

October 2026



WHEN POLITICIANS TURN PEOPLE INTO ENEMIES

Hate Speech, Freedom of Expression and Accountability in Lithuania

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THE WORDS

FACEBOOK · 8 MAY 2023

Reacting to Israel's demolition of a Palestinian school, the post called Israel "animals" — then repeated an antisemitic rhyme ending with a call to kill "that little Jew".



ORIGINAL LITHUANIAN · FACEBOOK

"Pasirodo, be putino dar vieni gyvuliai atsirado pasaulyje — IZRAELIS."

"Apparently, besides putin, more animals have appeared in the world — ISRAEL."

Criticism of a state shifted to hostility towards Jews as a group.

Sources: LRT16NS, 8 May 2023; Lithuanian Court of Appeal, 22 July 2026.

Let's start with Žemaitaitis's, one of Facebook posts from May 2023. The first post was a reaction to Israel's demolition of a Palestinian school. He wrote: "Apparently, besides putin, more animals have appeared in the world — Israel."

The post then went further. Žemaitaitis repeated an old antisemitic rhyme ending with telling children to take a stick and kill a Jewish person.

I think this is an important starting point because the post moves between two different targets. It begins with criticism of the actions of the Israeli state, but it also introduces a violent expression directed at a Jewish person because of their identity.

Criticism of Israel is, of course, legitimate political expression. The question here is what happens when criticism of state policy becomes a vehicle for hostility towards an ethnic or national group.

That distinction is central to understanding the proceedings that followed.

THE ALLEGED “LITHUANIAN HOLOCAUST”

13 JUNE 2023 · FACEBOOK

„Buvo HOLOKAUSTAS ŽYDŲ, bet dar DIDESNIS HOLOKAUSTAS LIETUVIŲ BUVO LIETUVOJE!“

“There was a Holocaust of Jews, but an even greater Holocaust of Lithuanians in Lithuania.”

14 JUNE 2023 · FACEBOOK

„Mes Lietuvių tauta niekada neturi pamiršti žydų ir rusų, kurie labai aktyviai prisidėjo prie mūsų TAUTOS NAIKINIMO!“

“We, the Lithuanian nation, must never forget the Jews and Russians who actively contributed to the destruction of our nation.”

A SECOND CLAIM: PIRČIUPIAI AND KANIŪKAI

He also claimed that Lithuanian Jews, together with Russians, massacred Pirčiupiai and Kaniūkai villages in 1944.

The Seimas impeachment inquiry cited historical evidence identifying German SS units — not Lithuanian Jews and Russians — as the perpetrators of Pirčiupiai massacre. Meanwhile, the exact perpetrators of Kaniūkai massacre could not even be established but no evidence shows that the massacre was carried out on ethnic grounds to exterminate Lithuanians or that Jews were primarily responsible (people of several nationalities, including Jews, have been involved)

Sources: Seimas impeachment inquiry (16 Nov 2023); Constitutional Court, 25 Apr 2024; historical evidence cited in the inquiry.

The June 2023 posts make that shift even clearer.

On 13 June, Žemaitaitis wrote: “There was a Holocaust of Jews, but an even greater Holocaust of Lithuanians in Lithuania.”

The next day, he wrote: “*We, the Lithuanian nation, must never forget the Jews and Russians who actively contributed to the destruction of our nation.*”

He also claimed that Lithuanian Jews, together with Russians, had massacred the village of Pirčiupiai in 1944 even though German SS units have been identified as the perpetrators, not Lithuanian Jews and Russians. Žemaitaitis has also claimed that Jews, together with Russians, had massacred the Kaniūkai village and its residents. Later during his trial, historians testified that this massacre involved perpetrators of different nationalities, among them Jews, but it is impossible to establish exactly who took part in the attack or how many Jewish people participated. Also, there is no such evidence that the massacre had been carried out on ethnic grounds, with the aim of destroying Lithuanians. Nonetheless, Žemaitaitis was presenting Jews and Russians as groups that had collectively contributed to the destruction of the Lithuanian nation.

So when it comes to these statements, there are two things worth distinguishing here.

First, recognising Soviet repression, deportations and crimes against Lithuanians, is entirely legitimate – I’m sure Latvia can understand this very well, considering our shared history.

Second, these statements went beyond discussing those historical crimes. They attributed collective responsibility to Jews as a group and used the supposed “Lithuanian Holocaust” to construct a comparison with the Holocaust of European Jews.

