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Paternotte, David; Kuhar, Roman

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Article

## Disentangling and Locating the “Global Right”: Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe

David Paternotte <sup>1,\*</sup> and Roman Kuhar <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Université libre de Bruxelles, 1000 Brussels, Belgium; E-Mail: david.paternotte@ulb.ac.be

<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia; E-Mail: roman.kuhar@ff.uni-lj.si

\* Corresponding author

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### Abstract

This article examines the development of campaigns against “gender ideology” in Europe, leading to the emergence of a specific family of mobilizations that we call anti-gender campaigns. These campaigns, started in the mid-1990s as a Catholic project in reaction to the results of the UN conferences of Cairo and Beijing, but developed significantly in several European countries after crucial encounters with right-wing populism. While recognizing the importance of these crossovers, we contend the interpretation that mobilizations against “gender ideology” and right-wing populism are the two faces of the same coin, and we plead for a more complex understanding of the ways in which distinct—and sometimes competing—projects can converge in specific settings. We argue that research on the “Global Right Wing” should therefore disentangle the various components of this phenomenon, and locate them in concrete settings. We show that this research strategy allows us to better grasp the specificities of each project and the ways in which they interact. Opening our eyes on crucial developments in contemporary Europe, this strategy also prevents researchers from falling into the trap of a global and unqualified backlash against everything achieved in terms of gender and sexuality in the last decades.

### Keywords

anti-gender campaigns; anti-gender movement; Europe; gender ideology; global right; populism

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

In September 2017, EuroNGOs, the network of European NGOs for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Population and Development, convened the organization’s annual meeting in Brussels under the theme *Re: Frame. Promoting SRHR in a time of growing populism*. The aim was to “challenge thinking and stimulate debate around the rise of populism, its impact on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights issues and how to respond to this changing context” (EuroNGOs, 2017). Two months later, European Commissioners Tim-

mermans and Jourová dedicated the EU annual colloquium on fundamental rights to the study of “women’s rights in turbulent times” (European Commission, 2017). The objective was to reflect, in presence of government representatives from all Member states, “on the relationship between strong fundamental rights for women, and resilient democratic societies”, including the “shrinking space for civil society” and the increasingly hostile climate in specific Member states. These two events, which followed each other very closely, are good indicators of the current climate among European policy-makers<sup>1</sup> and by no means exceptions in the region. They translate

<sup>1</sup> One of the authors was a speaker at both events.

growing concern for the fate of liberal democracy and fears that fundamental rights might be under threat.

A similar trend is observed in the academic literature, with a rapid development of research on opposition to gender and sexual rights in Europe (e.g. Avanza & Della Sudda, 2017; Bracke & Paternotte, 2016a; Broqua & Fillieule, 2018; Graff & Korolczuk, 2018; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Tuzcu, & Winkel, 2018; Hark & Villa, 2015; Köttig, Bitzan, & Petö, 2017; Kováts & Pöim, 2015; Krook, 2015; Kuhar, 2015; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Paternotte, van der Dussen, & Piette, 2016; Verloo, 2018). Several of these works rely on the idea of a global backlash against gender equality and sexual rights (Faludi, 1991; Mansbridge & Shames, 2008), with powerful actors joining forces to oppose the rights of women and LGBT people. Most of the time, these threats are lumped together, merging phenomena as diverse as populism, far right parties, religious fundamentalism, nationalism, racism, neoliberalism or austerity politics. These are often gathered under the broad umbrella term of “Global Right”, which identifies right-wing actors in opposition to the advocates of progressive causes (with whom they generally interact) and echoes the idea of a globalization of US culture wars (Bob, 2012). In current debates on women’s and LGBT rights, it expresses the feeling that the “Right” is on the rise everywhere, and represents a threat for liberal democracy and fundamental rights (e.g., Graff, Kapur, & Walters, in press; Gutiérrez Rodríguez et al., 2018; Roth, 2018).

Against such an alarmist reading, we argue that scholars should not be blinded by the spectacular manifestations of opposition faced in the last years or by the various victories recently won by these actors. They should rather engage, we contend, with the complexity of these oppositional dynamics and be careful about the concepts they use. This implies fine-grained theoretical and empirical work to better understand what is exactly at stake, as well as meticulous comparative research not to overstate what could be context-specific.

