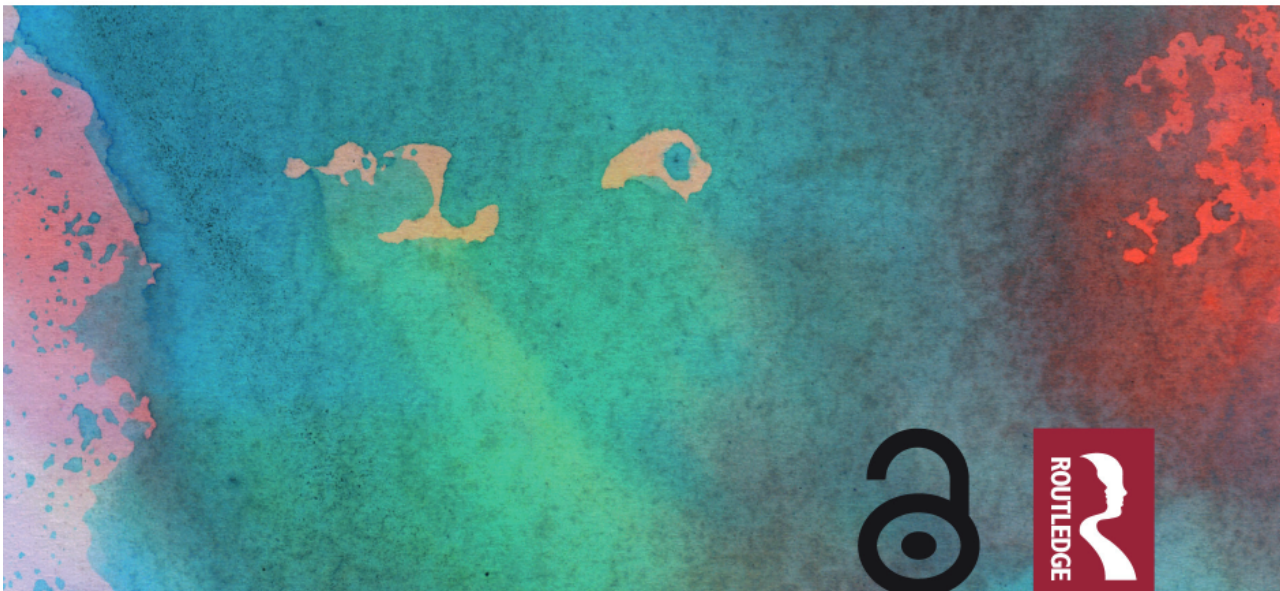


Routledge Studies in Gender, Sexuality and Politics

ANTI-GENDER POLITICS IN THE POPULIST MOMENT

Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk



2 Mapping the anti-gender campaigns as a global movement

From religious trend to political struggle

In September 1995, an American Catholic journalist named Dale O’Leary traveled to Beijing to attend the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. She returned convinced that “the Gender Establishment firmly controls the UN” and made it her mission to reveal to the public the full scope of their plan to “remake the world” (1997: 26). The story she eventually told is that of a hostile takeover of international bodies such as the UN by International Planned Parenthood Federation and a group of aggressive U.S. feminists – a relentless effort to push a radical sexual agenda upon developing nations. In a rhetorical move we view as paradigmatic of the anti-gender imaginary, O’Leary presents herself as a champion of ordinary people’s right to lead traditional lives and to defend their families against the forces of the global Sexual Revolution. She also insists that the gender agenda is in fact a hoax, an outrage against common sense. Her 1997 book *The Gender Agenda* concludes with a vivid metaphor:

The Gender Agenda reminds me of a giant balloon in a small room. So long as everyone treats the balloon with respect, it continues to expand, and, eventually, it will suffocate the people in the room. But, all that is needed to stop the balloon is one sharp pin.

(O’Leary 1997: 213)

O’Leary is one of many conservative Catholics who prepared the ground for what would eventually become an international movement against “gender ideology.” This chapter maps out the intellectual sources and global connections of the anti-gender movement. We discuss (1) the origins of anti-gender campaigns and the key role of the Vatican; (2) the subsequent development of what started as a religious movement into a political one; (3) the importance of the East-West divide for moral and political geography of the movement; (4) the role played by the socio-economic crisis in these developments and (5) the rise of a new wave of feminist activism, which we view as a countermovement to anti-gender campaigns.

There is no doubt that the Vatican and Christian religious institutions played a key role in initiating resistance to “gender ideology” (Buss and

DOI: 10.4324/9781003133520-3

Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement 39

Herman 2003; Case 2011, 2016 and 2019; Garbagnoli 2016; Kuhar 2014). Yet, throughout this book we argue that anti-genderism is political at heart and cannot be reduced to a religious phenomenon. We agree with Paternotte and Kuhar, who claim that the invention of “gender ideology” is not only a religious issue. “These campaigns intersect with raising right-wing populism in Europe and, to a lesser extent, with political homophobia designed as a political project to increase state power” (2017a: 9).

Religious origins of anti-gender campaigns

The trend originates in the 1990s with the Vatican’s opposition to the inclusion of the term “gender” in documents produced during two UN conferences: the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development and the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women (Buss 2004; Case 2011, 2016; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Corredor 2019). Interestingly, this was not simply a case of the center – the Vatican – influencing the peripheries. Morán Faúndes (2019: 410) has traced the genealogy of the “gender ideology” syntagma to the works of several Argentinean neoconservatives produced in 1995 and almost immediately picked up by U.S.-based Catholic journalist Dale O’Leary. According to many scholars, it was O’Leary who became a key early inspiration for the Holy See in introducing the phrase “gender ideology” into its discourse. Her pamphlet “Gender: the Deconstruction of Women” (1995) – later developed into *The Gender Agenda* – was widely read by Vatican officials, including Joseph Ratzinger, and conservative Catholics (Case 2016: 165; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017a: 9–10). Since then, “gender” has gradually replaced “civilization of death,” as well as the opposition between “good” and “bad” feminisms within Catholic teaching, a shift that facilitated alliances that were both international and interfaith (Garbagnoli 2016).

To conservative Catholics, it was unacceptable that key transnational institutions, such as the WHO and UN, had opted for a conceptualization of gender relations rooted in social constructionism and feminism, as opposed to complementarity and “natural law” promoted by the Church. In the words of O’Leary:

The Gender Agenda begins with a false premise – the differences between men and women are social constructs – and then goes on to demand that this premise be “mainstreamed” in every program and policy. According to the “gender perspective,” since all the differences between men’s and women’s activities and achievements are artificial, they can and should be eliminated.

(1997: 161)

Since O’Leary’s book, a whole library of anti-gender works has been published, many of them translated into numerous languages. The core ideas

40 *Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement*

of the religious anti-gender agenda can be found in documents issued by the Vatican, most comprehensively the 1000-page long *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions*, published in 2003 by the Pontifical Council for the Family. Subsequently, Catholics around the world were informed about the dangers of “gender” by numerous exhortations and public documents produced by the Vatican as well as by national Catholic Churches (e.g. Congregation for Catholic Education 2019; Benedict XVI 2008, 2012; Bishops’ Conference of Poland 2013; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004).

The most influential figures of Catholic intellectual circles that have spoken against “genderism” include Michel Schooyans, a Belgian priest positioned in the Vatican, who authored one of the founding books of anti-genderism in 1997; the Guinean Cardinal Robert Sarah appointed a prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments by Pope Francis in 2014; the Colombian Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo, the president of the Pontifical Council for the Family; as well as the French Lacanian psychoanalyst priest Tony Anatrella, who was eventually banned from exercising the priestly ministry in 2018 following an investigation into allegations of his having molested patients whom he claimed to have cured of homosexuality (Shine 2018). There are also several women among widely recognized authorities on the evils of gender, including activists and authors such as the German sociologist Gabriele Kuby (2015) and Belgian American theologian Marguerite Peeters (2007), whose work has been translated into many languages and circulated widely in Europe.

