

ROMAN KUHAR

The rise and success of the anti-gender movement in Europe and beyond¹

The so-called anti-gender phenomenon is relatively new. It began in Europe and then spread elsewhere, including to Latin America and Africa. It goes beyond earlier forms of resistance to gender equality and tries to attract a broader audience by putting new forms of mobilisation in place, and by promoting international networks and coalitions among different groups (such as family and pro-life associations, radical nationalist parties and right-wing populists) as well as by making reference to a vague ‘gender ideology’. Experts believe the phenomenon’s spread and success are to be ascribed to a number of political and socioeconomic developments, such as the perceived failure of liberal democracy, and in particular to its ability to appeal to and reinforce people’s deep-rooted fears, anxieties and identity-related uncertainties.

In 2012, Slovenia held a referendum on the Family Code, which sought to modernise legislation in the context of partnership and family life, including the legal regulation of same-sex partnerships. Although the Slovenian parliament passed the law, it was later rejected in a referendum initiated by a newly formed association of ‘concerned citizens’ called *Citizens’ Initiatives for Family and Children*. As a sociologist, I actively participated in the expert group that drafted and promoted the law. Although we had anticipated that some people would oppose the legalisation of same-sex partnerships, none of us was prepared for what awaited us during the months of the referendum campaign. The citizens’ initiative addressed the public with a series of new methods made possible by social networks, and most importantly, it constantly repeated the claim that the Family Code was part of the so-called ‘gender theory’. When I first heard this term, my initial thought was of a gap in my own knowledge: is there a specific theory called ‘gender theory’ that I obviously

¹ This text is based on the author’s keynote at the final conference of the EC Horizon 2020 project “Gearing Roles”, Brussels, 18 October 2022 (<https://gearingroles.eu/gr-final-conference/>).

do not know about? There are various theories about gender, but none of them has such a general name as 'gender theory'. Only later did it become clear that 'gender theory' is a new discursive strategy that establishes the idea that there is a 'secret plan' by radical feminists and LGBT+ activists to destroy 'our families' and 'brainwash our children'.

Shortly afterwards, mass protests erupted in France against the Hollande government, which had legalised marriage for all. Among other things, the demonstrators carried signs saying "Non à la théorie du genre". The message was the same as in the referendum in Slovenia. It became clear that we were dealing with something new. Today, this phenomenon is known as the anti-gender movement. After its initial successes in Europe, the movement soon spread to Latin America, Africa and elsewhere.

The anti-gender movement should not be understood as a continuation of earlier forms of conservative resistance to gender equality and sexual politics. Rather, it is new resistance based on new forms of mobilisation, new types of actions and new discourses that portray anti-gender actors as rational, active citizens whose actions are based on common sense. In this way, the anti-gender movement seeks to appeal to a broader audience, not just the traditional circles of conservative groups.²

The roots of the anti-gender movement

The anti-gender movement alternately uses three terms – 'gender ideology', 'gender theory,' or 'genderism' – to indicate the danger posed by issues related to intimate/sexual citizenship. Gender equality policies, they argue, no longer aim to guarantee equal rights but to deny biological facts about men and women, promote gender fluidity, and abolish traditional gender roles, including the role of mother and father. 'Gender ideology' is thus understood as a kind of conspiracy theory, a form of social engineering that interferes with the 'natural order'. It can be understood as an empty signifier that can be filled with very different and sometimes contradictory meanings.³ As an empty signifier, 'gender ideology' is a marker for same-sex marriage, reproductive rights, sex education in schools, adoption, abortion, political correctness, as well as for questioning democracy, social sciences, the functioning of international organisations (UN, WHO or EU) and the adoption of international treaties (such as the Istanbul Convention), all of which are perceived as an attack on the 'silent majority'. In Eastern Europe in particular, the anti-gender movement represents 'gender ideology' in terms of a neo-colonial logic, according to which the decadent West seeks to impose its 'sexual delusion' on the rest of the world.⁴ Related to this is the idea that 'gender ideology' is a sign of former communist elites trying to establish

2 Kuhar R. and D. Paternotte (eds) (2017) *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality* (London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield).