To substantiate this claim, we discuss the emergence and the development of anti-gender campaigns in Europe. In recent years, this region has indeed faced numerous attacks on women’s and LGBT rights. Intriguingly, most of these mobilizations regard “gender” as the matrix of the various policy reforms they combat in specific countries. As will be explained, these campaigns form a specific type of conservative opposition to gender and

sexual equality, which needs to be distinguished from other actors in Europe today.

Following Verloo’s emphasis on the variety of oppositions to gender equality in contemporary Europe (2018, pp. 215–216), we argue that concepts such as the so-called “Global Right” should be disentangled at a theoretical and empirical level, as well as located in concrete settings. More precisely, using the example of anti-gender campaigns in Europe, we show that recent forms of resistance should not be conflated with each other, although they may sometimes crucially intersect. These are often competing projects, which involve different types of actors and originate from historically different roots. In other words, what could at first sight look alike may proceed from distinct—and potentially competing or divergent—endeavors, and researchers should investigate how these projects can suddenly converge despite sometimes fundamental disagreement instead of regarding them as two components of the same ideological block.

This article is organized as follows: we first present anti-gender activism in Europe and discuss its historical roots, its discursive underpinnings, the policy issues it combats and its repertoire of action. Second, we trace the origins of this project back to the Roman Catholic Church. Third, we discuss the impact of the current right-wing populist wave on European anti-gender campaigns. Finally, we explain why, despite the decisiveness of such encounters, both projects should not be conflated. This piece relies on a recent project comparing these mobilizations in thirteen European countries, carried out between 2014 and 2017 (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Anti-Gender Campaigns in Contemporary Europe<sup>3</sup>

Although anti-gender campaigns<sup>4</sup> only became widely visible in recent years, they started in the mid-2000s. Spain appears as the earliest case in Europe: the Catholic Church, conservative groups and political parties mobilized against the government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and the same-sex marriage bill from 2004 (Aguilar Fernández, 2010, 2013). Early mobilizations have also been identified in Croatia (2006, mobilizations against sex education), Italy (2007, mobilizations against same-sex civil partnership) and Slovenia (2009, mobilization against marriage equality) (Cornejo & Pichardo, 2017; Garbagnoli, 2016, 2017; Kuhar, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> This article builds upon the findings of a project on anti-gender campaigns in Europe funded by the Budapest and the Brussels Offices of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2014–2017), as well as by the Université libre de Bruxelles and the Belgian Fonds national de la recherche scientifique (grant J.0115.16). Chaired by the authors, it covers 13 European countries: Austria (Stefanie Mayer and Birgit Sauer), Belgium (Sarah Bracke, Wannes Dupont and David Paternotte), Croatia (Amir Hodžić and Aleksandar Štulhofer), France (Michael Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Josselin Tricou), Germany (Paula-Irene Villa), Hungary (Eszter Kováts and Andrea Pető), Ireland (Mary McAuliffe and Sinéad Kennedy), Italy (Sara Garbagnoli), Poland (Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk), Portugal (Alberta Giorgi), Russia (Kevin Moss), Slovenia (Roman Kuhar) and Spain (Monica Cornejo and J. Ignacio Pichardo). Although researchers did not adopt a common methodology, they applied the same analytical grid and converged around a limited number of questions. Results have been published in English and in French (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Here, the aim is not to provide the reader with a summary of empirical findings, but to discuss the way oppositional movements are usually approached in the literature on Europe.

<sup>3</sup> Parts of this section rely on the introduction and the conclusion of Paternotte and Kuhar (2017).

<sup>4</sup> In most countries, these mobilizations are the result of collective action, explaining why we sometimes use the term “anti-gender movements”. However, as Russian campaigns have been engineered directly from the Kremlin and are increasingly part of public policy in Poland, Hungary and Italy, the term “campaigns” also encompasses these newer developments.

