenian radical right community (which generally sympathizes Russia). The word “pervert” common in Russian context (Persson 2015:263) is now widely used among the right-wing communities to refer to non-heterosexuals. The word itself is aimed at provoking disgust and directly signifies lack of morality thus putting the queer community out of the scope of moral responsibility of the speakers. Hayk Ayvazyan from Liberation Movement explained the meaning of the word:

Gender” describes the social sex, in contrast to man and woman — the biological sex. Social sex is what a person feels, what they are being taught to [feel]. When the social sex does not coincide with biological sex, then the human nature is being perverted, and such a person is called a “pervert” (homosexuals, transvestites, etc.)²⁸

Non-heterosexuals are pictured as alien and incomprehensible phenomena. Ayvazyan often shares photos of drag queens in expressive costumes — something that deviates from what the usual, acceptable image of how a person should dress in binary gender system. Another example is the huZANQ uZANG modern dance performance. While its authors stated the performance was a staging of classical works of Armenian poetry — names everyone knows from school — the actual performance was not similar to the representation of that classical poetry that people are used to see: it was a modern adaptation with unusual dance moves, unusual costumes. In short, it was all but the familiar classics. One parliamentarian even described the performance as “roars” of the beasts²⁹. Ayvazyan posted a video about the dance montaged with a drag queen show in the best traditions of the *épater la bourgeoisie*. The bizarre “differentness” of the queer community is enhanced by the fact that in Armenia, as in many other countries (Persson 2015:271), queer people hide their sexuality and are not thus visible for their families or friends. Therefore, media representation becomes the only way an average Armenian could encounter non-heterosexuality. I should add that adequate discussion around queerness is not held on television and the majority of mainstream news outlets, which is why the representation offered by the radical right (which

²⁸ <http://armsovereignty.com/archives/1935>

²⁹ Similar description appeared in the radical right discourse and in the mainstream media after the notorious attack in Shurnukh village, the first big scandal around queer community after the revolution. Then, the group of people who visited the village were beaten by the mob, and later described by local authority as having “voices like that of wolves or beasts” and disturbing calm life of people. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cm9x8y6cEJ4> .

Shirinian terms “hypervisible figure of the homosexual”, see section 4.3) dominates the media. Alternative representations offered by the queer activists do not have high public visibility.

On one hand, the queer community is bound with culture by birth. Thus, queer people are expected to be carriers of what is often called “Armenian genes”. This phrase, popular in conservative discourse and mocked by young liberals, is used to describe the cultural memory; the very same phenomena which Lotman and Uspensky, followed by Aleida and Jan Assman, famously characterized as “nonhereditary” (Lotman, Uspensky 1978: 213). However, queer community often deviates from the Armenianness (as it is seen in the self-description of the culture) and is represented by the far-right as culturally other. Being defined as *memory*, culture thus is understood by Lotman and Uspensky as oriented towards the past and not geared to knowledge about the future. “Consequently, at the moment of its appearance, culture cannot be recorded as such, for it is only perceived *ex post facto*” (Lotman, Uspensky 1978:214). Some phenomena may end up not being recorded in the collective memory and not because they never existed. In order for given phenomena to be recorded in collective memory, it has to be “acknowledged as existing; that is, it must be identified with a specific element in the language of the organization which is committing it to memory” (ibid.). References to the general *past* (and not a defined historical period) are common in groupuscular right discourse in Armenia. Lotman and Uspensky’s concepts allow to determine reasons these arguments are more than just a reference to habitual lifestyle: if there was no queerness recorded in the memory of the collective, then queerness cannot be part of culture, it is necessarily out of culture (although extensive body of research on sexuality have already showed that “not recorded” in history does not equal to “not existed” in history).

6.5. Queer community as the model violator of the pre-established order

Lotman proposed the topological terms of inner, outer and the boundary to discuss models of culture. The inner culture constructs the outer sphere of chaos from which it is fenced off with a boundary:

From the point of view of that culture which is accepted as the norm and whose language becomes the metalanguage of that cultural typology, the systems which are opposed to it appear not as other types of organization, but as non-organization. They are characterized not by the presence of other features, but by the absence of features of structure (Lotman 1975: 97).