What role has the war on gender played within the Catholic Church? Demonization of gender is sometimes seen as a strategy of the Church to discipline liberal Catholics, whose calls for reform in the aftermath of the pedophile scandals are viewed as a threat to the Church as an institution (e.g. Radzik 2013). On this interpretation, genderism has become the new enemy of the anti-modern wing of the Church, a generalized evil that to some extent replaces Jews in their role of scapegoat associated with modernity and moral degeneracy. Indeed, the similarities between the two mindsets are striking. Like Jews in 19th century European antisemitism, gender is associated with cosmopolitanism and more generally with change, rootlessness and modernity (Volkov 1978) as well as perversion and the dissolution of boundaries (Mosse 1997, Gilman 1991). Like Jews in the conspiratorial antisemitism promoted by ultra-Catholic nationalists in 1930s France (Sanos 2013), gender is claimed to be a global power engaged in scheming against ordinary people, a tool of social engineering, part of a plot of global elites whose ultimate aim is the subjugation of local populations. Finally, like Jews in medieval Christian anti-Judaism, gender is occasionally portrayed as a demonic force, in need of being exorcised (Trachtenberg 1943). When confronting LGBT demonstrations, protesters often bear crosses and rosaries, as if facing a demonic force in need of being exorcised. The numbers 666 can be seen on banners in anti-gender rallies, as can images

Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement 41

of the snail, associated in Christian iconography with sin and especially with lust. A closer look at the Sao Paulo Judith Butler incident reveals repeated references to “hell” (as in: “take your ideologies back to hell”), banners with Butler’s face adorned with horns, as well as references to witchcraft (Jaschik 2017; Brazil 2017).

These are not isolated similarities but elements of a certain pattern, a cultural continuity linking anti-gender discourse and traditions of religiously motivated conspiratorial antisemitism (Graff 2021). The belief that the Jews killed Christ and are enemies of Christianity allied with the devil played an important role in conservative Catholicism until the Second Vatican Council rejected these ideas in the 1960s. In 1988 another effort to purge Catholicism of antisemitism was made by John Paul II, who excommunicated Cardinal Joseph Lefebvre. While these decisions eradicated open antisemitism from Catholic doctrine, the ultraconservative anti-modernist strand of Catholicism survived in the form of Radical Traditionalism – a movement on the margins of the Church, active mostly in the U.S. (Weitzman 2015). The mainstreaming of a conspiratorial narrative about human sexuality can be interpreted as a symptom of a broad shift within the Church; gender has partly replaced Jews as the Church’s enemy and the embodiment of despised modernity. This hypothesis is corroborated by the fact that anti-genderism’s birth during the papacy of Benedict XVI roughly coincides with this pope’s efforts to bring Radical Traditionalism back into the fold. In 2007 Benedict XVI re-introduced the Tridentine Mass and in 2009 he lifted the excommunication of the bishops of the Society of Pius X, a group that had been the center of controversies concerning Holocaust denial (Weitzman 2015). Two months before his abdication, the same pope also issued the Vatican’s first extended exhortation against “gender ideology” (Benedict XVI 2012). Thus, a compromise appears to have been reached between two wings of the Catholic Church: one conspiracy theory replaced another, a change both parties found beneficial. Many anti-gender texts fit the definition of a conspiracy theory as outlined by Jovan Byford (2011). Conspiracism as an explanatory style is centered on intentionality and collusion, while rejecting all official sources of knowledge. Such theories set out to explain complex social processes as sinister plots. The narrative is Manichean in nature; it involves an innocent misled majority that is manipulated by a powerful devious minority group. The conspiratorial imaginary demonizes the enemy, thus precluding any possibility of compromise. Its logic is irrefutable as disconfirming evidence is transformed into further proof of conspiracy, while doubt is dismissed as distraction or worse – a sign of collusion with conspirators.

In short, the rise of anti-genderism appears as a reaction to tensions within contemporary Catholicism and works as the new source of cohesiveness among lay Catholics. As shown in a study conducted in Italy, this is a novel strategy “to combine religious coherence, political representation and consensus for Catholic activists in different arenas [...] an important trigger

42 *Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement*

for the renewal and refocusing of Catholic political action” (Lavizzari and Prearo 2019: 424–425). Thus, a conservative definition of the family becomes a new frontier and a cause to rally around, while dissenters are now positioned as those who have abandoned the faith. In the Polish context, the rise of anti-gender rhetoric within Catholic teaching is part of a broader process described by the theologian and philosopher Stanisław Obirek as a gradual drift of Polish Catholicism away from religion and toward politics (2015). Politicized religiosity in Poland is xenophobic, anti-intellectual, hostile toward the West and implicitly antisemitic, thus it easily enters into alliances with the extreme right forces and right-wing populists. One example of this trend is the rise and spectacular success of the Redemptorist priest Tadeusz Rydzyk, founder of Radio Maryja and TV Trwam, who has fueled nationalistic sentiments in Poland since the early 1990s and – as we will discuss later – become an important actor in anti-gender campaigns.

The Vatican’s opposition towards “genderism” is a continuation of the Church’s war against the “civilization of death” and the 1990s resistance to what was then called the “gender agenda” (Butler 2004; Omang 2013; Favier 2015), but it is worth noting what is new about the current phase of struggle, which dates back to around 2010. One key difference is that while representatives of the clergy and Catholic commentators oppose women’s reproductive rights and stress the connection between family planning and LGBT rights, they also link both to the flaws of global capitalism. Feminism, LGBT and global corporations are said to be part of the same agenda, which supposedly leads to the destruction of family and ultimately to the destruction of Christian civilization. Another new trend is “the inclusiveness of this axis, which is no longer divided along confessions, but rather along reactionary and progressive Christians, be they Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, or Orthodox” (Rivera 2018: 7). Unlike the Vatican’s earlier efforts to defend traditional “family values,” this is now part and parcel of a global struggle. The Catholic origins are undeniable, but examining them should not blind us to the importance of transnational and interfaith connections, or to the presence of fundamentalist Christians of various denominations at key anti-gender events such as World Congress of Families or Agenda Europe meetings, which we discuss below.

From the Vatican to Verona: how a religious movement became a political one

Tracing the Vatican’s influence and grasping the theological grounds of anti-genderism does not account for the movement’s current cultural and political significance. The key question for us is how the religious trend spread beyond the Catholic circles and moved from the realm of religion into that of politics. In our view, three sets of factors contributed to this process: socio-economic, political and technological, all converging in the first decades of the 21st century.

Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement 43

First, the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath strengthened the tendency toward the dismantling of welfare provisions in many states, resulting in increased precarity and a crisis of care (e.g. Piketty 2018; Theiss et al. 2017; Walby 2015). As Sylvia Walby argued in her 2015 book entitled *Crisis*, the global financial downturn had a powerful gender dimension: both the crisis itself (e.g. rising costs of living, stagnant or falling wages and growing job instability) and the austerity measures introduced in response to it, such as budget cuts and social services being turned over to the market, had a disproportional impact on women. Ultraconservative actors redefined these collective experiences in moral terms, as a “crisis of the family.” This was not a mere discursive strategy, but a full-fledged political one. Budget cuts and austerity measures mobilized many citizens to demand better social policies, and some of these mobilizations were subsequently co-opted by ultraconservatives.

The contributing political factor is, of course, the crisis of the left and the rise of right-wing populism, the latter tightly related to the so-called “refugee crisis” and increased attention to Islam as a potential threat to Europeans (Dietze 2019, Norris and Inglehart 2019). These developments facilitated the rise to power of new actors such as Lega in Italy or Law and Justice in Poland and strengthened the position of radical parties such as AfD in Germany, which were willing to cooperate with ultraconservative groups and take on their ideological agenda as their own, merging fear toward “gender ideology” with Islamophobia.

Finally, technological advances, such as social media and online petition platforms, enabled unprecedented collaboration between groups and networks across national borders and provided the means for spreading the ultraconservative worldview in a modern or even hip format (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Castells 2000). It is at the intersection of these trends that a rather marginal religious project – Dale O’Leary’s dream of destroying “the Gender Agenda” by means of “one sharp pin” – evolved into a vibrant transnational movement capable of influencing political developments and even reaching for political power.

Paternotte and Kuhar describe the various national anti-gender movements as “a complex constellation of global actors” (2017b: 271). Available research suggests that, indeed, there is quite a bit of cooperation, some of it institutionalized since the mid-1990s (e.g. Bob 2012; Buss and Herman 2001). For example, Polish activists cooperate closely both regionally and transnationally. During the September 2015 rally “Stop Depravation in Education,” which we attended as participant observers, many international guests were present. The list of speakers included renowned European anti-choice activists such as Antonia Tully (Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, Great Britain), Antoine Renard (La Manif Pour Tous, France and the head of the European Federation of Catholic Family Associations) and Christoph Scharnweber (Demo für alle, Germany).

