COURSE UNIT (MODULE) DESCRIPTION

Course unit (module) title	Code
Political Myth	

Academic staff	Core academic unit(s)
Coordinating: Greta Latvėnaitė **Other:**	Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University, Vokiečių str. 10, LT-01130, Vilnius

Study cycle	Type of the course unit

Mode of delivery	Semester or period when it is delivered	Language of instruction
Online	Spring semester	English

Requisites	
Prerequisites:	**Co-requisites (if relevant):**

Number of ECTS credits allocated	Student's workload (total)	Contact hours	Individual work
5	148	32	116

Purpose of the course unit		
The objective of this course is to introduce students to the role of political myths and non-rational aspects of human experience in political life: collective memory and trauma, hauntology, political charisma and leadership, heroes and antiheroes, victims and villains, self-sacrifice, and the social unconscious. The course also analyses the role of political myths in the contexts of military aggression, the instrumentalisation of history, and conspiracy theories. Students will explore the main theoretical and conceptual approaches to the analysis of political myths and examine how political myths shape perceptions of political reality, construct collective identities, influence political behaviour, and contribute to the legitimisation of political actions and power. The course is organised around four thematic areas: (1) the theoretical foundations of political myths, (2) the psychological and sociocultural aspects of political myths, (3) political identity, leadership, and symbolic narratives, and (4) political myths in the context of history and international politics. General theoretical and conceptual issues will be examined through the analysis of historical and contemporary cases, such as the role of national myths in Sino-Japanese relations, the construction of Irish identity, and Russian historical myths directed against Lithuania. Students are encouraged to critically evaluate different theoretical approaches to political myths, identify and analyse political myths in real-world contexts, and examine how they are constructed, conveyed, and maintained. Upon completion of the course, students are expected to be able to critically evaluate the role of myths in political and social life and to independently apply relevant theoretical approaches to the analysis of empirical cases.		
Learning outcomes of the course unit	**Teaching and learning methods**	**Assessment methods**
Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to define and explain *key concepts* related to political myths and determine their main characteristics and functions.	Seminars, critical engagement with required readings, discussions, independent study of recommended readings, analysis of real-world cases.	Evaluation of participation in seminars, presentation, final paper.

Students will be able to critically evaluate different *theoretical approaches* to the analysis of political myth, identify their strengths and weaknesses, refine and apply these approaches in their own research.	Seminars, critical discussion of required literature, student presentations and independent reading.	Evaluation of participation in seminars, presentation, final paper.
Students will gain knowledge about the *psychological, sociocultural, and historical aspects* of political myths. They will be able to explain how collective memory, trauma, the social unconscious, nationalism, and history are instrumentalised to politically construct perceptions of the world, collective identity, and political behaviour.	Seminars, analysis of academic and publicistic texts, discussion of historical and contemporary political cases.	Evaluation of participation in seminars, interactive exercise, presentation, final paper.
Students will be able to *identify and critically analyse* political myths in real-world contexts. They will be able to reveal how specific political myths are used to construct political identities, legitimise political power, and justify political actions.	Case-study analysis, interactive exercises, seminar discussions, preparation and delivery of student presentations and independent research.	Evaluation of participation in seminars, interactive exercise, presentation, final paper.
Students will be able to formulate relevant and original research questions, develop coherent arguments, and *independently apply* the theoretical approaches for the coherent analyses of political myths.	Independent research, preparation of seminar presentations, discussion of research ideas and individual work on the final paper.	Evaluation of presentation, final paper.

Content	**Contact hours**							**Individual work: time and assignments**	
	Lectures	Tutorials	Seminars	Workshops	Laboratory work	Internship	**Contact hours, total**	**Individual work**	**Tasks for individual work**
1. Theoretical Foundations of Political Myth									
1. Introduction to Political Myths, Course Structure, and Assessment Requirements - What is a myth? - When does a myth become a political myth? - What is the relationship between myth and truth? - In what forms do political myths appear? - Who constructs political myths?			2				**2**	**4**	**Reading and analysis of:** Leonard M. Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 1-25. **Recommended:** Christopher Flood, *Political Myth* (London: Routledge, 2001).
2. Role of Political Myth in Today's World - Is a world without political myths possible? - How do political myths shape our understanding of political reality?			2				**2**	**5**	**Reading and analysis of:** George Schöpflin, "The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths," in *Myths and Nationhood*, (eds.) Geoffrey A. Hosking and George Schöpflin (New York: Routledge, 1997), 19-35. **Recommended:**