The customs and laws of a given culture are seen as having a divine origin to which unorganized, unstructured outer culture is contrasted (Lotman 1975: 105). The divine pre-established order is not subject to human manipulation: “In this antithesis, that which is created by man is considered disorderly and contrasted to the order of a higher organization” (Lotman 1975: 97). The groupuscules I observed construct the outer sphere by this logic. The family here becomes one of the main representations of that order. Family is sacred: it is registered by church in a special ritual, and while this ritual has no legal force, many Armenians consider it the main way to get married and may undergo civil registration only years later, when documented proof of marriage is required for some reason. Non-heterosexual people are seen first of all as those who challenge the sacred family hence challenging the order itself. The “perverts” who opted for “social sex”, as Ayvazyan puts it, impose human changes on divine structure. This is also why the trans community is targeted heavily. Trans people are demonized, activists I observed selected photos of trans people in diabolic costumes, repeatedly called “prostitutes” and accused of aiming to “pervert” children.

Non-heterosexuals are denied belonging to the community: they are thought as elements injected by the decadent West, which, being outside of the own culture, is a territory of ultimate chaos. The outer chaos, in its turn, brings the parallels with the afterworld and the carrier of chaos, the devil. This is why Kamq allies performed frankincense burning ritual. Kamq ally Marina Khachatryan called the dancers “people of the darkness”. “We will pray and play our Komitas, that is the high art, that is the high value, the Armenian, and not the roars that happened yesterday”, says Khachatryan. She adds: “We put our feet into the dark and light up”. Vahagn Chakhalyan also took part in the ritual, he stated: “Be good, dear compatriots, we are not surrendering our country easily.”

Such rhetoric of existential danger and the need to fight it may seem absurd: after all, the “enemy” is a small community of people deprived of basic rights. However, this enemy is not alone: it is part and parcel of the external chaos which penetrated the inner culture and strived to destroy its order. Destruction of the order and structure would mean chaos, hence blurring of the

boundary between the inner and outer culture. Elimination of the boundary is “comparable to the destruction of the model itself” (Lotman 1975:112).

In summary we could say that the nonlinear nature of collective memory easily allows the stretching and compressing of time: many customs and traditions are thought to be thousands of years old, and it does not really matter when and under what kind of influence they actually originated from. Furthermore, the traditional patriarchal structure of the society is understood as the sacred pre-established order which cannot be challenged without challenging the existence of the culture itself. That is why the far-right activists talk about the queer community in the realm of categories of the whole nation, its sovereignty and its very existence. Thus, it is logical for the radical right narrative to portray the new government — itself perceived as a bunch of Western liberals — as in union with those who bring chaos to Armenia.

6.6. Queerness at the bilingual/ polylingual border of the semiosphere

It is not a coincidence that queer discourse brings a lot of new words to Armenian. Most of these words are borrowed from English and have become common international terms. But Armenian is a language with a strong tradition of purism. That is, most neologisms quickly find their localized form through root-for-root translation (like in Estonian, even the word “computer” has its localized form “համսլարգիչ”). In queer discourse, however, language purism is rarely practiced; it is full of loanwords. Self-defining words like “queer” and “LGBT”, or key terms like “gender” are not translated. Because the queer discourse itself is marginal, these words did not end up incorporated in mainstream language. They sound “external” and they signify meanings which have always been excluded from the discourse, declared non-existent. Therefore, the signifier and signified in these words is often equated: these “external”-sounding words are thought to mean “external” phenomena. So, loanwords further strengthen the misconception that non-heterosexuality is not native to Armenian culture but was brought from outside.

In this sense, it is noteworthy that the term “LGBT” is often mispronounced, which highlights either deliberate undermining of this term, or that its meaning is little understood. For example, RPA member Margarit Yesayan said in an Interview on November 5: “I was watching

who was protesting 1.5 years ago [during Velvet Revolution], who gathered at those squares, and there were mainly supporters and members of the NGOs which want the LGTP community to be more active in the Republic of Armenia, to act legally, their activities not to be incognito”³⁰. This mistake – LGTP instead of LGBT – is not an isolated case.

The word “gender” has been equated to pejorative term, it is sometimes used as a metonymy for non-heterosexual people, as well as feminists³¹. Hayk Ayvazyan used “gender” to build his definition of the term “pervert” (see section 6.4).

At the same time, not everything “filtered in” from the outside semiosphere remains



Figure 2. huZANQ uZANG performance

untranslated. Many words, like “homosexual”, find their root-to-root translation in Armenia (fitting into the tradition of language purism). Such translated neologisms introduced by queer discourse are many. And not only separate words get transformed, but also whole texts. One example is modern dance performance huZANQ uZANG. Although it was not dedicated to the topic of homosexuality per

se, it was challenging gender norms and thus fits into queer discourse. Creators describe the performance as “female body’s public emancipation by doing art. huZANQ uZANG questions the public perceptions of female behavior, way of talking and moving in public”³². As mentioned above, the far-right accused the performance of being “lesbian” and “satanist” event. But the entire performance was based on classical works of Armenian futurism of early 20th century. One of the authors featured in huZANQ uZANG was Yeghishe Charents. Many of his texts – including queer poetry – are less known to the wider public, but he is the author of the most famous patriotic poem