3 Mayer S. and B. Sauer (2017) "'Gender Ideology' in Austria: Coalitions around an empty signifier" in R. Kuhar and D. Paternotte (eds) *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality* (London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield), pp. 23-40.

4 Graff A. and E. Korolczuk (2021) *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*, 1st ed (London: Routledge).

a new cultural revolution after the failed political project of socialism. The assumption is that the struggle is no longer in the relationship between capital and the working class, but in the relationship between men and women. Indeed, 'gender ideology' is often classified as new Marxism or Marxism 2.0.⁵

The movement has Catholic roots and is based on the conflict between two concepts: equal rights (gender equality) and the equal dignity of men and women. The emergence of the term 'gender ideology' can be traced back to developments following the 1994 UN Conference on Population in Cairo and the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing. During these two conferences, the term 'gender' began to appear in official United Nations documents, replacing the more essentialist term 'sex'. At that time, the Vatican and several other countries expressed explicit reservations about the term 'gender'. For them, the idea that the roles of men and women are socially constructed is at odds with their notions of a 'natural family' in which both men and women have their own roles defined by their biological differences. For these reasons, the Vatican has sought to promote the idea of the 'equal dignity' of men and women, rather than equality regardless of gender.⁶

Actors and strategies of the anti-gender movement

Today, the anti-gender movement goes beyond specific religious affiliations. As Eszter Kováts and Maari Põim⁷ point out, the vague notion of 'gender ideology' acts as a symbolic glue that enables cooperation between different actors despite their many differences. The network of the anti-gender movement, therefore, includes family associations, pro-life groups, radical nationalist parties, right-wing populists, and allies from the media, academia, or the business world. In some countries, such as Poland or Hungary, anti-gender ideology has become the official ideology of political elites in power.

The anti-gender actors also form international coalitions, as in the case of the European Citizens' Initiative for the Protection of Marriage and Family "Mum, Dad and Kids"⁸ or the "One of Us"⁹ initiative. There are advocacy networks and organisations such as the European Centre for Law and Justice, Alliance Defending Freedom International, and Agenda Europe. The latter links 150 organisations and individuals in 30 different countries. Their goals are to ban same-sex marriage, ban divorce, ban same-sex adoption, ban artificial insemination, legalise home-schooling and abolish equality legislation at the EU level.¹⁰

One of the first transnational tools to promote the alleged danger of 'gender ideology' was the creation of the CitizenGO platform in 2013, whose goal is to 'defend life, family and freedom around the world'. According to its website, it consists of over 17 million

5 Strehovec T. (2013) "Zakonska Zveza v Perspektivi Drugega Vatikanskega Koncila". *Bogoslovni Vestnik*, no. 2, pp. 233-249.

6 Case, M. A. (2016) "The Role of the Popes in the Invention of Complementarity and the Vatican's Anathematization of Gender". *Religion & Gender* 6, no. 2, pp. 155-172.

7 Kováts, E. and M. Põim (2015) *Gender as Symbolic Glue* (Brussels: FEPS, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung).

8 "European Citizens' Initiative: Mum, Dad & Kids" (2015).

9 "European Citizens' Initiative: One of Us" (2012).

10 Datta, N. (2018) *Restoring the Natural Order* (Brussels: EPF).

active citizens who “prevent radical lobbies from imposing their agenda on society”.¹¹ It operates in 12 different languages primarily on the basis of collecting signatures for anti-gender petitions.