								Gérard Bouchard, *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).
3. Two Approaches to Political Myth - What are the main theoretical approaches to analysing political myth? - What are the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches? - Does political myth function more as a mobilizing force for action or as an ideology that upholds the status quo?			2				**2**	**5**	**Reading and analysis of:** Michael Tager, "Myth and Politics in the Works of Sorel and Barthes" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, No. 4 (1986): 625-39. https://doi.org/10.2307/2709722. **Recommended:** Chiara Bottici, "Philosophies of Political Myth, a Comparative Look Backwards: Cassirer, Sorel and Spinoza" *European Journal of Political Theory* 8, No. 3 (2009): 365-82. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885109103840. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 20-36. Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press, [1957] 1991), 131-152.
2. Psychological and Unconscious Dimensions of Political Myth									
4. Psychoanalytic Approach to Political Myths - Where do political myths originate? - Why are political myths so influential? - How do political myths affect people psychologically?			2				**2**	**5**	**Reading and analysis of:** Chiara Bottici and Angela Kühner, "Between Psychoanalysis and Political Philosophy: Towards a Critical Theory of Political Myth" *Critical Horizons* 13, No. 1 (2012): 94-112. https://doi.org/10.1558/crit.v13i1.94. **Recommended:** Farhad Dalal, "The Social Unconscious and Ideology: In Clinical Theory and Practice," in *The Social Unconscious in Persons, Groups, and Societies. Volume 1: Mainly Theory*, (eds.) Earl Hopper and Haim Weinberg (London: Karnac, 2011): 243–64. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429483233. Karim G. Dajani, "The Social Unconscious: Then and Now" *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 19, No. 2 (2022): 179-86. https://doi.org/10.1002/aps.1755.
5. Conspiracy Myths - How do conspiracy myths differ from conspiracy theories? - How do conspiracy myths shape the public's view of the government, institutions, and other countries?			2				**2**	**5**	**Reading and analysis of:** Geoffrey T. Cubitt, "Conspiracy Myths and Conspiracy Theories" *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 20, No. 1 (1989): 12-26.
6. Collective Trauma - How does an individual trauma become a collective experience?			2				**2**	**5**	**Reading and analysis of:** Stephen Frosh, "Born with a Knife in Their Hearts: Transmission, Trauma, Identity, and the Social Unconscious," in *The Social Unconscious in Persons, Groups, and*

- How do the experience of trauma, memory of it, and reinterpretation of collective trauma differ? - Can collective trauma be healed?									*Societies: Volume 2: Mainly Foundation Matrices*, (eds.) Earl Hopper and Haim Weinberg (London: Karnac, 2018), 3–20. **Recommended:** Jeffrey C. Alexander et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1-30.
7. Hauntology - How does the past continue to influence the present? - How does the concept of hauntology differ from traditional approaches to historical and collective memory? - What does the statement "the past haunts the present" mean?			2				**2**	**6**	**Reading and analysis of:** Alexander Etkind, "Post-Soviet Hauntology: Cultural Memory of the Soviet Terror" *Constellations* 16, No. 1 (2009): 182–200. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8675.2009.00527.x. Mark Fisher, "What Is Hauntology?" *Film Quarterly* 66, No. 1 (2012): 16–24. https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16 **Recommended:** Martha Lincoln and Bruce Lincoln, "Toward a Critical Hauntology: Bare Afterlife and the Ghosts of Ba Chúc" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, No. 1 (2015): 191–220. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417514000644.
3. Political Identity, Leadership and Symbolic Narratives									
8. Charisma and Politics - What makes political leadership charismatic? - How do political myths contribute to the construction of it? - To what extent does charisma depend on the expectations of one's followers?			2				**2**	**5**	**Reading and analysis of:** Philip Smith, "Culture and Charisma: Outline of a Theory" *Acta Sociologica* 43, No. 2 (2000): 101-111. Roger Eatwell, "The Concept and Theory of Charismatic Leadership" *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 7, No. 2 (2006): 141-156. https://doi.org/10.1080/14690760600642156. **Recommended:** Ann Ruth Willner, *The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 1-61.
9. Heroes and Antiheroes - How can such morally contrasting figures as heroes and antiheroes both serve as figures in narratives through which politicians legitimise their authority? - Do they both possess equal legitimising power? - How is American politics shaped by myths?			2				**2**	**6**	**Reading and analysis of:** Igor Prusa and Matthew Brummer, "Myth, Fiction and Politics in the Age of Antiheroes: A Case Study of Donald Trump" *Heroism Science* 7, No. 1, (2022): 1-40. https://scholarship.richmond.edu/heroism-science/vol7/iss1/5 Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Heroes, Presidents, and Politics" *Contexts* 9, No. 4 (2010): 16-21. https://doi.org/10.1525/ctx.2010.9.4.16.
10. Sacrifice - What makes an act of sacrifice meaningful? - How do societies remember, represent and interpret acts of sacrifice?			2				**2**	**5**	**Reading and analysis of:** Herbert De Vriese, "Political Myth and Sacrifice" *History of European Ideas* 43, No. 7 (2017): 808-824. https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2017.1321567.