The courts subsequently examined this narrative alongside the other posts. That historical context was important to the legal assessment.

FROM FACEBOOK TO COURTROOM

25 APR 2024

Constitutional Court: serious breach of oath and Constitution.

22 JUL 2026

Court of Appeal: upheld conviction; combined fine increased to €10,000.

4 DEC 2025

Vilnius Regional Court: convicted under Criminal Code Articles 170(2) and 170²(1).

9 SEP 2026

Supreme Court accepted cassation appeal; oral hearing date not yet announced.

As at 19 Oct 2026. Supreme Court review is pending. Sources: Constitutional Court; Court of Appeal; LRTBNS reports.

The case passed through several stages.

In April 2024, the Constitutional Court found that Žemaitaitis had breached his parliamentary oath and grossly violated the Constitution. This was a constitutional finding, separate from the criminal proceedings.

In December 2025, the Vilnius Regional Court convicted him in the criminal case and imposed a combined fine of 5,000 euros.

In July 2026, the Court of Appeal upheld the conviction and increased the combined fine to 10,000 euros.

Currently the case is in cassation appeal stage.

What is worth noting that the constitutional finding did not prevent Žemaitaitis from returning to parliament following the 2024 elections which illustrates the division between constitutional accountability, criminal liability and political consequences.

THE COURTS' FINDINGS

ARTICLE 170(2)

Group-directed hostility

The posts used degrading labels, dehumanising metaphors and collective blame directed at Jews – a group.

ARTICLE 170²(1)

Historical claims

The court found the invented "Lithuanian Holocaust" narrative grossly trivialised the Holocaust.

ONE PATTERN

REPEATED POSTS ASSESSED TOGETHER

PIRČIUPIAI

The collective accusation was contradicted by historical evidence cited in the Seimas inquiry.

Sources: Lithuanian Court of Appeal, 22 Jul 2020; Seimas impeachment inquiry, 16 Nov 2023.

The criminal proceedings in Žemaitantis case concerned two provisions of the Criminal Code.

Article 170(2) concerns public conduct such as mocking, humiliating or inciting hatred or discrimination against a protected group.

Article 170²(1) concerns public approval, denial or gross trivialisation of international crimes.

The courts assessed statements that used degrading labels and dehumanising metaphors, attributed collective responsibility for historical crimes to Jews, and reproduced a violent antisemitic trope.

The historical claims were also relevant. In the Pirčiupiai example, the accusation against Lithuanian Jews and Russians was contradicted by the historical evidence cited in the parliamentary inquiry.

The Court of Appeal considered the repeated posts as a whole, rather than treating each statement as an entirely isolated incident.

The broader point is that the proceedings concerned not simply an offensive phrase, but a series of public statements, their context and the way they

portrayed an entire group.

HOW THE RHETORIC WORKS



Rhetorical pattern drawn from the appellate court's assessment; not a substitute for analysing each statement in context.

Looking at the case more generally, there are several rhetorical features worth noticing.

The first is the shift in the target: criticism of a government or a state becomes an accusation against an ethnic group.

The second is collective blame. Instead of identifying particular people responsible for particular historical acts, the speaker presents an entire group as responsible.

The third is dehumanising language. Calling people animals or using degrading labels changes the way the group is represented in the public debate.

There is also a violent element in the antisemitic rhyme, alongside the use of historical events to support generalised accusations.

Finally, repetition and the public platform matter. These statements were published across several episodes, and they came from an elected politician whose comments attracted substantial public attention.

These features are not to be treated as an automatic legal test. A generalisation or offensive metaphor does not, by itself, establish a criminal offence.

Having said that, they help explain why the context and the overall pattern can matter when a court evaluates a particular statement.

GRAŽULIS & SINICA: THE ACTUAL WORDS

PETRAS GRAŽULIS · 26 MAY 2022

„Iš kur tie pederastai atsirado? Čia išsigimimas.“

"Where did these [anti-gay slur] people come from? This is degeneracy."

„Jūs platinate venerines ligas.“

"You spread venereal diseases."

„Dievas sukūrė vyrą ir moterį, o ne vyrą ir vyrą.“

"God created a man and a woman, not a man and a man."

FIRST INSTANCE · OCT 2025 — Convicted; €10,000 fine.

APPEAL · APR 2026 — Acquitted. The Court of Appeal still described the remarks as discriminatory, degrading and insulting, but concluded that criminal punishment was not justified in this case. Supreme Court review is pending.