In most cases, the movement tries to hide its religious connections and creates a secularised self-image. It presents itself as a rational, reasonable actor raising its voice because things have simply gone too far. Often this movement also employs a strategy of self-victimisation, portraying itself as the true defenders of oppressed people, a majority that is silent or even silenced by powerful lobbies and elites. They also present themselves as the saviours of national authenticity in the face of international powers. An important part of their activity is the so-called ‘walk through the institutions’, in which they try to have their representatives occupy important positions in consultative or decision-making bodies of the European Union, the Council of Europe and the like. They also use the tool of amicus briefs and other forms of strategic litigation to intervene in legal cases involving issues of intimate or sexual citizenship in an attempt to influence the decisions of the courts.¹²

If we look at the logos of anti-gender campaigns, we can notice many similarities. Most often they are depicted with a silhouette of what they consider a natural family. All of them have two children – a boy and a girl – except Russia and recently Mexico, where they have three children. In some other cases, the logo consists of a hand protecting the children from gender-based threats. What seems to unite them is the image of the ‘innocent child’ – and thus of the family and the nation – which are at the heart of anti-gender discourse (Picture 1).



Picture 1 – Logos of anti-gender organisations

11 “CitizenGo: Defending Life, Family, and Freedom across the World” (2013).

12 Kuhar R. and D. Paternotte (eds) *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe*; Graff A. and E. Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics*; Kováts, E. and M. Põim, *Gender as Symbolic Glue*.

The discourse of anti-gender actors is based on what Ruth Wodak¹³ calls the politics of fear. The alleged danger posed by gender is translated into short messages that incite fear, moral panic and a sense of threat, but also allude to essentialist notions of what is normal and natural. The notion of ‘gender ideology’ plays on people’s deep-rooted anxieties about sexuality, especially homosexuality, and gender roles. In this way, it creates the desired populist effect: aversion, but also anger and moral panic.¹⁴

The success of the anti-gender movement

From this brief description of the contemporary anti-gender movement, it can be concluded that gender and sexuality are now at the centre of struggles for cultural and political hegemony. But what makes the anti-gender project such a successful platform for populist politics in the 21st century?

The most general answer to this question is that the anti-gender movement strategically reinforces the uncertainties associated with the fundamental ontological questions of humanity, including gender as one of the most basic and important indicators of our identity. At the same time, it offers a very simple but reassuring and strategically formulated response to these uncertainties and, more generally, to the current political, economic, social and cultural changes that are being presented as a crisis. In fact, the anti-gender project, both in terms of political movement and discourse, can be understood as a response to four interrelated crises: the crisis of liberal democracy and the problems caused by neoliberalism, the crisis of masculinity, the crisis of equality and the crisis of knowledge (epistemic crisis).

Most current research links the anti-gender movement and anti-gender ideology to the negative economic and social consequences of neoliberalism. The assumption is that the collapse of the welfare state and the culture of commercialisation of our everyday lives, as well as the rise of individualism, have caused anti-gender discourse to fall on fertile ground, especially among the victims of neoliberalism, those who were left behind. Graff and Korolczuk claim that anti-genderism is “structured and legitimised as a conservative response to the excesses of neoliberalism”.¹⁵ Their main argument is that the people are the victims of corrupt elites and gain a sense of agency by adopting anti-gender rhetoric. They become proactive citizens and defenders of traditional values.

Some scholars who see the anti-gender project as a response to the crisis of neoliberalism specifically link it to the failures of liberal democracy and democratic representation. In the context of the European Union, the anti-gender project is interpreted as a reaction to the image that the EU conveys – namely that the EU is based on human rights, which is understood primarily as the protection of minorities, while at the same time social provisions are being dismantled. According to Grzebalska, Kováts and Pető (2007), anti-genderism is a rejection of the current socioeconomic order, which prioritises “identity

13 Wodak, R. (2015) *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: Sage).

14 Kuhar R. and D. Paternotte (eds) *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe*.

15 Graff A. and E. Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics*.

politics over material issues and the weakening of people's social, cultural, and political security [...]"¹⁶

Specifically in the context of Eastern Europe, Elena Zacharenko points out that the anti-gender movement feeds on disenchantment with the creation of equal economic standards with the rest of Europe – a project that has obviously failed. "What was imported instead", she claims, "often with a patronising attitude, were lessons on 'correct' attitudes and values".¹⁷ This is precisely why LGBT activists and feminists are considered elite; it is the success of equality and identity politics that sets them apart as such.