There is growing evidence of ideational and organizational links between recent mobilizations, including the Vatican’s statements targeting gender,

44 *Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement*

mass protests of concerned parents such as *La Manif Pour Tous* in France, recent attacks on “the gender agenda” in the U.S. and the anti-LGBT and antifeminist backlash in Putin’s Russia, Ukraine and Georgia, as well as anti-gender mobilizations in other regions, including Africa (Datta 2018; Gradskova 2020; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Rivera 2019; Spallaccia 2019; Suchanow 2018, 2020). However, some national movements are closer to each other than to others. The *Ordo Iuris* Institute in Poland and its funding body, the Father Piotr Skarga Association for Christian Culture, have been established by ultraconservative network named TFP – Tradition, Family and Property – which originated in Brazil in 1960 and eventually expanded in other parts of the world, including Eastern Europe. Neil Datta argues that the organization is not so much a Catholic movement as “an insurrection movement within Catholicism, with a distinct way of working by fusing social conservatism with economic hyper-liberalism and a legacy of complicity with far-right movements” (2020: 1). In some countries, including France, TFP was labeled a sect and was accused of indoctrinating school children in its facilities (Suchanow 2020), but this did not stop the organization from expanding. In the beginning of the 21st century its main operation centers became France and Poland, and the main strategies include mobilizing people on the ground, entering decision-making spaces, such as European Union (EU) bodies and local governments, as well as promoting ultraconservative views on sexual and reproductive rights via traditional channels and social media (Datta 2020; Dauksza et al. 2020). TFP is behind some of the most dynamic anti-gender initiatives in Eastern Europe: *Ordo Iuris* is becoming a hub for the entire region. For example, it was behind the establishment of a “sister organization” – the *Vigilare Foundation* – in Croatia. According to Croatian journalist Ana Brakus, “the Father Piotr Skarga Association paid 5,400 Euros in founding capital, on top of 100 Euros from [original funder John Vice] Batarello’s original *Vigilare* NGO” (2018). Representatives of *Ordo Iuris* have served as advisers to the *Vigilare Foundation*, which has followed some of the strategies employed in Poland, including collecting signatures in favor of banning abortion or sending donation slips to thousands of people in a fundraising and propaganda effort.

Close cooperation between Italian and French groups, in turn, has been documented in great detail by Sara Garbagnoli, who writes that:

The success of French anti-gender mobilizations encouraged [Italian] Catholic associations to fully adopt the anti-gender rhetoric. The Italian anti-gender movement, in other words, was created by copying and pasting the logos, the names, and the style of the main anti-gender French protests. New groups were created as the equivalent of French ones: *La Manif Pour Tous* – Italia (LMPT-I), the *Sentinelle in Piedi* (Standing Sentinels) and *Hommen-Italy*.

(2016: 198)

Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement 45

Cooperation takes place across the Atlantic, as well. In 2014 Ignacio Arsuaga and La Manif Pour Tous's Ludovine de La Rochère publicly supported the March for Marriage in Washington DC (Brunet 2014; Feder 2014). In 2019 at the World Congress of Families in Verona, Americans such as Brian Brown, CEO of International Organization for the Family, and ultraconservative evangelical pastor Jim Garlow, the chairman of Renewing American Leadership, shook hands with European political leaders including Italy's Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, Alexey Komov, who was a regional representative of WCF in Russia and Teresa Okafor, the Director of Foundation for African Cultural Heritage in Nigeria (Korolczuk 2019). These examples show that anti-gender ideas, strategies and images travel across borders, and while some remain the same, others are adapted to local needs.

When looking at different national cases of anti-gender mobilizations, common themes and preoccupations become obvious; it is also clear that the movements share common intellectual sources and authorities. Whereas the strategies include demonstrations, publications, workshops and conferences as well as political initiatives in parliaments, it is remarkable how well anti-gender activists have made use of the internet, building a sense of common identity among "defenders of the traditional family and values." There are growing numbers of ultraconservative websites, social media outlets and open platforms disseminating information and mobilizing people to sign online petitions, take part in protests and engage on the local and national level. Sometimes these digital communities are linked to a specific local organization, such as stopgender.pl and stop-seksualizacji.pl in Poland, but there are also multi-language online platforms, such as CitizenGO founded in Spain in 2013, which mobilizes people through online petitions in 17 countries. In spring 2020 the site boasted over 12,000,000 registered users, poised to defend "life, family, and liberty." Campaigns have included an effort to stop the Netflix animated series *Super Drags*, mobilizing people in Ireland to keep abortion illegal, and opposing the depenalization of homosexuality in Kenya. A recent mobilization in Warsaw has opposed the introduction of sex education, based on claims that WHO standards include masturbation lessons for preschoolers (CitizenGo 2019).

The global dimension of the current wave of ultraconservative strategizing consists not only in the building of transnational networks but also in these networks' choice of targets, with an ear for the local culture but an eye for the larger goals ahead. Hence, on the one hand, focus on "conscientious objection" laws, as a way to limit access to abortion in even such liberal contexts as Sweden, and, on the other hand, the relentless vilification of the Istanbul Convention and other EU efforts to promote equality and non-discrimination (e.g. Niemi et al. 2020).

The global anti-gender movement believes itself to be the rightful heir to the values of Western civilization, and increasingly functions as a rival of the progressive forces in the UN and the EU. This long-term strategy is reflected

46 *Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement*

by both intervening at the level of transnational organizations and specific initiatives undertaken by ultraconservative organizations. For example, the Novae Terrae Foundation in Italy, closely linked to Agenda Europe and Lege party, has published a report titled Human Dignity Global Index. The title imitates a well-known UN report, the Universal Human Rights Index, which provides information on human rights violations in specific countries. Here, a “dignity rating” is introduced where dignity implies “the universal right to be born” (entailing limitations on access to contraception and abortion) (Rivera 2019: 18). Thus, efforts to ban abortion are strategically reframed as the pursuit of universal human rights. In the fall of 2020, a similarly structured initiative was launched by Poland’s Ordo Iuris. Following the government’s call to reject the Istanbul Convention, ultraconservative organizations proposed to replace it with the Convention on the Rights of the Family, a document drafted by Ordo Iuris lawyers, which had been circulated in the region for two years and had been endorsed by activists from around Europe, including representatives of HazteOir and CitizenGo, as well as the European Center for Law and Justice (Ciobanu 2020b). Romanian journalist Claudia Ciobanu quotes an Ordo Iuris head lawyer Karolina Pawłowska, who explains this move in terms of the region’s self-defense against the imposition of Western norms:

That’s the whole reason why this initiative started, because we saw that the European Court of Human Rights is, step by step, trying to violate the definition of family and marriage in countries like Poland, Romania, Bulgaria [...] We also have this new project of an EU LGBT strategy, in which the EU would like to impose the recognition of marriage contracted in countries that do recognise gay marriage, on other countries which don’t. [...] The idea of our convention is to defend those countries which try to preserve the natural social order based on the “natural family” from this ideological dictate.

(Ciobanu 2020b)

Much of this ultraconservative strategy consists in repeating the steps by which feminism went international (and institutional) in the seventies, eighties and beyond, building transnational networks and introducing the movement’s vocabulary into the language of international institutions and treaties. What is at stake here is an uneasy balance between transnationalism and national embeddedness. What binds these actors together is ultraconservative universalism, the desire to build a world order that would displace what they perceive as the moral degradation and relativism of the contemporary “modern godless states” (Benedict XVI 2012). When anti-gender actors join forces with right-wing populists, this goal is framed in nationalistic discourse; the struggles for a new moral world seamlessly merge with goals related to national sovereignty and democracy, understood as the power of the people.

Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement 47

Today, cooperation between ultraconservatives and political actors is facilitated by transnational networks and organizations, such as the World Congress of Families (WCF). A global network of pro-life – or rather anti-choice and anti-LGBT – groups, the Congress positions itself as a global pro-family movement. The WCF originated in the U.S. as a project of the Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society, founded in 1997 by conservative historian Allan Carlson. Renamed as the International Organization for the Family (IOF) in 2016, it is now led by Brian Brown, who is also president of the National Organization for Marriage, formed in 2007 specifically to oppose the legalization of gay marriage in California. Today, the IOF has more than 40 official partner organizations around the world, including Russia. The IOF's main goal, as stated in the mission section on their website, is “to unite and equip leaders, organizations, and families to affirm, celebrate, and defend the natural family as the only fundamental and sustainable unit of society” (IOF webpage). The efforts to protect what the leaders call “the natural family” include a range of activities described as “efforts to protect the unborn, encourage marriage, reduce poverty, improve the health of children and adults, help orphans find homes, and eliminate human trafficking and prostitution” (IOF webpage). In practice, the main activities of the organization overlap with the goals of the U.S. Christian Right; they include opposing marriage equality and reproductive rights. Due to its vicious rhetoric and vilification of sexual minorities, the Southern Poverty Law Center lists the IOF as a hate group.