Most mobilizations, however, started in the 2010s, and 2012 appears as a tipping point, which corresponds to the climax of the “Manif pour Tous”, the massive French mobilization against same-sex marriage (Paternotte, 2015). This movement managed to bring thousands of demonstrators in the streets of Paris and various other French cities for more than two years, and it has significantly impacted policy-making on issues related to gender and sexuality (Paternotte, 2018; Perreau, 2016). In a country generally associated with sexual liberalism and secularism, this unexpected success appeared as a major victory, which could therefore be emulated elsewhere.

From this moment, similar mobilizations spread across the region, in countries as different as Germany, Italy, Poland, Russia or Slovakia. These mobilizations were all triggered by a specific policy debate, which vary cross-nationally, and can occur as a reaction to a concrete policy proposal (such as in France, where protests by the “Manif pour tous” were organized as a reaction to François Hollande’s pledge to introduce same-sex marriage) or as a form of prophylaxis against claims and policies that could emerge in the future. This happened for instance in Croatia (Hodžič & Štulhofer, 2017) and in Slovakia (Smrek, 2015), where anti-gender movements anticipated possible bills on marriage equality and called for a constitutional referendum to change their national constitutions before LGBT activists and their allies could move forward. Interestingly, despite the fact that some differences can be accredited to the historical and political contexts of post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe, the East-West divide does not offer a particularly useful analytical lens.

Although the triggers vary across borders, a common pattern may be identified: these mobilizations share a critique of gender, labeled as “gender ideology”, “gender

theory” or “(anti)genderism”. They all claim to combat “gender”, which is seen as the root of their worries and the matrix of the reforms they want to oppose. Therefore, following an emic approach (Avanza, 2018), we call these mobilizations anti-gender campaigns to insist on the specificity of this wave of opposition, in comparison with other forms of opposition to gender and sexual equality. The identification of a common enemy by these activists allows us to bring together mobilizations which could otherwise look like separate national events. These striking resemblances are illustrated by the logos of these movements (Figure 1), which can ultimately be counted down to only two different symbols. These commonalities are further attested by the observation of cross-border patterns of mobilization, which include a common discourse, a traveling repertoire of action, and similar strategies, which are presented in the remainder of this section along with the main areas of discontent.

### 2.1. What Do Campaigners Mean by “Gender Ideology”?

“Gender ideology”, or even more so “gender theory”, should not be confused with the scholarship developed in the field of gender studies, but is a term initially created to oppose women’s and LGBT rights activism as well as the scholarship deconstructing essentialist and naturalistic assumptions about gender and sexuality. Erasing fierce controversies within gender and sexuality studies and the complex interplay between activism and the academy, it operates as a powerful interpretive frame. According to its opponents, “gender ideology” is the ideological matrix of the different reforms they try to oppose, which pertain to intimate/sexual citizenship debates, including LGBT rights, reproductive rights, and sex and gender education.



Figure 1. Logos of anti-gender campaigns in Europe (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, p. 269).

“Gender ideology”, however, is not only regarded as an anthropological and epistemological threat but also as a covert political strategy, a sort of conspiracy aimed at seizing power and imposing deviant and minority values on average people. Anti-gender ideologues often invoke George Orwell’s concept of “newspeak”, and accuse feminists, LGBT activists and gender scholars of manipulating language and hiding their objectives behind a democratic sounding language of equality and human rights (Lopez Trujillo, 2005, p. 8). They claim that gender studies are a theory of power, and question the very notion of democracy, articulating knowledge production to political enterprises. They pretend therefore to uncover the underpinnings of the nice language about (gender) equality, warning fellow citizens about its dangers.

Anti-gender theorists also claim that popular will has been confiscated by corrupt elites, and argue that “gender ideology” is a new form of totalitarianism, which would be more dangerous than Marxism and Fascism (Anatrella, 2011; Kuby, 2012, 2016; Schooyans, 1997, 2000). Kuby argues for instance that “totalitarianism has made a costume change and now appears in the mantle of freedom, tolerance, justice, equality, anti-discrimination and diversity—ideological backdrops that prove to be amputated, distorted terms” (Kuby, 2016, p. 12). Some also depict “gender ideology” as a new leftist ideology invented on the ashes of communism (Contreras & Poole, 2011). According to them, the achievement of socialism remains the goal of the revolution, but it can no longer be reached only through social revolution, as the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe has clearly showed. This argument resonates particularly well in post-Socialist European countries, where gender theory is often classified as new Marxism (Cestnik, 2013).