- What is the connection between political myth and sacrifice?									**Recommended:** David Pan, *Sacrifice in the Modern World: On the Particularity and Generality of Nazi Myth* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2012).
11. Victims and Villains - Why do political actors construct narratives of victimhood and villainy? - How are they constructed? - What is the relationship between such political myths and collective identity?			2				**2**	**5**	**Reading and analysis of:** Bernhard Giesen, *Triumph and Trauma. The Yale Cultural Sociology Series.* (Boulder, Colo: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), 45-72. Sam Keen, "Homo Hostilis, the Enemy Maker," in *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 10-15. **Recommended:** Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 1987).
12. Interactive Exercise			2				**2**	**2**	Open book interactive exercise completed during the seminar time on the Virtual Learning Environment.
4. Political Myths in Historical and International Contexts									
13. Wars, Interventions, and Political Myths - What role do political myths play in cases of wars and interventions? - Which audiences do they target?			2				**2**	**6**	**Reading and analysis of:** Hrvoje Cvijanović, Kateryna Shymkevych, and Andrii Omelchenko, "The Shadow of the Bear: Russian Historical Myths in the Context of Russia's Imperial Policy towards Ukraine" *Croatian Political Science Review* 61, No. 4 (2025): 30–49. https://doi.org/10.20901/pm.61.4.02. Joanne Esch, 'Legitimizing the "War on Terror": Political Myth in Official-level Rhetoric' *Political Psychology* 31, No. 3 (2010): 357–391. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2010.00762.x. **Recommended:** Julie Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
14. Instrumentalisation of History - How and why do states instrumentalise their own and other countries' histories? - Is this harmful in all cases? - How do political myths contribute to the construction of Irish identity? - Why does Russia employ historical myths directed against Lithuania? - How can we counter such strategies?			2				**2**	**5**	**Reading and analysis of:** Darius Kuolys, "Lithuania and Moscow: The Difficult Neighbourhood," in *Russia by Daylight*, Almanac no. 1, (ed.) Vladimiras Laučius (Vilnius: Geopolitics and Security Studies Center, 2025), 11-31. https://www.gssc.lt/en/publication/russia-by-daylight-almanac-no-1-2025/. Robert Fitzroy Foster, "'Colliding Cultures': Leland Lyons and the Reinterpretation of Irish History," in *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It up in Ireland* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 2001), 37-58.

15. Nationalism - How can myths contribute to the formation of nationalism? - How do myths enable political elites to construct a collective national identity? - How do national myths affect Sino-Japanese relations?			2				**2**	**5**	**Reading and analysis of:** Yinan He, "War, Myths, and National Identity Formation: Chinese Attitudes Toward Japan," in *National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents*, (ed.) Gérard Bouchard (London: Routledge, 2013), 305-330.
16. Myth as a Universal Sociological Mechanism - Can some myths strengthen social cohesion but at the same time exclude certain groups? - How do social myths adapt to changing circumstances?			2				**2**	**7**	Revision. Preparation and discussion of final paper topics, an overview of the requirements, and advice on academic writing. **Reading and analysis of:** Gérard Bouchard, "The Small Nation with a Big Dream: Québec National Myths," in *National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents*, (ed.) Gérard Bouchard (London: Routledge, 2013), 19-50.
Presentation								**10**	Preparation for a seminar presentation: a critical analysis of the required readings assigned to one of the seminar topics, the formulation of discussion questions, the presentation of one's own argument, and the application of real-world examples of political myths to the topic being discussed.
Final paper								**25**	By the end of the semester, students will be required to write a 2,500–3,000-word final paper applying the theoretical approaches and literature discussed in the seminars to the analysis of a real-world case of political myth. This final paper will serve as the final assessment of the knowledge acquired during the course.
Total			**32**					**116**	