The IOF and its flagship project, the World Congress of Families, have facilitated an ideological alliance between the U.S. Christian Right and European nationalists, right-wing populists and autocrats, perhaps most significantly also including Putin's Russia along with the Russian Orthodox Church. Tracing the links between various figures and groups connected to the WCF may seem like a conspiracy theory, but the connections are well documented (e.g. Bob 2012: 42–43; Datta 2018; Mierzyńska 2020a; Moss 2017; Rivera 2018; Suchanow 2018, 2020). For over a decade, American founders have cooperated closely with local groups in other countries – for instance they took part in organizing the first and the second World Demographic Summits, both of which took place in Russia (at the Russian State Social University in 2011 and in Ulyanovsk in 2012). In 2012 the U.S.-based organization helped Russia launch FamilyPolicy.ru, a powerful advocacy group whose objective is to influence key decision makers and opinion leaders in the field of family policy in Russia.

Not only do the American and Russian ultraconservative organizations cooperate, but Russian oligarchs, notably the ultra-Orthodox billionaire Konstantin Malofeev, are said to sponsor the activities and meetings of the network in an effort to advance Russian political interests in Europe (Barthélemy 2018; Rivera 2019; Suchanow 2020). Another notable figure facilitating transnational cooperation is Alexey Komov, a WCF board member and its representative in Russia, who allegedly worked for Malofeev.

48 *Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement*

Komov cooperated closely with Matteo Salvini, the leader of Italy's populist right party Lega. He was also on the board of CitizenGo, a petition platform started in Spain, as a daughter organization of ultraconservative advocacy group named HazteOir. Both Spanish organizations were initiated by Ignacio Arsuaga, who took part in the World Congress of Families in Verona in 2019, along with Brown, Komov, Salvini and others. It is figures like Komov that best epitomize the effective networking on the global right, which often occurs with the help of Russian money and Orthodox religious authorities (Moss 2017; Datta 2018).

The World Congress of Families is not the only global networking site facilitating cooperation among ultraconservatives and right-wing populists. Another platform for transatlantic cooperation, one that links civil society representatives with political actors, is the Political Network for Values. Established in 2014, it focuses on promoting the traditional family, marriage and religious freedom. According to its website, it is:

a global platform and a resource for legislators and political representatives rooted in a Trans-Atlantic dialogue on shared values and aimed at collaborating as a network on a local and global level by actively defending and promoting the values we share.

(Political Network for Values website)

What differentiates the Network from organizations such as the World Congress of Families is the prominent role of politicians, who are not guests but key figures in this group. The advisory board includes the Hungarian Minister of State for Family and Youth Affairs Katalin Novák as well as parliamentarians from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Croatia, Kenya, Lithuania, Peru, Spain and Slovakia. Representatives of non-governmental organizations outnumber politicians on the Board of Directors, which includes Sharon Slater (president of Family Watch International), Benjamin Bull (Executive Director of Advocacy at First Liberty) and Brian Brown (listed here as President of the National Organization for Marriage). Three other members represent European countries: two politicians (Katalin Novák and Jaime Mayor Oreja, listed as Former Minister of Home Affairs in Spain) and Ignacio Arsuaga, President of CitizenGo.

The Network organizes annual meetings – Regional, Transatlantic and International – called Summits, as if to signal its ambition to become a rival to the United Nations. In recent years such Summits have taken place in Brussels, Washington, Madrid and Bogota, gathering together politicians and civil society representatives from various countries, including Poland and Sweden. An important initiative of the group is called the Values Observatory, whose website features maps of the world assigning various countries specific ratings (marked in green, red or yellow) depending on national legislation and policies concerning abortion, LGBT rights, access to assisted reproduction and euthanasia. Much like the Novae Terrae Foundation's report,

Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement 49

this ranking both echoes and inverts the United Nations' Universal Human Rights Index; countries which allow for homosexual marriage or abortion are marked in an alarming red, whereas contexts where access to termination of pregnancy or assisted reproduction is banned appear in a hopeful green. Poland and other East European countries are presented in yellow, as a frontier between the rival civilizations: the civilization of death prevailing on the West and the Global South together with most of Asia, which are seen as regions committed to "Human Dignity and the Common Good." The very act of drawing such a map can be viewed as ultraconservatives' claiming of moral authority in the international arena and sketching out the boundaries of conflict.

The moral geography of anti-genderism is vividly expressed by visual means in a poster announcing a conference entitled "Culture War in Europe: Does Poland Stand a Chance?", held in Warsaw in October 2020 (see Figure 2.1). The event's main organizer was Patryk Jaki, a European MP associated with the right-wing party United Poland (*Solidarna Polska*). He is known for public statements about "gender ideology," which he routinely equates with Marxism. The image is worth a closer look, due to the remarkable literalism with which it presents this claim. A contour map of Poland is split in two by a closed fist, a symbol of the revolutionary spirit. On the right are Marx, Lenin and a male gay couple in a close embrace. On the left, we see John Paul II, a heterosexual couple with two children (both boys) and Robert Schuman. The latter is perhaps the most interesting figure in this otherwise predictable scenario; Schuman has long been an icon of Europe's liberal forces, a founding father of the EU associated with the ideals of pluralism, individual freedom and transnational cooperation. Recently, however, he is being recruited for the cause of pan-European conservatism and religiosity. While the Vatican initiated the process of his beatification already in the nineties, in recent years Polish ultraconservatives have been presenting him as patron of a Christian Europe of sovereign nations, an antidote to neomarxism and "gender ideology." In Poland, this effort is being carried out by the Institute of Schuman's Thought (*Instytut Myśli Schumana*), formed in 2016, and working in close collaboration with Radio Maryja, TV Trwam and Ordo Iuris. The Institute's website makes it clear that its ambitions are not limited to Poland; the aim is to "shape Europe under the banner of Schuman" building a counterforce to the liberal left secular forces. These ambitions are clearly shared by various groups in Europe. The conference announced in the poster is apparently sponsored by the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) Party, which claims to be Europe's leading Conservative movement united by "centre-right values," but in fact brings together predominantly extreme-right and populist right parties including Vox (Spain), Fratelli di Italia (Italy), Sweden Democrats, Law and Justice (Poland), as well as a number of conservative and far-right parties in both North and South America.

50 *Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement*

Figure 2.1 Poster for the conference “Culture War in Europe: Does Poland Stand a Chance?” organized by Patryk Jaki, Warsaw, Poland, 2020.

Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement 51

Neil Datta's 2018 report on "Restoring the Natural Order" helps one understand how coordination between different national organizations works globally. According to his findings, 20 U.S.-based and European ultraconservative campaigners met in 2013 and began pulling together an agenda of "achievable goals" (Datta 2018). Agenda Europe, as this group calls itself, has since grown to include over 100 organizations from 30 European countries. The network's ideas, aims and ambitions are those of religious extremists, but explicitly religious language is strategically displaced by talk of "rights" and seemingly neutral Natural Law discourse (Datta 2018: 10). "Natural Law," the anonymous authors of the group's manifesto claim, has been undermined by the "Cultural Revolution" (equated by them with "sexual revolution"), which is destroying humanity. Western civilization is on the verge of collapse, and Agenda Europe's urgent rescue plan includes not only overturning existing laws related to sexuality (LGBT rights) and reproduction (contraception, abortion, all assisted reproduction technologies), but also divorce, use of embryonic stem cells, euthanasia and organ transplantation. Their strategy is to reframe the conflict, using the strategies of their opponents. This involves positioning themselves as victims of the Cultural Revolution, "defenders of faith [struggling against] cultural revolutionaries [...] and intolerance against Christians, or 'Christianophobia' " (Datta 2018: 15). Among its strategic recommendations, Agenda Europe's manifesto explicitly mentions the "colonization of human rights" – that is, the reframing of ultraconservative religious positions on sex and reproduction to sound like human rights language. It is worth quoting Agenda Europe's own description of how they intend to oppose what they see as "the contamination of language" by feminist and LGBT activists. The plan is to reclaim the terms used by progressive forces and "contaminate" them back to their own advantage:

It therefore seems to be a much better strategy to use all those words, including neologisms such as "reproductive rights", but at the same time making clear what meaning those words have for us. If that is done consistently, we might even succeed in "contaminating" (or in, fact, rectifying) the vocabulary that our opponents have crafted, so that they cannot use them anymore. If, for example, a sufficient number of governments clearly state that "reproductive rights" means that anybody has the right to reproduce, but that they do not imply any right to have access to abortion or artificial contraception, then all existing references to this term could be used in our favor.