VYTAUTAS SINICA · 2026 PROPOSAL

„Įstatymai neturi reguliuoti įžeidimų, jausmų srities.“

"The law should not regulate insults or matters of feelings."

„Neetiškus pasisakymas turi lydėti visuomenės vertinimas [...] bet už juos neturime būti baudžiami įstatymu.“

"Unethical speech should be met with public judgment [...] but not punishment by law."

He also argued that the law "does not allow politically incorrect discussion of sensitive issues".

BILL XVP-1157 · REGISTERED JAN 2026

The proposal sought to remove criminal liability for most Article 170(1)–(2) offences, retaining liability for public incitement to violence or physical retaliation. Its planned presentation was removed from the Seimas agenda in March 2026.



Sources: Vilnius Regional Court (7 Oct 2025); Lithuanian Court of Appeal (27 Apr 2026); LRT/EHS on Sinica's proposal (17 Jan; 19 Mar 2026).

Couple more examples. Gražulis, currently sitting in the European Parliament, is a useful contrast to Žemaitaitis because Gražulis case illustrates how a court can find language discriminatory and degrading without concluding that criminal punishment is justified.

After parliamentary sitting in May 2022, during consideration of the Civil Union Bill, Gražulis made a series of remarks about LGBTQ+ people, some of which you can see on the slide.

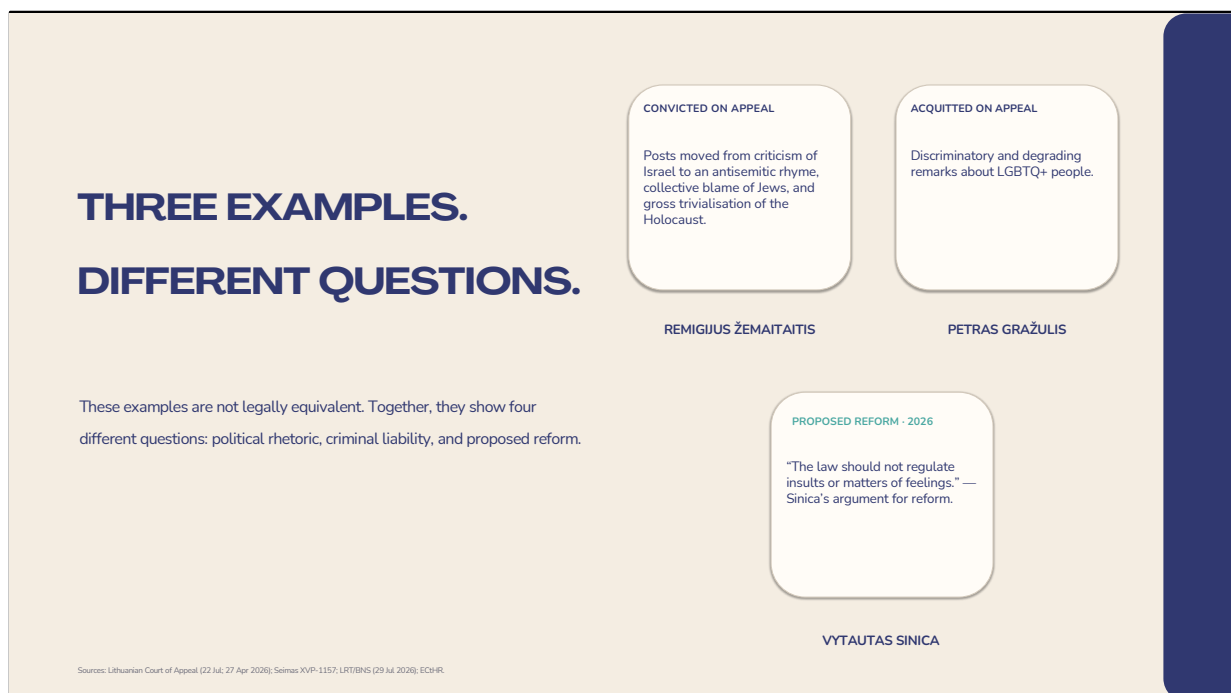
In October 2025, Vilnius Regional Court convicted him and imposed a 10,000-euro fine. The court considered that the language humiliated and demeaned LGBTQ+ people because of their sexual orientation.