However, this is only part of the story; the success of the anti-gender movement and the viewing of feminists and LGBT people as elites is also related to societal homo-/transphobia and non-acceptance of lifestyle diversity, which is only reinforced by economic and social dissolutions. Legal protection of sexual minorities is seen as 'ideological colonisation' – a term often used by Pope Francis when referring to 'gender ideology'. The antipode of ideological colonisation is tradition, including the traditional family and traditional relationships between men and women. This is where the anti-gender movement and the radical right meet: in the family. For the anti-gender actors, the traditional family is in opposition to 'abnormal' LGBT+ lifestyles or radical feminism, and for the radical right, the traditional family is the core of their nationalism and nativism.

The second stream of studies interprets the success of the anti-gender movement as a response to the crisis of masculinity. Some men are seen as the losers of equality policies and the successes of feminism and gender mainstreaming. The crisis arises from the new and not entirely clear position of men in contemporary society and in the family. This manifests itself in many ways – from the claim that boys are disadvantaged in school because of female teachers and gender equality policies, to the threat to heterosexual men from the normalisation and legal protection of homosexuality, to the interpretation that migrant workers are taking 'our jobs', etc. The anti-gender movement is therefore seen as an attempt to restore the supposedly natural role of men as patriarch of the family. It is an attempt to restore the authority of men who believe that they have been replaced by women, LGBT+ people and migrants. Birgit Sauer¹⁸ calls this "masculinist identity politics", which is largely based on creating a crisis situation, a situation of fears and anxieties, and on the other hand, facilitating the generation of anger and rage at 'the others', at those who are held responsible for this situation, including the advocates of so-called 'gender ideology'.

This is related to yet another line of explanation of the successes of the anti-gender movement, which can be called 'equality fatigue'. Equality fatigue is a position of being fed up with equality politics, 'woke culture', political correctness... – and seeing them as

16 Grzebalska, W., E. Kováts and A. Pető (2017) "Gender as symbolic glue: How "gender" became an umbrella term for the rejection of the (neo)liberal order". *Political Critique: Long Reads, Network 4 Debate* (blog).

17 Zacharenko, E. (2019) "The neoliberal fuel to the anti-gender movement". *Green European Journal*, pp. 1-5.

18 Sauer, B. (2020) "Authoritarian right-wing populism as masculinist identity politics. The role of affects, in G. Dietze and J. Roth (eds) *Right-Wing Populism and Gender* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag), pp. 23-40.

excessive. Equality fatigue is the belief that equality has already been achieved and that feminists and other minorities seek special protection and additional – not equal – rights and benefits. This claim can be understood as tapping into broader forms of ‘fatigue’, particularly in terms of disillusionment with discourses of human rights as spearheaded by transnational organisations and state-sponsored programmes, and broader disillusionment with the promises of democratic transformation in post-socialist societies.¹⁹

The fourth crisis from which the anti-gender movement capitalises is the epistemic crisis, a growing distrust of science, especially the social sciences. It is a struggle over the legitimacy of academic work, especially gender and related studies. Anti-gender actors are important contributors to this crisis because they are concerned not only with political power but also with epistemic power.²⁰ Alternative knowledge production is one of their main political strategies. In some countries, gender departments and gender studies at universities have been attacked and denounced as nests of ‘gender ideology’ and unscientific work. Often dismissed as a waste of public money, gender studies are constructed as ideological, unscientific and in contradiction to the supposedly indisputable findings of the natural sciences, especially biology. For this reason, the anti-gender movement seeks to develop into an alternative field of knowledge production that aims to dismantle post-structural research in the social sciences and humanities.²¹