(Agenda Europe 2019a: 127)

It is clear that the ultraconservatives aim to reframe the debate by taking over key terms introduced by the human rights discourse. Also recommended is infiltration of institutions and becoming "a respected interlocutor at the international level"; the aim is to get recognized as a UN player and be

52 *Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement*

included in Treaty Monitoring Bodies, as Special Rapporteurs and judges on the ECJ and ECHR as well as in the EU institutions (Datta 2018: 18).

Agenda Europe shares many supporters and participants with the World Congress of Families. For example, the 2017 WCF annual meeting organized in Budapest brought together, among others, Brian Brown, Alexey Komov and Ignacio Arsuaga, who are all listed as involved in Agenda Europe meetings and strategizing (Datta 2018: 39). Politicians representing populist right-wing parties were also present at Budapest events, including the Polish Minister for Family, Work and Social Policy, Elżbieta Rafalska, and Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, who delivered the opening speech at the summit (Rivera 2018: 16; Suchanow 2019).

Two years later, the World Congress of Families was organized in Verona, an Italian city with a long history of fascist traditions, whose mayor had declared it “pro-life” already in October 2018. Verona proved to be the site of even closer cooperation between political actors and the religious fundamentalists; the summit was supported by both local and national Lega branches, and the then Italian Prime Minister Matteo Salvini was welcomed enthusiastically as the event's star speaker. Salvini's opening speech exemplifies how right-wing populism and anti-genderism converge in the vilification of feminism and Islam, linking the anti-gender struggle with anti-Muslim sentiments:

The feminists that speak of women's rights are the first to pretend to not see what is the first, only and major, real danger in 2019 for rights, social achievements, freedom to work, study, speak, study, dress as you like – and it's not the World Family Congress – it's Islamic extremism, a culture where the woman's value is less than zero [...] The woman gets covered with a burka, the woman doesn't have the right to leave the house, the woman shouldn't wear a mini-skirt, and if she dresses too western, thinks too western or becomes too western, (they) beat her up. Not from the “dangerous extremists” of the Family Congress.

(Fox 2019)

Thus, an Italian right-wing populist leader positions himself as a champion of women's rights and protector of individual freedoms, the core of Western civilization. Similar rhetoric was used by other speakers of the Congress, and, as we will show later, by many anti-gender actors in other locations. Gender-progressive forces are thus vilified as allies of radical Islam and positioned either as cynical enemies of the Western civilization or as naïve dupes, still believing in the peaceful coexistence of different religions and races.

Right-wing populists' ascent to power in countries such as Italy and Poland opened up political opportunities for ultraconservative organizations. The ideological and organizational affinity between ultraconservatives and populist right-wing parties has led to the institutionalization of the anti-gender movement within state structures (Donà and Bellè 2019; Mierzyńska 2020a). This, in turn, has resulted in the intensification of the culture war rhetoric

Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement 53

and the emergence of new anti-gender initiatives. One drastic example is the anti-LGBT campaign in Poland; as of April 2020 more than 80 Polish local governments or municipalities (covering one-third of the country) have proclaimed themselves to be “LGBT-free zones” under the pretense that “LGBT-ideology” is a threat to children and families. This development triggered strong criticism from the European Parliament, which issued a statement linking Poland’s “zones” to a more general rise of homophobia in Europe, including Romania, Estonia, Spain, the UK and Hungary (European Parliament 2019). With the controversy over the “zones,” the struggle over “gender” has become an important cleavage in international relations. At the time of writing (spring 2020), the anti-gender campaigns are entering a new stage, one in which Poland’s very membership in the EU may be at stake.

The moral and political geography of the anti-gender movement: does the East-West divide matter?

Anti-gender alliances are part and parcel of global power struggles and are affected (and often disrupted) by tensions and realignments in international politics such as the changing relations between the U.S., Russia and EU. The key to understanding the present phase of the culture wars is the post-1989 geopolitical landscape; Eastern Europe and the Global South are seen as the key battlegrounds by the ultraconservative forces, whereas Russia plays the role of the poster child of retrotopic political imagination. As Zygmunt Bauman argued in his book *Retrotopia* (2017), utopian aspirations today tend to be directed toward an ideal past rather than a better future. This tendency, he claimed, is a reaction to late modernity experienced by many as a “Hobbesian” world of insecurity, fragmentation, individualism and violence. The anxiety produced by the complexity and liquidity of the modern world results in fantasies about the return of an ideal past. Within retrotopic imagination, both the return of tribal attitudes and indifference toward inequality are viewed not only as rational but also desirable. Not surprisingly, the country that is often idealized in ultraconservative discourse is Putin’s Russia. According to Kuby, “Russia is today the only country where there may be the possibility for church and state to rebuild the foundations of the family” (2014). While core documents of the movement include exhortations from the pope (e.g. Benedict XVI 2012), and while the key proponents of anti-genderism tend to be West Europeans (e.g. Anatrella, Kuby and Peeters), the present interests of the Vatican, Christian fundamentalists in the U.S. and European nationalists appear eerily convergent with those of Putin’s Russia, which is perceived as a moral rejuvenator of the West.

Some scholars posit that “the East-West divide does not offer a particularly useful analytical lens” in the study of anti-gender campaigns (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018: 8). We challenge this view by showing how the East-West divide has been moralized by the anti-gender movement and elaborating on the consequences that this trend has for anti-gender political strategies

54 *Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement*

and coalitions. We argue that the key to understanding the present phase of contemporary culture wars is the post-Cold War geopolitical landscape, in which Eastern Europe and Russia are the key battlegrounds in the struggle against gender and increasingly also influential actors in global struggles.

Former socialist countries play a special role within the anti-gender declension narrative about the fall of Western civilization. Russia is an important source of anti-gender argumentation and resources (Bluhm and Varga 2019; Moss 2017; Suchanow 2020), while Poland and other post-socialist countries constitute a testing ground for the global right on how to implement their political agenda in a favorable political context. In the words of the German sociologist and anti-gender authority Gabriele Kubly:

A new totalitarianism is developing under the cloak of freedom [...] now the East European countries are becoming aware of this trend, and my book seems to be helping awaken people. The destruction has not gone as far here and people are motivated to resist it. My great hope is that these East European countries will become a stronghold of resistance in the European Union.

(as cited in Vail 2014: 1)

In contrast to the 1990s, when the West was aiding the East to establish liberal democracy, today the anti-gender actors claim that it is time for the East to save the West from rampant individualism and secularization.

It is increasingly evident that the operation is not just spiritual in nature – huge amounts of money are involved and Eastern European organizations are not just recipients of Western know-how and financial support but also newly emerged leaders. These developments are connected to geopolitical shifts and the role of the Kremlin as a patron of ultraconservative groups worldwide (Bluhm 2016, Datta 2018, Moss 2015, 2017). A recent investigative report tracing how money travels within the TFP network reveals that Poland has become not only a space where the aims of global ultraconservative organizations can be effectively implemented but also a player in its own right and a source of funding for transnational operations. A group of journalists from Poland, France and Brasil revealed that between 2009 and 2019 the Piotr Skarga Association – the Polish organization that founded Ordo Iuris – transferred 6.8 million euro to ultraconservative groups associated with TFP around the world (Dauksza et al. 2020). The Polish group perfected a business model originally developed by TFP in conjunction with the American Leadership Institute: mass mailings asking people for donations for religious purposes and offering devotional items such as rosaries in return. The reported income of the Piotr Skarga Association from such a scheme amounted to 6.3 million euro in 2019 alone. What explains the spectacular success of this strategy in Poland is that the donors believe that the money is transferred to the Catholic Church, which is why many Catholic institutions in France and in Poland have dissociated themselves

Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement 55

from the financial dealings of TFP network, even though they often support their political agenda. Clearly, the East has become not only just an imagined center of Christian civilization but also an important hub for the global anti-gender movement.