Assessment strategy	Weight %	Deadline	Assessment criteria
Participation in seminars	20	During the semester	During seminars, students are expected to be 1) prepared to discuss the required readings, 2) evaluate them critically, and 3) engage meaningfully and respectfully in discussion with other students in the course by providing real-world examples, sharing their own original ideas or personal experiences, and supplementing or critically evaluating the comments of other participants in the discussion. Attendance at seminars is mandatory. Students who attend all course seminars but do not make meaningful contributions to the discussions will receive a score of 5. The maximum score awarded for participation in seminar discussions is 10, provided that all the requirements listed above are fulfilled.
Presentation	20	During the semester	Over the course, students will be required to give one presentation (in groups of 2-3 students), based on the required readings for that seminar. Recommended readings are optional. Presentations will be evaluated according to the following criteria: 1. The presentation provides a critical analysis of the readings: an argument, a challenge, and a set of follow-up questions, rather than merely a summary of the readings.

			2. Students discuss the main aspects of the texts, but may choose to focus their analysis on specific topics, such as key theoretical or methodological discussions, shortcomings or omissions, and provide real-world examples. 3. Presentations should last between 15 and 20 minutes. This is followed by 10–15 minutes for questions from other students and the course coordinator, to which presenters provide coherent answers supported by the required reading(s). 4. The presentation slides and notes must be uploaded to the Virtual Learning Environment by 6 pm on the day before the presentation. A grade of 10 indicates that all the criteria have been met.
Interactive exercise	20	During the semester (on the 12th seminar)	Students will individually complete the interactive exercise on the Virtual Learning Environment during the seminar. The written interactive exercise will consist of three tasks: 1) reading two short excerpts of academic and journalistic texts, 2) answering three questions based on students' prior knowledge, the required seminar readings, and the excerpts provided for this task, 3) providing and unpacking an example of a real-world political myth. This interactive exercise is graded based on three main criteria: 1. The exercise is submitted in due time; 2. The answers demonstrate the ability to creatively and critically engage with the provided excerpts, seminar readings and their prior knowledge. 3. The answers indicate the analytical skills developed during this course - the student is able to identify political myths and systematically unpack their underlying meaning. A grade of 10 indicates that all the criteria have been met.
Final paper	40	At the end of the semester	At the end of the course, students will write a research paper that should meet the following requirements: - formulate a research question that addresses one of the theoretical issues emphasised during the course (10% of the grade); - review the literature related to this topic: at least two texts from the course, including required and/or recommended readings (10% of the grade); - present a clear argument (not a description or a summary) (20% of the grade); - address the research question by presenting some original research (often involving a case study) (40% of the grade); - develop a clear structure of the research, including introduction, literature review, empirical analysis and conclusion (10% of the grade); - explain the contribution of this research to the field of analysis and/or policymaking implications (10% of the grade). Maximum grade is 10, if all the requirements are met, which is equivalent to the maximum of 40% of the final grade of the course. The research paper should be about 2,500-3,000 words, not including footnotes. Students are allowed to choose the most convenient citation style for this research and clearly state the word count at the end of the paper. Students will also be asked to give a very short oral outline of their research on the 16th seminar of this course. The goal is to write a paper that could be revised and sent out to a journal. The final grade formula: 0.2 × Seminar Participation Grade + 0.2 × Interactive Exercise Grade + 0.2 × Presentation Grade + 0.4 × Final Paper Grade = Final Grade.