More recently, anti-gender actors have also begun to establish their own universities. One example is the Polish ultraconservative think tank Ordo Iuris, which produces so-called alternative facts for the Polish government, or what Erzebeta Korolucz²² calls “ultraconservative gendered knowledge” framed by legal and medical discourses and supported by conservative experts with law or medical degrees. Among other things, Ordo Iuris prepared anti-abortion legislation in Poland and recently established the ‘Collegium Intermarium’, which began its work in the fall of 2022. According to its website, “Collegium Intermarium was founded as a response to the deepening crisis of academic life. It refers to the classic perception of the university as a space of free debate and courageous search for truth”.²³ However, it is also true that the alternative knowledge produced to trigger anti-gender actions has its weak points, the most important being the discrepancy between this knowledge and the actual experiences of women and other groups.²⁴ Mieke Verloo rightly claims that in the face of the production of alternative knowledge, it is not “the truth that disappears, but rather the facts and arguments producing it”.²⁵

19 Ghodsee, K. (2014) “A tale of ‘two totalitarianisms’: The crisis of capitalism and the historical memory of communism”. *History of the Present* 4, no. 2, pp. 115-142.

20 Korolczuk, E. (2021) “Counteracting challenges to gender equality in the era of anti-gender campaigns: Competing gender knowledges and affective solidarity”. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 27, no. 4, pp. 694-717 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa021>).

21 Paternotte, D. and M. Verloo (2021) “De-democratization and the politics of knowledge: Unpacking the cultural marxism narrative”. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 28, no. 3, pp. 556-578 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab025>).

22 Korolczuk, E. “Counteracting challenges to gender equality”.

23 “Collegium Intermarium: A new university connecting academics from Central Europe” (2021) .

24 Korolczuk, E. “Counteracting challenges to gender equality”.

25 Verloo, M. (2018) “Gender Knowledge, and Opposition to the Feminist Project: Extreme-Right Populist Parties in the Netherlands”. *Politics and Governance* 6, no. 3, p. 23.

Conclusion

The anti-gender movement is successful because, like populist parties and groups across Europe, it appeals to people's fears about the future – first and foremost, the future of the family, and especially the future of children. With its focus on corrupt elites, the anti-gender movement gives people the promise of a better future. The future, however, lies in the past: our societies, it is claimed, should return to the natural order of things.²⁶ Bauman²⁷ called these demands for a return to the past “retrotopia”: utopian longings today are directed toward an ideal past rather than a better future. The anti-gender movement is a typical retrotopian project. However, the success of the anti-gender movement should not tempt us to create a grand narrative of a global backlash against everything that has been achieved in the last decades in terms of gender equality and sexual politics.²⁸ Indeed, many anti-gender campaigns and messages of hatred toward gender and sexual minorities have led to countermeasures or perhaps even increased public support for equality.

In the summer of 2022, Slovenia, with which we began this text, became the first post-socialist country to introduce marriage equality, including the possibility of adopting children. The claim that the anti-gender movement in Slovenia has contributed to equal rights may seem a little far-fetched, but the fact is that all of this was possible in part because the adoption of the marriage equality law was a reaction to the radical activities of the anti-gender movement.²⁹ We cannot naively say that the danger of the anti-gender project is not real – it is. But the success of the anti-gender movement should not be discouraging. Rather, it should be seen as an opportunity to critically engage with the current problems of feminism and the LGBT+ movement, and to move away from the complicity of gender equality and sexual politics with neoliberal ideology. Instead, the role of feminism and the LGBT+ movement in the 21st century should be to create new spaces of freedom based on strong social politics and solidarity.

26 Kuhar R. and D. Paternotte (eds) *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe*.

27 Bauman, Z. (2017) *Retrotopia*, (Cambridge: Polity Press).

28 Paternotte, D. and R. Kuhar (2018) “Disentangling and locating the ‘global right’: Anti-gender campaigns in Europe”. *Politics and Governance* 6, no. 3, pp. 6-19 (<https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i3.1557>).

29 Kuhar, R. (2022) “How the anti-gender movement contributed to marriage equality in Slovenia”, *Cultural War Papers (Illiberalism Studies Program)*, no. 36, pp. 1-10.