Another vivid example of how anti-genderism is contingent on global politics is the development of the World Congress of Families. On their website the American founders take pride in the accomplishments of their Russian partners; in the eyes of the WCF leaders Russia epitomizes the last frontier of true “family values” because “at a time when Western governments are moving backward to a pagan worldview, Russia has taken a leadership role to advance the natural family” (WCF 2014). However, close collaboration between neoconservatives from Russia and the U.S. in 2012 was put to the test by changes in the global geo-political landscape: tensions between Russia and the U.S./EU due to the crisis in Crimea in 2014 (Moss 2017) and then the developments in Syria. Consequently, American leaders decided to officially withdraw from organizing the biennial conference, which was to take place in 2014 in Moscow. Similarly, Poland was repeatedly mentioned by speakers at the World Congress of Families conference in Verona in 2019 as a great example of pro-family policy making and resistance to gender ideology, but no Polish representatives were present, most probably because the Russian influence in WCF would not go down well with Polish voters. Asked directly by one of the authors why there were no Poles at the Verona conference, Brian Brown stated evasively that they had all been invited but “chose not to come.” Polish investigative journalists and activists working on the issue suggested that open collaboration with Russian-sponsored groups would be potentially incriminating for groups such as Ordo Iuris that work closely with the ruling party (Mierzyńska 2020a; Suchanow 2020).

Like the Vatican, the WCF strives to become a counterweight to the UN at least regarding population policies, but in the context of serious political tensions it has difficulty maintaining its identity as a global institution. The crisis in Eastern Ukraine significantly reduced the political opportunities of some local anti-EU, pro-Russian groups such as the Parents’ Committee of Ukraine (Strelnyk 2017). At the same time, new possibilities for transnational cooperation opened up with the rise of right-wing populist leaders such as Donald Trump or Javier Bolsonaro, whose positions on Russia’s autocratic regime are highly ambiguous.

We interpret anti-genderism as a political movement whose agenda is obfuscated by appeals to human dignity, references to Natural Law and endless talk of moral values. Examined from a political perspective, the anti-gender campaigns reflect the nature of global civil society, which is ideologically diverse and conflict-oriented, with differences cutting across institutions and borders, and specific battles resulting in policy outcomes (Bob 2012; Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2017). This conceptual framework allows us to see transnational and local ideological and institutional

56 *Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement*

connections. Locally, the movement often has a grassroots character and builds on context-specific concerns; the key themes, however, such as the recurrent image of the child in danger and the critique of cosmopolitan elites, are commonly used by anti-genderists around the globe. The movement's activists and ideologues portray politics as evil and corrupt, while local populations are seen as innocent, authentic and oppressed. By appealing to nostalgia for "natural" modes of living, anti-gender campaigns tap into the anti-political resentment observed on both sides of the Atlantic (Bennett et al. 2013), which in turn fuels electoral victories of right-wing populist actors and political successes of extreme right-wing parties (Köttig, Bitzan and Petö 2016; Krizsán and Roggeband 2019). Thus, as we will show in the following chapters, anti-genderism is best seen as a brand of populist discourse.

While ultraconservative organizations seek respectability and legitimacy through the use of the language of human rights and engagement in transnational institutions, they sometimes struggle to manage their public image as legitimate actors within liberal democracy. A vivid example of such a public relations crisis can be found in the publication of Agenda Europe's secret documents by the secretary of the European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights, Neil Datta, in 2018 (Datta 2018; Agenda Europe 2019a). While Agenda is focused on Europe and many of its leaders have direct links to the Vatican, its Summits have hosted American luminaries from groups such as the (Rivera 2019). These special guests were there to share experiences gained in many decades of activism in the U.S., which many European activists seem to view as far ahead of Western Europe. An important guest speaker was Alexey Komov, a well-known Russian ultraconservative representing the Russian Orthodox Church and, no doubt, Russia itself, as a beacon of the new ultraconservative civilization. Donors to the program include a Mexican billionaire, members of the European aristocracy, a UK climate-change denier, a far-right Russian oligarch and a corrupt Italian politician (Datta 2018: 24; Rivera 2019). While these connections are clearly profitable to the network, they are also less than attractive to the general public in Europe. As Datta comments:

Vatican surrogates catalysed the Christian, anti-SRR community in Europe and leveraged Catholic institutions to create a space where Agenda Europe members could discreetly convene and strategize, away from public scrutiny, but under the helpful gaze of the Holy See.

(2018: 19)

Thus, a problem arose when the strategic document produced at an Agenda Europe meeting was leaked to the public and publicized. Agenda representatives responded with a venomously sarcastic post on their blog dated 6 May 2018. The post is worth quoting at length as it shows, perhaps

Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement 57

unintentionally, a profound ambivalence and anxiety regarding the issue of transparency:

Neil Datta, the chief lobbyist of the international baby-slaughtering industry on the Brussels scene, has made a sensational discovery that is making headlines all over Europe: he has found out that defenders of the Right to Life from all over Europe know each other, connect to each other, support each other, and ... actually ... meet each other!!!! Now, this comes as a total surprise. A really shocking revelation. Until just some weeks ago, Datta must have thought that meeting each other, discussing strategies, or influencing politics was the exclusive privilege of the baby-killing industry (which, thanks to its enormous profits, can afford a host of well-paid professional lobbyists like himself), and perhaps of some other protagonists of the Culture of Death (such as the sodomy-promoting fake-NGO ILGA Europe, which, thanks to lavish donations from George Soros and the European Commission, is equally able to afford a highly efficient lobbying activity all over Europe), but he never expected that his opponents – the defenders of the Human Rights and Human Dignity he so viscerally rejects – were doing *the same*.

(Agenda Europe 2019b)

Despite the fact that Agenda Europe representatives vehemently denied the secret status of the network and claimed full transparency, in fact it took them over a year to fulfill the promise and publish the document itself. They did so in a blog entry dated 21 May 2019, explaining that the document had needed “a bit of proof-reading before [they] put it online” and adding that in the process they “somehow forgot about” it. Interestingly, the published document bears no signatures or names, thus belying claims to full transparency, while in the blog post the anonymous authors ironically dismiss any transnational connections between their network and Russian oligarchs, European aristocrats or Steve Bannon.

The authors call Datta “a gangster-lobbyist” and a representative of “a multi-billion industry that kills babies and sells their body parts,” which makes the text an example of hate speech, a discourse that dehumanizes its opponents, thus implicitly justifying potential violence. It is a rhetorical structure commonly used by anti-gender groups: another example we discuss further on is the Polish “documentary” entitled “Invasion” aired in 2019 (see Chapter 4). What caused this outburst of anger and hatred? In our view, the network aims to mainstream its radical ultraconservative agenda in what is a largely liberal Europe. Hence, it tends to highlight its identity as the voice of the people (e.g. by including links to many conservative NGOs), while concealing its alliances with radical political parties such as Vox, and perhaps even more importantly, its affiliations with Russian actors such as Komov. By publishing what the network calls an “entirely private document destined to animate a private discussion in a private meeting”

58 *Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement*

(Agenda Europe 2019b), Datta upset this strategy, revealing the ways in which Agenda Europe really functions: as a network of elite groups allied with radical and populist right-wing parties and the Kremlin, and supported by shadowy business moguls whose ultimate aim is to reach for power.

Protecting children and families: moralizing the socio-economic crisis

In many countries, anti-gender campaigns erupted in response to specific legislative initiatives seen as a danger to families and children. The triggers have included reproductive rights, gay marriage and the prevention of gender-based violence, but also sex education in schools and gender studies in general. The campaigns' central motif – both rhetorical and visual – has almost invariably been the child in danger and the traditional family in need of protection: the logos of various campaigns featuring silhouettes of “traditional” families are strikingly similar (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017b: 269). As early as 2004, “gender” was demonized during the conservative mobilization against Zapatero’s government same-sex marriage bill in Spain (Cornejo and Galan 2017). The peak of European mass mobilization against “gender ideology” occurred in France in the fall of 2012 when hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of Paris and Lyon to oppose marriage equality for non-heterosexual couples under the banner of La Manif Pour Tous (Chetcuti-Osorovitz and Teichner 2018; Fassin 2016). In Italy, a political party named The People of the Family (*Il Popolo della Famiglia*) was formed in 2016 by one of the leaders of anti-LGBT networks, with the slogan “No gender in schools,” and the anti-gender agenda was eventually taken over by mainstream parties such as Lega, as part of the effort to build their political image as defenders of the family and tradition (Garbagnoli 2017; Lavizzari and Prearo 2019). Anti-gender campaigns focused on “protecting” children have also spread beyond the European context; in August 2017 the Supreme Court of Justice in Peru ruled that including “gender ideology” in school curricula is illegal as it violates parents’ rights to decide about their children’s upbringing; in Brazil opposition to gender studies and equality policies became one of the core political goals of the newly elected President Bolsonaro (Correa, Paternotte and Kuhar 2018; Redden 2018). In roughly the same period (2017–2018) thousands of Polish schools submitted themselves for certification as “Family Friendly,” a program led by a Catholic anti-choice foundation determined to protect children from “gender indoctrination.”