³⁰ <https://youtu.be/MiZN2-kZXDk?t=677>

³¹ See, for example, <http://w.louysonline.com/archives/Complete-New-1/253-WEB/Printed%20Version%20253%20Armenian-color-.htm>

³² <https://www.facebook.com/events/529012534602341/>

“I Love My Sweet Armenia's...”, which is taught in schools across the country. This layer of Armenian cultural heritage was mixed in the performance with art objects created in the manner of Kazimir Malevich’s suprematism (Fig. 2) and was accompanied by experimental style of reading. That is, texts from Armenian culture were mixed with “outside” texts, that of Russian suprematist art (although we should note that Malevich’s significance is not limited to Russian culture).

We can thus say that huZANQ uZANG created a new text based on the mix of suprematist art, experimental reading of the 20th century futurist trends and textbook items of Armenian poetic tradition. This semiotic translation of the “outside” texts was, however, rejected by the far-right precisely because the performance was not offering “pure” example of Armenian culture, but rather an international mishmash.

Thus, one can state that the marginal queerness of Armenian culture is bilingual/polylingual. Lotman writes, that the border of the semiosphere is “an area of enhanced meaning generation” (2005:2014) and is always bilingual/polylingual. Bilingualism of the border makes it able to perform an act of translation (thus an act of communication) between the own and the other semiosphere.

The far-right, on the other hand, claim to represent the pure Armeniannes, something not diluted with external influences. Characteristic of nationalistic discourse, these claims outline a set of special features that define being an Armenian for the far-right. It is argued that queer people, despite being born Armenian, are a mix of those “Armenian” features with alien ones, and thus cannot represent the true Armeniannes. The far-right see themselves as those who understand and describe the culture “correctly”. i.e. who define Armenianness per se. The queers for them dilute Armenian culture with external influences and hence are a deviation from their “correct” description.

However, if we look at the culture not from point of view of the far-right groups, we can see that these groups were also marginal. Even before the revolution, they did not have serious power, in a sense that they did not hold the key positions in legislative, judicial or executive

branches of the government. But for two decades, central discourses in Armenia have been nationalistic and largely corresponded to how the far-right perceive the culture. For example, the far-right had sensible presence in academia. This is evident from the protests around educational reforms: when changes in Armenian church history, Armenian language and literature curricula were announced, the far-right started protesting them together with the mainstream conservative political parties, especially the ARF and PA. After the revolution, the far-right claim to be unfairly pushed to the margins, while those at the margins of society unfairly seized power. For example, Adekvad's leader Arthur Danielyan calls Velvet Revolution "Soros-led coup d'etat"³³.

During a protest Istanbul Convention, Liberation Movement leader Hayk Ayvazyan announced:

The filthy Sorosians who have occupied state positions are so lazy, they are so incompetent that they are not able to pass Istanbul Convention on their own, that is why they have sent troops from abroad to help them in passing the Istanbul Convention. [...] Since 2018, Armenian authorities have given negative conclusions to a number of draft laws banning same-sex marriage in Armenia, adoption of children by same-sex couples, and homosexuality propaganda among children.

Ayvazyan listed the law proposals by largest Parliamentary opposition party PA (see section 7.2) aimed at creating constraints to queer rights promotion. He also spoke of a law proposed by the government which, in his view, was aimed at promoting same-sex unions. He then went on:

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned realities, as well as the unprecedented aggressive and hostile actions of the new government against the Armenian Apostolic Holy Church and the Catholicos, we state that the current government of the Republic of Armenia are engaged in unhindered propaganda of homosexuality, hindering perversion as a norm among children, as well as granting broad privileged rights to people with a another gender identity, or so-called LGBT individuals. Therefore, we call on all public and political organizations, initiatives, respectable and conscious citizens of the Republic of Armenia to join the 'Neither Istanbul, nor the perversion' initiative, in order to neutralize the threats against the Armenian national, spiritual and traditional value system³⁴.