In some contexts, “gender ideology” is also interpreted as imposed by the West on the rest of world. Often understood as a symptom of the devaluation of EuroAmerica, it is seen as a neocolonial project through which Western activists and their governments try to export their decadent values and to secularize non-Western societies (Alzamora Revoredo, 2005, p. 559; Peeters, 2013, p. 79; Sarah, 2013, p. 4; for a critical analysis, Graff & Korolczuk, 2018). International institutions like the UN or the EU and private funders such as the Open Society or the Ford Foundation are accused of playing a central part in this process, especially by forcing poorer and less influential countries to accept morally problematic laws and regulations in exchange for support and money. This is the reason why, for instance, Pope Francis prefers the expression “ideological colonization” when he refers to “gender ideology”, and several Vatican documents, especially in the context of the two Synods on the family, fustigate Western attempts to intermingle in the national policies of countries from the Global South (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016b).

## 2.2. What Is Combatted

Depending on the country, anti-gender campaigners have combatted LGBT rights, reproductive rights, sex and gender education in schools, gender itself (as meant in gender violence, gender studies and gender mainstreaming), as well as mobilized in defense of religious freedom and a certain understanding of democracy. These five areas of cross-national contention are detailed below.

(1) Debates around same-sex marriage and civil partnership appear as the most powerful triggers across the region. Related issues include fierce debates on second-parent and joint same-sex adoption, surrogacy, and reproductive technologies and similar concerns about access to kinship by (gay and lesbian) individuals and same-sex couples. Often, anti-gender activists claim they defend the best interest of the child against the “egoistic wishes and desires” of adults, and warn citizens against a slippery slope: same-sex marriage would necessary lead to more controversial policy reforms in a near future, and to an anthropological revolution because it denies motherhood and fatherhood, negates sexual differences and gender complementarity and thereby eliminates “the anthropological basis of the family” (Pope Francis, 2016, p. 56).

While lesbian and gay rights are the forefront targets of anti-gender movements, transgender rights have rarely been attacked, even when the issue was discussed in Parliament, as in 2016 in France. Yet, a few exceptions can be identified, such as the 2015 Slovenian referendum campaign, during which transgender people were objectified as the ultimate goal of gender ideologists, or the 2017 campaign by the Spanish group *HazteOír*, which attempted to drive around a bus covered with the sign “Boys have penises. Girls have vulvas. Don’t let them lie to you”. A similar version of the bus, called the Free Speech Bus, later drove around Manhattan and other locations in the United States, as well as in Nairobi and in various Latin American countries Mexico, Chile, etc.) (Holden, 2017).

(2) Reproductive rights were historically at the roots of the discourse on “gender ideology”, and issues like abortion, contraception and reproductive technologies remain at the center of the debate (Grabowska, 2014; Heinen, 2013), as shown by Spanish debates on the abortion law in 2011 and the 2016 proposal of the Polish ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party to ban abortion. Reproductive rights, particularly abortion, are interpreted as being part of what Jean-Paul II called the “culture of death” and as such in opposition to the “culture of life” promoted by the Church (Grzebalska & Soós, 2016; Vaggione, 2012).<sup>5</sup>

(3) Sex and gender education in schools appear as another crucial area of discontent. Since 2006, Croats have been discussing different modules of sexual education, in which gender equality and homosexuality appear to

<sup>5</sup> Abortion is sometimes connected to euthanasia through the notion of “culture of death”. While the issue is not discussed in most countries under study, this is the main terrain of the small Belgian anti-gender movement (Voyé & Dobbelaere, 2015).

be contentious issues (Bijelić, 2008; Hodžić, Budesa, Štulhofer, & Irvine, 2012; Hodžić & Štulhofer, 2017; Kuhar, 2015). Similarly, French mobilizations started with a discussion about the insertion of “gender” in textbooks in 2011 (Béraud, 2013). In all these cases, opponents invoke the figure of the innocent child and claim that “gender ideology” has severe consequences on children’s development, not the least by blurring anthropological references about the sexes. Furthermore, such education and alleged promotion of “sexual permissiveness” is seen as encouraging the hypersexualization of children.