While the focus on children has been a staple of many conservative campaigns in the past, the current attack on “gender” would not be such a success if right-wing populism did not address the real needs and grievances of many families in Europe and beyond. Ultraconservative actors – both religious and secular – have skillfully harnessed people’s anxieties, resentment and anger by claiming to defend the natural family against a morally

Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement 59

corrupt and wealthy elite. This claim alone may sound somewhat vague; what makes it robust and convincing is the accompanying promise of more generous social policies focused on parents and children. Such proposals are often purely strategic, but they should not be dismissed. Promises of generous welfare provisions are an effective way to recruit supporters who do not necessarily share an ultraconservative worldview.

In many countries, “defending the family” and promoting public policies with a family perspective became an important platform of cooperation between anti-gender organizations and right-wing populist parties. The latter often combine conservative positions on gender equality with promoting generous state support for “our children” and “our families.” Already in the 1990s, radical right parties began to shift their economic orientation from pro-market to welfare chauvinism (Andersen and Bjørklund 1990; Eger and Valdez 2015; Mudde 2002; Norocel 2016). Maureen A. Eger and Sarah Valdez (2015), who analyzed the political ideology of European radical right parties and their voters’ attitudes, conclude that this shift can help explain the rise of popular support for such parties. They conclude that while radical right politicians increasingly invest in nationalist ideology, including a preference for anti-immigrant and anti-multicultural policies, they also tend to embrace welfare chauvinism, supporting the increase in social spending for in-groups, while cutting benefits to out-groups:

During the 1970s and early 1980s, parties articulated support for free enterprise and economic orthodoxy; yet, in the most recent period, platforms indicate a decline in support for liberal economics. Instead, these parties increasingly favour social expenditure and welfare state redistribution. Results from our voting analysis confirm that welfare chauvinism – not rightist economic preferences – affects voting behaviour.

(Eger and Valdez 2015: 124–125)

Poland and Hungary are vivid examples of how contemporary right-wing populist parties employ a similar strategy, positioning themselves as champions of generous social policies. They claim to support hard-working families with children – families that liberals allegedly never cared for. In Chapter 5 we show in detail that they have also introduced a number of policies aimed at boosting fertility rates, and that the issue of welfare and the mobilization of parents have been of paramount importance for the popular appeal of the anti-gender movement. The 2019 World Congress of Families in Verona was emblematic in this regard: even the American leaders publicly agreed that state support in the form of cash transfers, cheap credit and affordable child care is an important element of defending “the natural family” (Korolczuk 2019).

We claim that anti-genderism is the contemporary populist right’s response to the failures of the neoliberal paradigm, on both the ideological

60 *Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement*

and economic levels. The obvious effects of neoliberalism include the privatization of social services, the dismantling of welfare provisions and the precarization of the working and living conditions of both women and men (Brown 2015; Charkiewicz and Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz 2009; Zacharenko 2019, Walby 2015). But there are also social and cultural effects: neoliberalism economizes all spheres of life and introduces extreme forms of individualism, deeply transforming gender relations and value systems (Brown 2015 and 2019; Cabanas and Illouz 2019; Fraser 2009; Gregor and Grzebalska 2016; Ong 2006). While in reality right-wing populist governments have continued neoliberal policies in some areas, e.g. forging close alliances with the business elite and continuing the process of privatizing the state's assets (e.g. Pawłowski 2020), simultaneously, they have introduced some pro-welfare changes and stressed the importance of state support for families. Thus, they have been successful in presenting themselves as guardians of social cohesion and as generous supporters of the common people. Anti-gender rhetoric has helped them to link the economic, the social and the cultural dimensions, and to promulgate the view that only traditional forms of community – the family and the nation – offer protection against the evils of late capitalism.

In contemporary ultraconservative discourse “gender” is strongly linked to “individualism” and antithetical to “natural family.” “Gender” stands for confusion, instability, erosion of community, in short, the chaos of modern life. This is why the anti-gender rhetoric is so readily adopted by right-wing populists. As Ruth Wodak elaborates in her seminal book *The Politics of Fear* (2015), right-wing populism thrives on collective anxieties related to both real and imagined threats such as economic hardships, the refugee crisis and moral panics. “Gender” – a word that sounds ominous and alien in most cultural contexts – has replaced feminism in ultraconservative rhetoric, epitomizing both the erosion of family and social bonds, as well as economic exploitation of the people by the corrupt global elites.

Knowledge production and expertise: academia as a site of struggle

Anti-genderists do not just undermine the scholarly legitimacy of gender studies scholars, whom they portray as ideology-driven activists blinded by “cultural Marxism” (Jamin 2018; Busbridge et al. 2020); they also aim to build academic credentials for their own claims. Gender is deemed ideological and unscientific, whereas a commonsense view of sex differences as being self-evident and biologically grounded is said to be scientific. This tendency is shared by the contemporary populist right, which is profoundly suspicious of experts, academic institutions and intellectual authorities in general. This trend is not limited to gender issues; history is also an important battleground, especially the history of migration, antisemitism, slavery, colonialism and nationalism. Right-wing intellectuals have long claimed

Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement 61

that academia is dominated by liberals and leftists, thus must be purged of “ideology”: this view has been an important theme of the culture wars at least since the 1970s (e.g. Engeli 2019; Hartman 2015). Attacks against gender studies have evolved into an emblematic element of this process, which consists of attacking gender scholars as well as building up alternative sources of legitimacy, a body of knowledge and a new pantheon of intellectual celebrities with academic titles (Korolczuk 2020). A close reading of texts by exponents of transnational anti-genderism, including Gabriele Kuby and Marguerite Peeters – or their local versions such as Polish anti-genderists Father Oko or Marzena Nykiel – reveals an ambitious intellectual project, one that strives to present itself as rational and rooted in science (Kuhar 2014). Books are published and translated, lectures are given and academic conferences are organized at institutions of higher learning, online courses and workshops are offered.

Anti-genderism is thus a vast project of knowledge production and education, which employs various channels, both religious and secular. Just like second wave feminism established itself in the academic world in the form of gender studies, the present wave of anti-feminist activism seeks to legitimize itself by establishing *anti-gender studies* (Korolczuk 2020). The scale of this educational effort is remarkable. For example, in Poland during 2015 alone the Association of Catholic Families organized over 120 meetings for parents concerned about the “sexualization of children” through gender education in parishes all over Poland (Duda 2016: 37). In 2017 Polish gender scholars were targeted by the Ordo Iuris Institute, demanding that rectors of public universities provide a list – it seems appropriate to call it a “blacklist” – of gender studies scholars, whom they accused of promoting pedophilia. Interestingly, by 2020 the Ordo Iuris strategy had changed; the foundation proposed to amend the law of higher education as to “strengthen the freedom of opinion.” In practice, this proposal would have opened the doors of academic institutions to religious fundamentalists of no academic standing, including “experts” promoted by Ordo Iuris, such as Mark Regnerus, whose research on children brought up in homosexual families has been discredited by the American Sociological Association. The future of this legislative change remains uncertain, but the ultraconservatives’ efforts have in the meantime focused on silencing students at Silesian University, following a complaint against one of the professors, who had expressed ultraconservative views during lectures (Morgan 2020; Śmieja and Boryslawski 2020).

Anti-genderism, as a body of knowledge and worldview, claims to be scientific, even though the movement’s proclaimed aims are moral and its highest authorities tend to be religious figures. It reflects an ambitious plan to establish a new paradigm in social sciences, based on a religiously grounded set of fundamental truths about human nature, sexuality, family and society. In their texts and lectures, the key experts featured by the movement – some local, some international, often endowed with academic titles – engage in endless mutual citation, a vicious circle of self-legitimation

62 *Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement*

as is characteristic of conspiracy theories (Byford 2011). Anti-genderists have established an intellectual circuit alternative not just to gender studies or feminism but to contemporary social sciences and cultural studies. As Kuhar has observed, “the Church’s discourse (and its public appearance) seems to be ‘secularizing’: the Bible is substituted by science and the Church itself by civil society proxies” (2014: 7).