The church in Armenia is one of the most powerful national institutions. While one could debate on how actively religion is practiced, the church itself is considered one of the pillars of the nation (noteworthy, the Armenian church distinguished itself from other churches in the region centuries

³³ Interview to Freewestmedia.com, <https://freewestmedia.com/2019/08/02/we-offer-an-alternative-for-armenia/>

³⁴ Yerevan.Today, <https://youtu.be/yQ-rEJGiTuk>. "Neither Istanbul, nor the perversion" was never active; it has a Facebook page, but the abovementioned speech by Ayvazyan is the only post on it.

ago, now it is a church if one nation). Ayvazyan states that the new government initiated “aggressive and hostile actions” towards the church and then concludes from that statement that the government if engages in “unhindered propaganda of homosexuality” (*Taking into consideration...we state that...*). Thus he binds together the attack on nationhood with defending queer right.

Ayvazyan and others opposing the Istanbul Convention use this conspiracy theory to present it as “anti-national” and dangerous. The Convention is viewed as inherently alien phenomena which could penetrate Armenia only through queers – marginal people subjected to external influences. They present the post-revolutionary government as queer (that is, possessing external influence rather than pure Armenianness) and use narratives like the one about Istanbul Convention as a tool to prove it.

However, if we look closer, the far-right share as much with external world as the queers: many of them are part of international far-right initiatives and use extensive borrowings from international narratives. For example, conspiracy theories like that of George Soros or Istanbul Convention were borrowed and adapted to Armenian realia from external sphere.

After the revolution, mainstream conservative parties which were actually holding key positions in lawmaking, academia, art, etc. borrow from the far-right discourse. By doing so, they are strengthening the self-perception of the far right as the representatives of the true core which was pushed away to the periphery by unjust and abnormal deviation from the regular flow of things, that is, the Velvet Revolution.

In what follows, I’ll show how the mainstream political parties borrow from the far-right discourse and mix with the far-right thus strengthening this “abnormal core-periphery” view.

7. MAINSTREAM CONSERVATIVE PARTIES: RESEMIOTIZING THE FAR-RIGHT

In this chapter I will discuss how mainstream conservative parties incorporate the topics voiced by the far-right in their activities but undertake contradictory positions regarding those topics. Using the example of Istanbul Convention, I will show how mainstream parties on the one hand advocate for treating legal documents as a formality, a non-binding issue, and on the other hand declare the necessity to create a legislative basis for defending so-called traditional values. That is, in speeches of mainstream politicians a legal document, Istanbul Convention, is a self-modelling text which is and should be detached from the existing cultural practice. At the same time, politicians resemiotize far-right claim into a legislative proposal in order to eliminate “misinterpretations” of existing cultural practice.

7.1. The self-modelling text of the Istanbul Convention and the two ways to approach it

Lotman developed the notion of self-model to explain how “complicated and contradictory complex” of any culture develops unity at the level of self-description. That is, self-models highlight certain dominants within a given culture which helps to build “a unified system that should serve as a code for self-knowledge and self-decoding of the texts of this culture” (Lotman 1971:170). Lotman differentiates three types of self-models:

- 1) those that try to be maximally similar to the culture;
- 2) those that differ from existing cultural practice and seek to change that practice;

3) those that function in ideal self-consciousness of culture, separately from exiting cultural practice and do not seek convergence with that practice.

Self-models can be concrete texts, laws, etc. Madisson brings following examples of self-models, respectively: 1) a course syllabus; 2) Lenin's interpretation of Marxism; 3) the theory of pure art (Madisson 2016b:208). Lotman himself explains that the model of Russian state in Peter I-era legislation can be viewed as a self-model of second type. Third type self-models include laws that are adopted but are not meant to be put into practice (Lotman 1971:170-171).

As mentioned in section 4.3, pre-2018 Armenian authoritarian government was characterized with "artificial ideology" utilizing ultra-nationalism; the government's policies "were not shaped by ideology, but rather, by a drive to consolidate illegitimate power through patronalistic³⁵ politics" (Kopalyan 2018). RPA and its coalition partner ARF were not anti-Western or anti-democratic, nor were they explicitly rejecting democratic reforms. Quite on the contrary: they were not blocking civil society from receiving funding from the West, and the government itself was eager to adopt certain reforms funded from the West (usually EU). However, it was not a democratic government, the reforms were occasional, non-systemic and not meant at eliminating corruption or building transparent government and equal society. Self-models generated at that period (for example, European-style laws) could be regarded as the third type of self-models, i.e. models that function separately from exiting cultural practice and do not seek convergence with that practice. Let me discuss this process with the example of Istanbul Convention, a legal document that can be considered a self-modelling text.