(4) Gender itself has been under discussion. In addition to debates on the notion itself, three issues directly connected to gender relations have been targeted: gender violence, gender mainstreaming, and gender studies. Although these are intrinsically different issues, they all aim at transforming unequal gender relations and are accused of being covert vehicles of “gender ideology” because of their use of the word “gender”. Polish debates on “gender ideology” started in 2012 in opposition to the ratification of the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Graff, 2014). In Slovenia or Bulgaria, anti-gender activists have similarly claimed that this Convention would turn “gender ideology” into the official ideology of the state. Spain has experienced comparable debates, with opponents suggesting the use of expressions like “domestic violence” or “intimate partner violence” to avoid the abhorred term “gender”.

Gender mainstreaming was at the core of the debate in Germany and Austria. According to activists, it is a totalitarian ideology and a non-democratic practice, imposed on European countries by the feminist lobbies and elites from Brussels. As claimed by the German anti-gender activist Gabriele Kuby:

For the first time in history, power elites are claiming authority to change men’s and women’s sexual identity through political strategies and legal measures. They had previously lacked expertise in social engineering. However, today this is happening before our eyes on a global scale. The strategy’s name: *gender mainstreaming*. The battle is being fought under the banner of equality of men and women, but that has proven to be a tactical transitional stage. (2016, p. 42)

Gender was finally discussed in connection to gender studies and the existence of gender curricula and gender departments at universities. Often brushed aside as a waste of public money, gender studies are constructed as ideological and non-scientific, and the anti-gender project appears as a struggle over the legitimacy of knowledge production. In fact, anti-gender campaigns can be read as a project of alternative knowledge production, which aims to dismantle post-structural research in social sciences and humanities in particular as these are not in line with allegedly unquestionable findings of natural sciences, particularly biological, medical and psy-

chological studies about essential differences between male and female sex (including differences in male and female brains) and complementarity of male and female sexes. This has had severe outcomes in several countries. In France for instance, the region of Ile-de-France has dismantled its crucial financial support to gender studies. In 2018, the Hungarian government has threatened teaching programs in gender studies.

(5) Campaigners claim that democracy as such is endangered as they equate “gender ideology”—particularly in post-socialist Europe—with (new) Marxism and the communist political regime in order to emphasize its undemocratic character. More recently, these actors have claimed that they defend religious freedom and denounce rising forms of “christianophobia” in Europe, for instance by forcing Catholics to act or speak against their conscience and their beliefs. In order to support their claims they often make explicit connections to the situation of Christians in the Middle East (Eberstadt, 2016).

### 2.3. How Do They Fight?

As indicated by our study across 13 countries in Europe, these campaigns share a distinctive repertoire of action as well as a specific set of strategies, which are crucial to their identity and specificity. Protests display a colorful, youthful and festive outlook, far away from stereotypical images of conservative mobilizations and reminiscent of Pride Parades or techno music gatherings. Through this, anti-gender campaigners try to build a pluralizing (and secularizing) self-image against the religious or conservative imagery often conveyed in public opinions. It projects itself as a rational, moderate and commonsensical actor, who raises its voice because things have simply “gone too far”. Often, this movement also uses a self-victimization strategy, presenting itself as the true defender of oppressed people, of a majority who is silenced by powerful lobbies and elites, as well as the savior of national authenticity against international powers. These choices are instrumental in hiding the religious and political origins of the movement, while indicating a modernization and a professionalization of conservative activism in Europe (Datta, 2018).

The repertoire of action includes demonstrations, stand-ins and sit-ins, petitions and the collection of signatures, litigation, expertise and knowledge production, lobbying, referendum campaigns, electoral mobilization, party politics (including the establishment of new political parties), incitement to vigilance and ad hominem exposure campaigns in schools and hospitals. Anti-gender activists are extremely active on the web and take advantage of the possibilities offered by new information and communication technologies. Their online activities are multidimensional and go far beyond a mere informative function (Tricou, 2015). This active presence on the web does not mean that the movement does not target traditional media. The organization of events, lectures,

preparation of statements and press conferences are all targeted towards traditional media outlets (Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2017). Anti-gender campaigns also include extensive lobbying, both at national and transnational level.