Author (-s)	Publishing year	Title	Issue of a periodical or volume of a publication	Publishing house or web link
Required reading				
Alexander, Jeffrey C.	2010	"Heroes, Presidents, and Politics"	*Contexts* 9, no. 4	
Bottici, Chiara, and Angela Kühner	2012	"Between Psychoanalysis and Political Philosophy: Towards a Critical Theory of Political Myth"	*Critical Horizons* 13, no. 1	
Bouchard, Gérard	2013	"The Small Nation with a Big Dream: Québec National Myths"	*National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents* (Edited by Gérard Bouchard)	London: Routledge
Cubitt, Geoffrey T.	1989	"Conspiracy Myths and Conspiracy Theories"	*Journal of the Anthropological Society* of *Oxford* 20, no. 1	
Cvijanović, Hrvoje, Kateryna Shymkevych, and Andrii Omelchenko	2025	"The Shadow of the Bear: Russian Historical Myths in the Context of Russia's Imperial Policy towards Ukraine"	*Croatian Political Science Review* 61, no. 4	
De Vriese, Herbert	2017	"Political Myth and Sacrifice"	*History of European Ideas* 43, no. 7	
Eatwell, Roger	2006	"The Concept and Theory of Charismatic Leadership"	*Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 7, no. 2	
Esch, Joanne	2010	"Legitimizing the 'War on Terror': Political Myth in Official-Level Rhetoric"	*Political Psychology* 31, no. 3	
Etkind, Alexander	2009	"Post-Soviet Hauntology: Cultural Memory of the Soviet Terror"	*Constellations* 16, no. 1	
Fisher, Mark	2012	"What Is Hauntology?"	*Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1	
Foster, Robert Fitzroy	2001	"'Colliding Cultures': Leland Lyons and the Reinterpretation of Irish History" In *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It up in Ireland*		London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press
Frosh, Stephen	2018	"Born with a Knife in Their Hearts: Transmission, Trauma, Identity, and the Social Unconscious"	*The Social Unconscious in Persons, Groups, and Societies* (Edited by Earl Hopper and Haim Weinberg)	London: Karnac
Giesen, Bernhard	2005	*Triumph and Trauma*		Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers
He, Yinan	2013	"War, Myths, and National Identity Formation: Chinese Attitudes Toward Japan"	*National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents* (Edited by Gérard Bouchard)	London: Routledge
Keen, Sam	1986	"Homo Hostilis, the Enemy Maker," In		San Francisco: Harper & Row

		Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination		
Kuolys, Darius	2025	"Lithuania and Moscow: The Difficult Neighbourhood"	*Russia by Daylight*, Almanac no. 1 (Edited by Vladimiras Laučius)	Vilnius: Geopolitics and Security Studies Center
Prusa, Igor, and Matthew Brummer	2022	"Myth, Fiction and Politics in the Age of Antiheroes: A Case Study of Donald Trump"	*Heroism Science* 7, no. 1	
Schöpflin, George	1997	"The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths"	*Myths and Nationhood* (Edited by Geoffrey A. Hosking and George Schöpflin)	New York: Routledge
Smith, Philip	2000	"Culture and Charisma: Outline of a Theory"	*Acta Sociologica* 43, no. 2	
Tager, Michael	1986	"Myth and Politics in the Works of Sorel and Barthes"	*Journal of the History of Ideas* 47, no. 4	
Thompson, Leonard Monteath	1985	"Political Mythology in the Modern World," In *The Political Mythology of Apartheid*		New Haven: Yale University Press
Recommended reading				
Alexander, Jeffrey C., et al.	2004	*Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*		Berkeley: University of California Press
Barthes, Roland	[1957] 1991	"Myth Today" In *Mythologies*		New York: The Noonday Press
Bottici, Chiara	2009	"Philosophies of Political Myth, a Comparative Look Backwards: Cassirer, Sorel and Spinoza"	*European Journal of Political Theory* 8, no. 3	
Bouchard, Gérard	2017	*Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries*		Toronto: University of Toronto Press
Dajani, Karim G.	2022	"The Social Unconscious: Then and Now"	*International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 19, no. 2	
Dalal, Farhad	2011	"The Social Unconscious and Ideology: In Clinical Theory and Practice"	*The Social Unconscious in Persons, Groups, and Societies* (Edited by Earl Hopper and Haim Weinberg)	London: Karnac
Flood, Christopher	2001	*Political Myth*		London: Routledge
Lincoln, Martha, and Bruce Lincoln	2015	"Toward a Critical Hauntology: Bare Afterlife and the Ghosts of Ba Chúc"	*Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, no. 1	
Mertus, Julie	1999	*Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War*		Berkeley: University of California Press
Pan, David	2012	*Sacrifice in the Modern World: On the Particularity and Generality of Nazi Myth*		Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press
Rogin, Michael Paul	1987	*Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other*		Oakland: University of California Press

		Episodes in Political Demonology		
Sorel, Georges	1999	*Reflections on Violence*		Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Willner, Ann Ruth	1984	*The Spellbinders: Charismatic Political Leadership*		New Haven: Yale University Press