Istanbul Convention is a legislative document aimed to combat violence against women and domestic violence. The text includes the view of gender as social phenomena, disapprove discrimination of any kind, including discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation. Successful implementation of the convention in traditionalist societies, such as Armenian, is both a legal and cultural matter. As discussed in section 6.3.2, the conspiracy theory about "Western-imposed" convention is one of the central topics of the far-right discourse in post-revolutionary

³⁵ Kopalyan uses here Henry Hale's notion of *patronalism which describes political culture in post-Soviet space based on personal ties and exchange of rewards rather than abstract ideological beliefs.*

Armenia. It was signed in 2018, couple of months before the revolution, by RPA-majority Parliament. According to the procedure, ratification was meant to follow short, and the fact that it started during Pashinyan's rule was a technical, and not an ideological matter.

On November 5, in an interview to Iravunk news outlet, RPA member Margarit Yesayan said: "The Istanbul Convention could have been left as it was – signed but not ratified. But from the very first day of their coming to power, they [the new government] and Soros grant-eating NGOs brought up the issue of Istanbul Convention." As I cited earlier in section 6.6, she continued saying that during the revolution protesters were mainly representatives of "those NGOs" who want queer community in Armenia to "act legally": "I am surprised at the editors who say that there is no LGBT in the Istanbul Convention. But the convention does not speak about couples, it speaks about partners!"³⁶

First, Yesayan repeats here common statement about Istanbul Convention promoting same-sex marriage because it does not specify that a family is a unity of a man and woman but uses a concept of partner instead. This statement is widely used in far-right discourse, and it is similar to criticism which Istanbul Convention faced in other countries, for example, in Bulgaria. Second, Yesayan states that there was no need to ratify, i.e. to give official legal power to the document. That is, Yesayan, being a ruling party MP, gave her consent to sign the document and thus provide formal agreement for Istanbul Convention to be applicable to regulate social relations in Armenia. She, however, does not see any point in *actually applying* Istanbul Convention because, to her, social relations in Armenia are not and should not be similar to the ones described in the convention.

Another example of this sigh-but-not-ratify argument is November 29 speech by one of the most well-known members of ARF, Artsvik Minasyan, whose party and he himself were in a coalition government with RPA. Minasyan was speaking at a round table meeting organized by opposition National Agenda party and dedicated to Istanbul Convention. Both far-right activists and representatives or mainstream conservative parties were present at the meeting: Minasyan was

³⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MizN2-kZXDk&t=678s&ab_channel=iTV

sitting just two seats away from Liberation Movement leader Hayk Ayvazyan. Talking about the need to adopt laws to protect traditional valued (see below), Minasyan criticized the government for being sympathetic to Istanbul Convention and manipulating the issue: “These manipulation that it was signed in the past, and we have to now [ratify it] is an absurd justification, there is nothing like that in reality.”³⁷

These statements by RPA and AFR members present Istanbul Convention as a law which is formally adopted but is not meant to be put in practice. That is, from their point of view the convention is a self-model of third type (Lotman 1971:170-171): they see no contradiction in legislation which describes a world detached from the existing cultural practice.

Compare these statements to the words of Minister of social affairs Zaruhi Batoyan, who until recently was the only female minister in Pashinyan’s cabinet³⁸. On November 1, asked by a journalist about her opinion on the convention, Batoyan said:

The ratifying body is the National Assembly³⁹, and the National Assembly must ratify it. If a convention is signed, a convention must be ratified. [...] The government of the Republic of Armenia has undertaken its readiness [to defend] human right, signed it, and now has to ratify.

Asked if there is a possibility to not ratify the document, Batoyan said: “Of course, there is always such a possibility”. Answering the follow-up question on whether she is in favor of the convention, she likewise said: “Of course I am in favor”^{40,41}.

Batoyan’s position is the opposite of those that RPA and ARF have. The post-revolutionary ruling power declared anti-corruption and other reforms their top priority (it also came under criticism later for not implementing the institutional reforms efficiently). They came to power with

³⁷ <https://www.arfd.am/news/20554/>

³⁸ After the defeat in war with Azerbaijan, Pashinyan reshuffled the cabinet and dismissed its only female member.

³⁹ The Parliament of Armenia.

⁴⁰ <https://168.am/2019/11/01/1197561.html>

⁴¹ Batoyan, along with MPs Gayane Abrahamyan, Maria Karapetyan (who spoke about the cultural change that revolution brings, see section 3.2) and others has been in civil society before 2018. She is an example of new type of politicians that the Velvet Revolution brought to power: representatives of civil society whose previous work was about advocacy for equality and human rights. In the parliament, these politicians formed the left wing of My Step’s “big tent”.

the promise of political, social and cultural change. This implies that Velvet Revolution created suitable conditions for emergence of second type of self-models, i.e. those that seek to change existing cultural practice. The far-right and mainstream conservative politicians managed to turn Istanbul Convention into a hot potato for the government, and the hearing on ratification was postponed (but not cancelled). However, other legislative initiatives seeking to change cultural practice (by addressing problems like hate speech, domestic violence, corruption etc.) were or are being adopted. No legislation explicitly addressing queer rights issues has been developed, but Pashinyans Parliament speech in defense of transgender athlete (see section 2.1) was generally accepted as a major step forward and the first instance of criticism of homophobia/transphobia on such high level.