In April 2026, however, the Court of Appeal overturned the conviction. It described the remarks as discriminatory, degrading and insulting, but concluded that criminal punishment was not justified in this particular case. The Supreme Court accepted cassation challenges in July, so the case remains under review.

Another one of our Parliament member's Sinica example takes a different approach. He argued that criminal law should be reserved for cases involving

public incitement to violence, while other offensive or discriminatory statements should be addressed through public criticism and reputational consequences rather than criminal sanctions. His proposal was basically to remove criminal liability for most of the conduct constituting hate speech. This March, the proposal's planned presentation was removed from parliamentary agenda. Notably, Sinica has made continuous controversial statements about migration and Muslim communities, which provide some broader context here as well.

I think these examples are useful because they show two different questions. Gražulis's case concerns how an existing criminal provision should be applied to particular words and circumstances. Meanwhile, Sinica's proposal goes as far as saying the law should decriminalise most of such conduct in the first place.



Here you have three examples, illustrating different ways in which hate speech by the politicians can become a legal or political issue.

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In Žemaitaitis's case, the statements resulted in a criminal conviction, which was upheld on appeal, as well as constitutional accountability.

- Gražulis's case ended differently: his remarks were deemed as discriminatory and degrading, but not justifying criminal punishment in that particular case.
- Sinica's example is different again. He is challenging the legal framework itself , arguing that most hate-speech offences should not attract criminal liability at all.

The point here

is to look at what the courts actually consider when they assess particular state ments, and how politicians themselves approach the boundaries of permissible speech.

THE COST

AUTHORITY AND REACH

A politician doesn't just express a personal opinion. Their position gives the message a public platform and political legitimacy.

CONSTRUCTING A COLLECTIVE ENEMY

Criticism of policies or historical events becomes blame directed at an entire group.

LEGAL ACCOUNTABILITY ≠ POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY

A court can convict a politician. It cannot decide whether voters will continue to support them.

Bringing it all back to the roots, there are some particular features when it comes to hate speech by the politicians that go beyond the general question of what constitutes hate speech.

First, politicians have a public platform and a degree of authority that most people don't have. Their statements can become part of mainstream political debate, rather than remaining an isolated comment on social media.

Second, look at the way the rhetoric works in the Žemaitaitis case. The statements did not simply express an opinion about Israel or discuss Soviet-era crimes. They repeatedly portrayed Jews as a group responsible for historical harm to Lithuanians. That is a very different kind of political narrative from criticizing a particular government or historical actor.

We see a different example with Gražulis, whose remarks targeted LGBTQ+ people during a political controversy over civil unions. Sinica's example, meanwhile, shows that the boundaries of hate-speech law are themselves being contested by politicians, including through proposals to change the Criminal Code.

And finally, legal accountability and political accountability are not the same thing. Žemaitaitis was able to return to parliament despite the constitutional findings against him, and his subsequent criminal conviction did not automatically resolve his political standing.

I think that is one of the most interesting aspects of this subject. Courts can determine whether particular statements meet the legal threshold for punishment, but that does not settle how the rhetoric is received politically or whether it continues to play a role in public debate.

SELECTED SOURCES

Court records and official proceedings first; reporting used for direct quotations and procedural updates.

[Lithuanian Court of Appeal - Žemaitaitis, 22 July 2026](#)

Appellate reasoning; sentence increased on appeal.

[Lithuanian Court of Appeal - Gražulis, 27 April 2026](#)

Acquittal; court still described the words as degrading.

[Constitutional Court - 25 April 2024](#)

Constitutional finding concerning the oath and Constitution.

[LRT / BNS - Gražulis cassation, July 2026](#)

Supreme Court review accepted; status checked 19 Oct 2026.

[Seimas impeachment inquiry - 16 Nov 2023](#)

Original posts; alleged Lithuanian Holocaust and Pirčupiai claim.

[LRT - Žemaitaitis cassation, 9 Sep 2026](#)

Cassation challenges accepted after the appellate acquittal.

[Seimas - Bill XVP-1157](#)

[Proposal to decriminalise most Article 170\(1\)-\(2\) offences. Sinica's rationale: LRT/BNS, 17 Jan and 19 Mar 2026.](#)

[LRT/BNS - Seimas Commission on the Grounds for Initiating Impeachment Proceedings Against Žemaitaitis](#)

Commission findings outlining the statements examined and the grounds for initiating impeachment proceedings against Žemaitaitis.

Sources checked 19 October 2026. Supreme Court review remains pending in both cases.