Sometimes this struggle turns violent. An emblematic event took place in October 2017 when an effigy of Judith Butler was burnt by protesters opposed to her visiting Brazil (Brazil 2017; Jashik 2017). Over 370,000 people signed a petition calling for the cancellation of her lecture and the conference she co-organized in Sao Paulo, and claiming that gender equals pedophilia. In 2018 a fake bomb was left on the doorstep of the National Secretariat for Gender Research in Gothenburg, and even though no one was hurt, the message was clear: opponents of gender studies and gender mainstreaming mean business. Media reports and recent studies have shown that even in gender-egalitarian Sweden many scholars interested in gender and queer theory are trolled online and receive hateful emails, as well as rape and death threats (e.g. Ericson 2020; Lilja and Johansson 2018, de los Reyes et al. 2017). While some of those attacks have been waged by alt-right trolls, Sweden being a hotbed of alt-right activity in Europe, more mainstream critiques of gender studies significantly add to the hostile atmosphere. Even before the bomb threat, gender studies scholars in Sweden were concerned for their safety enough to publish an open letter in the popular Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet*, where they claimed that such attacks “often lead academics to change their research focus. They do not have the strength to live with the threats directed at them. A milieu that wants to limit the space for open and critical research is expanding” (de los Reyes et al. 2017, our translation).

In many countries attacks on gender studies have been justified as being in defense of true science, objectivity and freedom of speech, but references to insufficient academic productivity are also sometimes made. In August 2018, the right-wing populist government in Hungary announced its plan to ban gender studies in both public and private universities, claiming that it no longer wishes to finance such educational programs, as their graduates have no jobs anyway. Apparently, the neoliberal logic of today’s academia seamlessly coexists with ultraconservative bias against gender studies. In June 2020 the Romanian parliament voted to pass a law that makes it illegal to use the concept of “gender” in higher education and to question the difference between sex and gender, thus effectively outlawing gender studies as a discipline (Bucur 2020; Tidey 2020). Subsequently, the proposal was rejected, thanks to an appeal to the country’s Constitutional Court made by Romanian president, but this initiative attests to the broader tendency in the region.

Sweden is an interesting example, where gender studies are delegitimized through their comparison to religion (Korolczuk and Gunnarsson Payne 2018). One of the most vocal critics of gender studies and gender mainstreaming in the Swedish media is the freelance journalist and conservative pundit Ivar Arpi, who regularly publishes on such issues in major newspapers, such as

Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement 63

Svenska Dagbladet (SD). In four long articles published in SD in Autumn 2017, Arpi described the alleged hegemony of gender studies at Swedish universities. He claimed that gender studies have become a “higher church” (*upper kyrkan*) in today’s academia: a set of scientifically unfounded claims is used to indoctrinate young people at institutions of higher learning, while ideological radicalism of feminist and queer scholars leads to stifling public debate and freedom of speech (Arpi 2017a). Arpi has not postulated the banning of gender studies in the Swedish educational system; in fact, he positions himself as a defender of academic freedom, which is allegedly under threat from an overzealous and radical elite group (2017b, 2017c).

Despite its secular framing, Arpi’s critique of gender studies and gender mainstreaming is strikingly similar to attacks waged by religious anti-gender pundits such as Kuby or Peeters. Arpi’s 2020 book *Genusdoktrinen* (Gender Doctrine), written together with Anna-Karin Wyndham, who holds a doctorate in pedagogy from the University of Gothenburg, presents a world where a silent revolution is underway, the pursuit of knowledge is endangered, and truth is distorted. Ironically enough, the book is listed in the Gender Studies section on the website of Bokus, one of the biggest online booksellers in the country. It is advertised by an alarmist passage telling the prospective buyer to brace for an upcoming catastrophe:

A revolution is sweeping through our universities. It is called gender mainstreaming and it is used as a cover for a radical and in-depth process. Quotas for women are established behind closed doors. Researchers fall silent for fear of reprisal. Knowledge is distorted when research funding is conditional on the need to create a gender perspective, even if it is glaciers, Moomin trolls or bridge supports that are being studied. What is now happening at the universities will soon affect the whole of society.

(Bokus 2020, our translation)

Arpi is not the only Swedish journalist critiquing gender studies as an unscientific, ideology-driven and dangerous. A similar vision of a gender apocalypse has appeared in opinion pieces published by various authors in Christian media, local newspapers and right-wing extremist online magazines, such as *Samtiden* (e.g. Hyltén-Cavallius 2017).

The anti-gender activists focus on educational institutions and universities not only because they see them as a breeding ground of “gender ideologues” and sex educators, but also because they attempt to delegitimize and eventually replace current intellectual elites. The movement’s promise to its constituency is a world in which ordinary people thrive supported by the state, free from the pressures and demoralizing influence of liberal elites. As in the case of Hungary and Sweden, the critique of gender studies and anti-discriminatory education does not have to be rooted in religious discourse, but can also be derived from a neoliberal rhetoric of productivity and “objective science.”

64 *Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement*

Anti-gender campaigns and feminist mobilization: the dynamics of political struggle

We believe it is necessary to examine anti-gender campaigns in dialectic with the emergence of a new wave of feminist activism. Too often are the two phenomena analyzed separately: the former as a new stage in the decades-old opposition to gender and sexual equality among religious fundamentalists, the latter as a response to the rise of misogyny epitomized by the alt-right in the U.S. and masculinist movements around the world. Rather, we view anti-genderism and the new feminism as rival responses to the challenges of the populist moment. While most actors on the right have always viewed gender issues as central to their cultural and political project, the liberal mainstream and parts of the left seemed for a long time to be oblivious of the significance of women's and LGBT rights. In Chapter 3 we will show how gender-related battles were central to the victory of the populist right in Poland, and how the defense of women's rights became an important nexus of resistance against the Kaczyński regime.

On 3 October 2016, many commentators were astonished to see tens of thousands of angry women in the streets of 140 Polish cities and villages. That same year, mass-scale protests erupted in Argentina under the slogan #NiUnaMenos as women revolted against femicide and sexual violence. The movement grew and radicalized quickly, “expanding the ambit of ‘violence’ as an analytical category to include the multifarious assaults of capitalism on the lives of poor and working women and gender non-conforming people” (Arruzza and Bhattacharya 2018). A few months later, the Women's March on Washington took place, in response to the inauguration of Donald Trump as U.S. president, turning into one of the biggest grassroots mobilizations in the country's history. Perhaps the most vivid example of the new wave of women's activism is the International Women's Strike – also known under the Spanish name *Paro Internacional de Mujeres* – a global mobilization coordinated across different countries, bringing women into the streets on 8 March 2017 and 2018. Initiated by activists from the Polish Women's Strike, the network operated under the banner “Solidarity is our weapon” in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the U.S. In late October 2016, the IWS made a call to strike translated into several languages:

We, the women of the world, had enough of physical, economic, verbal or moral violence directed against us. We will not tolerate it passively. [...] As conscious citizens, us women know that the world is going through a phase of crisis but we do not accept being victims of it. [...] We, the women of the world, announce that if we do not take effective measures to stop this violence urgently and immediately, we will make a strike, caring and united, all over the world to defend our human rights. We constitute more than half of the world's population and we know that power is in our hands.

(International Women's Strike 2017)

Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement 65

Women’s rights – a set of issues that had been dismissed for decades as mere distractions from real political struggle, as “cultural” or “identity” politics – proved to be the biggest mobilizing factors at a time of political crisis. In terms of sheer attendance, feminist protests attracted incomparably more people than “pro-family” marches ever had. For example, the March for the Family organized by the World Congress of Families in Verona in March 2019 (Figure 2.2) was attended by a thousand participants at most, whereas a feminist protest against the WCF (Figure 2.3) gathered at least



Figure 2.2 March for the Family in Verona, Italy, 2019, organized by the World Congress of Families.

Photo by Elżbieta Korolczuk



Figure 2.3 Feminist March in Verona, Italy, 2019, held under the banner “Verona Transfeminist Parade.”

Photo by Elżbieta Korolczuk

66 *Anti-gender campaigns as a global movement*

30,000 people from all over Italy and abroad. The political dynamic, however, makes it much more difficult for the progressive groups to influence politics. In countries where the populist right is in power, such as Poland, Brazil or Italy under Salvini, the structure of political opportunities is more or less closed to feminist actors.