7.2. Resemiotization of the threat of legal same-sex marriages

On November 12, the Parliament discussed two amendments⁴² to the family law by PA member Gevorg Petrosyan. The amendments were first introduced earlier in September and proposed to ban “persons of the same sex as well as persons at least one of whom have changed their sex” to marry or adopt children. Both the family law, and the constitution of Armenia do not allow same-sex marriages. These proposals came at the time of a series of scandals featuring a constructed threat of same-sex marriages. Petrosyan’s amendments were eventually rejected by the Parliament. However, they became a matter of a fierce public debate in the highest legislative body of the country and brought the threat of same-sex marriages from the far-right discourse to the mainstream – to the level of legal document by an established lawmaker. In this section, I argue that the very format of a legislative proposal was a resemitotization of the far-right discourse around queer rights and Istanbul Convention.

Concerns about the Istanbul Convention were voiced by the far-right years before the government signed it⁴³. In Armenian far-right discourse Istanbul Convention is not a solution for domestic violence problem, but a document which malicious foreign actors use to pave the way

⁴² <http://www.parliament.am/drafts.php?sel=showdraft&DraftID=10758&Reading=0>
<http://www.parliament.am/drafts.php?sel=showdraft&DraftID=10764&Reading=0&lang=arm&enc=utf8>

⁴³ <http://stop-g7.com/archives/341>

for same-sex marriages to be legalized and for the foundations of Armenian culture to be destroyed. This interpretation stems from the self/other opposition which is built on the contrast of traditional values and pure Armenianness on one hand, and the queerness understood as externally influenced deviation on the other hand. Furthermore, this interpretation is a result of layering of the text of the convention onto the discourse dominated by the “hypervisible figure of the homosexual” (Shirinian 2016). The far-right construct a threat in the form legal same-sex marriages and use the language of war and conflict to describe this threat (see section 6.2).

Several members of Parliament, including Gevorg Petrosyan directly supported the far-right by signing the anti-Istanbul Convention petition of Kamq (the whole process was also broadcast live). Petrosyan announced that he put his signature because the convention is against the Constitution and Armenian values: “What does ‘partners’ mean? [...] We all grew up in traditional families and we must inherit such family to our children”⁴⁴. Several days after his appearance at Kamq protest Petrosyan presented his law proposals at the Parliament, criticizing the ruling MPs for not giving positive evaluation to his draft law.

The texts of draft laws themselves consisted of two sections. In the first section, it was proposed to add several short phrases to the family law specifying the ban of same-sex marriage and adoption of kids. The second section provided justification of the need to pass the amendments. The texts differed from speeches at the protests by usage of more impersonal, formal language. Kamq members, whose focus is protesting Istanbul Convention, often use passionate, personalized language: “Be good, dear compatriots, we are not surrendering our country easily”. In contrast to this, Petrosyan’s proposal used highly formalized, less personalized language. It contained multiple references to other legal documents, used little or no personal pronouns: “The proposal is expected to ensure the implementation of the state policy goals defined by the Constitution, as well as ensure the implementation of the rights of a child defined by international legal acts.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UI0EnzULj6o&feature=emb_title&ab_channel=NEWSAM

⁴⁵ Of course, in some cases the groupuscules, especially Liberation Movement, mimics the formal style of legal document in their speeches. However, their texts lack *the status* of legal document as their not presented in accordance to specific procedure.

Iedema states that during resemiotization an organizational process takes place which “stabilizes specific meaning and in doing so resemiotizes those meanings into more durable manifestations” (Iedema 2001:35). In such processes “each recontextualization appears to add to the ‘weight’, the institutional importance, the authority, in short, the *facticity*, of what is said and written”. Iedema calls this process a set of “fact-producing transformations”, because each new step includes increasingly “durable” semiotics (Iedema 2003:43).

The threat of legalization of the same-sex marriages was constructed by the far-right by juxtaposition of a conspiracy theory and real legal document which was not at all regulating queer right as its primary issue. By creating law proposals and participating in official parliamentary hearings on the topic, PA provided the aforementioned institutional importance, facticity to the threat constructed in far-right speeches and protests. Suddenly, the parliament was spending hours for discussing a proposal to ban something which the legislation never allowed. Despite the amendments were eventually rejected, the mere fact of legislative initiative taking place “confirmed” existence of the problem.

Answering to the criticism that same-sex marriages are already not legal in Armenia, Petrosyan said that his aim is to eliminate possible misreading and loose interpretations: “If we really want to ban marriage of homosexuals and transgenders in Armenia, let’s not try to solve the question by legal misperceptions. Let’s clearly write [it] in family law”⁴⁶.

ARF member Artsvik Minasyan had similar argument. At the aforementioned Istanbul Convention round table he proposed a roadmap comprised of two actions:

As I mentioned, it is strengthening legislative protection for these values, defended values: motherhood, family, respect... This means initiating bills. The Constitution allows us to show a civil initiative, create a law, force the parliament to adopt that law or if not, this law will go to a referendum. Second action is creation of judicial precedents [...] up to Court of cassation [...] for it not to be possible to interpret in some other way⁴⁷.

PA and ARF politicians in this case directly describe creating legislations as a process aimed at eliminating *negotiability* of the issue. Iedema states, that “as a result of the resemiotizations

⁴⁶ https://youtu.be/H5i0xRF61_0

⁴⁷ <https://www.arfd.am/news/20554/>

achieved, constraints built up around the negotiability of outcomes” (2001:43). That is, each step of resemiotization adds up to the facticity of the outcome and makes it less negotiable. A far-right activist’s speech at a protest about Istanbul Convention imposing same-sex marriages is highly negotiable, temporal format of meaning-making. In Iedema’s terms, “resemiotization logic” pushes it towards more specialized practice (such as lawmaking; *ibid.*). In this process, a poorly grounded theory common in the groupuscular right discourse acquires difficultly deniable materiality in a legislative proposal: a bill makes the threat of same-sex marriages less invented, more real.

CONCLUSION

This thesis applied semiotic approach to analyze far-right discourse and its interweaving with mainstream conservative parties' discourse. I described the structure of the far-right communities in post-revolutionary Armenia using Roger Griffin's concept of groupuscule. Furthermore, I used concepts from Tartu-Moscow school and contemporary semiotic research on far-right communities conducted at the University of Tartu to discuss the instrumentalization of conspiracy theories in far-right discourse and answer the first research question: how does the groupuscular right in Armenia construct the otherness? Finally, I used Yuri Lotman's concept of self-model and Rick Iedema's concept of resemiotization to answer the second research question: how specific claims from groupuscular right discourse transform in the discourse of mainstream conservative political parties?

Four far-right groups (Adekvad, Liberation Movement, Kamq, Veto) most visible in the press in Armenia after the Velvet Revolution have structure and activities characteristic of the groupuscules. They are small, uncentered, non-party political formations which became highly visible with their attacks against queer minority and post-revolutionary government. These groups have extreme or radical right ideology, lack of rigid hierarchical organization, fluid membership base. Some of them have populist style, some are explicitly neo-fascist. All of them deny universality of human rights and advocate for "purity of culture" thus presenting reformist version of fascist ideology.

Despite lack of party-like organization and institutionalized power, all the groups I observed have similarities in how they construct the outer sphere of the culture. The far-right use conspiracy narratives to communicate the figure of enemy. In conspiracy theory about billionaire George Soros and his "agents network" the far-right combine two types of enemy figure: non-own (that comes from the outer chaotic sphere) and anti-own (that comes from the inner negative

structures). Both in Soros and in Istanbul Convention conspiracy theories dangerous outer influence is linked to the queer community. Outer sphere is seen as a sphere of disorder and chaos, and queerness is how that chaos penetrates into inner sphere. The post-revolutionary power holders are presented as defenders of gays and thus part of Soros' "agents network" which penetrated the state institutions.

Queerness is argued to be absent from the cultural memory and not fitting self-description of culture (the Armenianness as the far-right see it). Therefore, queerness is seen as inherently alien. Queer discourse is at the periphery of the semiosphere, at its bilingual/polylingual border. Using the case of modern dance performance huZANQ uZANG I showed how canonical texts of inner sphere are mixed with external texts in semiotic translation. This is characteristic of the periphery of semiosphere, and it is rejected by the far-right, who claim to represent the pure Armenianness, the "correct" self-description of the culture.

Thus, for the far-right the Velvet Revolution is not a victory of the Armenian people but a triumph of injustice. For them people connected to "agents" which bring outer chaos and danger into inner sphere took over the state power, while they, who hold "pure culture", were pushed to the margins.

The three major conservative parties of Armenia instrumentalize far-right claims. Using the example of Istanbul Convention, I showed how the far-right construct the threat of legal same-sex marriages. The far-right activities against the convention were picked up by politicians who signed that very same document before the revolution. However, there is a contradiction in the mainstream parties' approach to Istanbul Convention.

On one hand, parties support far-right claim that the ratification of the document will pave a way for legalization of same-sex marriages in Armenia. Their support is manifested either by personally joining the respective petition, or in their speeches and other texts. Politicians argue that despite they signed the convention before the revolution, it should not be ratified, i.e. should not be put in practice. In their speeches the Istanbul Convention is an example of the third type of Lotmanian self-model which functions separately from exiting cultural practice and does not seek convergence with that practice.

On the other hand, politicians resemiotize the far-right claim about same-sex marriages into a legislative bill. It is argued that laws and judicial precedents need to be created to effectively protect so-called traditional values and eliminate “misperceptions” and “misinterpretations”, i.e. seal the correct interpretation of the concept of family, an interpretation which will correspond to the existing common model of family. Using the example of two bills banning same-sex marriages and adoption, I showed how mainstream politicians resemiotize far-right-constructed threat of legal same-sex marriages. This process of resemiotization provides more *facticity* to the poorly grounded claim, makes it less negotiable. In short, resemiotization of far-right claim into a legislative proposal makes that claim less invented, more real.

This thesis investigated far-right construction of otherness and interweaving of far-right and mainstream conservative parties’ discourse. One important issue that was not address in the current work is the perception of these discourses by the public. One direction of future research might be analysis of public perception of far-right and mainstream parties’ massaging regarding queerness and post-revolutionary democracy-building. Transformation of these two discourses in other discourses, such as in speeches of progressive communities or pro-reform parties might be another direction for future research.

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RESÜMEE

Magistritöö „Tähendusloome analüüs paremäärmuslaste ja konservatiivsete erakondade diskursiivses kommunikatsioonis: revolutsioonijärgse Armeenia näitel“ vastab kahele uurimisküsimusele:

1. Kuidas Armeenia paremäärmuslased teisesust semiootiliselt konstrueerivad?
2. Kuidas paremäärmusliku diskursuse tuumideed transformeeruvad peavoolu konservatiivsete erakondade diskursuses?

Paremäärmusliku kommunikatsiooni kontseptualiseerimisel kasutatakse magistritöö Roger Griffini arendatud grupuskuli mõistet, mida täiendati Tartu-Moskva koolkonna kultuurisemiootika ideedega. Peavoolu kuuluvate konservatiivsete erakondade diskursuse analüüs viidi läbi Lotmani enesemudeli ja Iedema resemiotiseerimise mõisteid kasutades

Lõputöö tulemusena tuuakse välja, et paremäärmuslikes diskursustes on üheks peamiseks vaenlase konstrueerimise vahendiks vandenõuteooriad ning paremäärmuslaste minna-pildile vastanduv queer-kogukond. Viimastes nähakse oma “puhta“ armeenia kultuurile vastanduva välise mõjutuse sümbolit, mida sageli seostatakse revolutsioonijärgse poliitilise eliidiga. Äärmusparempoolsete jaoks kehastab sametine revolutsioon ülekohust ja ebaõiglust, mille tagajärjel võõra ja välise kultuurisfääriga seotud inimesed usurpeerisid võimu, samas kui ennast nähakse kannatajatena, „puhta kultuuri“ kandjatena, keda revolutsioonijärgses uues poliitilises situatsioonis suruti poliitilisse perifeeriasse.

Töö teises osas analüüsitakse, kuidas peavoolu kuuluvad konservatiivsed jõud kasutavad paremäärmuslaste ideid oma poliitilise agenda seadmisel ja diskursuse ülesehitamisel. Konkreetse näitena analüüsitakse Istanbuli konvetsiooniga seotud diskursust. Konservatiivsed poliitilised jõud

resemiotiseerivad paremäärmuslikus diskursuses levivad poliitilised nõuded seadusandlikeks ettepanekuteks, et niimoodi delegitimeerida traditsiooniliste kultuuripraktikatega vastuollu minevaid liberaalseid ideid.

Töö tulemusi saab kasutada tulevaste uuringute alusmaterjalina. Üks perspektiivikas suund oleks keskendumine avalikule diskursusele laiemalt. Esialgse uurimisprobleemi võib sõnastada järgmiselt: millist rolli omab queer-teema erinevate Armeenia poliitiliste jõudude poliitilises diskursuses, milliste väärtustega seda teemat agendasse seatakse ja kuidas see poliitilise võitluse tulemusel kujuneb.

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