Finally, the recurring usage of the image of an innocent and endangered child appears as a mechanism for triggering moral panic (Thompson, 1998). By seeking to produce a moral panic, anti-gender activists try to legitimize their particular claims, establish the validity of the issues raised, stir up concern among the general population and attract media attention. They present their claims in terms of good versus evil and use specific examples to present them as general (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). This strategy is reminiscent of the early anti-gay rights movements in the United States, such as the 1977 “Save Our Children” campaign led by Anita Bryan (Fejes, 2008, p. 99).

### 3. A Catholic Strategy

“Gender ideology” is not only an analytical frame, but also a political strategy. As such, it should not only be read as a reaction to social transformations, but also as a political project. As documented by numerous scholars and activists (Buss, 1998, 2004; Buss & Herman, 2003; Butler, 2006; Case, 2011, 2016; Chappel, 2006; Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2017; Girard, 2007, p. 334; Swiebel, 2016), it has a history, and its presence has been reported in other parts of the world (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016a). This discourse was elaborated in Catholic circles in the mid-1990s as a response to the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights in the UN rights system at the 1994 UN conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1995 Beijing conference on Women. At the time, the Holy See attempted to oppose the notion of gender because it feared that it would become, along with the institutionalization of sexual and reproductive rights, a vehicle for the international recognition of abortion, additional attacks on traditional motherhood and a legitimization of homosexuality. The Holy See hence interpreted the results of Cairo and Beijing as a major defeat.

As highlighted by this literature, the notion of “gender ideology” was designed to become an important element of the counter-strategy mounted by the Vatican and its allies. It turns the notion of gender into the ideological matrix of a set of abhorred ethical and social reforms, and provides the Vatican with an interpretative frame which connects different sorts of actors under the frame of a gender conspiracy (Peeters, 2013). Relying on the Gramscian theory of cultural hegemony (Brustier, 2014; Peeters, 2011, p. 221), this strategy also aims at propagating alternative ideas by using and subverting the notions it repudiates in order to contest the supposed cultural and political hegemony of “postmodern gender”. The Church has reclaimed progressive notions such as gender or feminism to change their meaning, resignifying what liberal voices have been trying to articulate over the last decades. These efforts led in 2003 to

the publication of the *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions* by the Pontifical Council for the Family with the support of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This official document, which resembles a dictionary with entries on a wide range of ethical topics (including several on gender), aims at reclaiming the true meaning of words. This strategy connects to crucial debates in contemporary Catholicism (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016b; Case, 2016). It builds upon John Paul II’s theology of the body (Carnac, 2013a, 2013b; Case, 2011, 2016; Favier, 2014; Garbagnoli, 2014, 2016; Garbagnoli & Prearo, 2017) and New Feminism (Couture, 2012) while echoing his discourse on the “culture of death”. It also mirrors Cardinal Ratzinger’s anxieties about the propagation of hedonism, laicism, relativism and individualism in Western societies (Ratzinger & Messori, 1985). “Gender ideology” should nevertheless not be understood as a mere attempt to set John Paul II’s and Benedict XVI’s theologies in motion. The Catholic Church has been instrumental in the emergence and the development of the notion of “gender ideology” both as an answer to the interrogations of the Vatican and as a strategy of action. As these scholars have shown and as the burgeoning literature on these mobilizations on the ground is currently documenting, its role cannot be circumscribed to a laboratory of ideas, for the Church has also offered a space where intellectuals and activists could meet and exchange views and strategies, and has provided a powerful mobilization and diffusion network.

Moreover, anti-gender campaigns must be located within wider priorities of the Vatican, particularly the project of New Evangelization (Aguilar Fernández, 2011; Béraud & Portier, 2015; Paternotte, 2017; Tricou, 2016). This project, which was initiated by the same actors under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, is an attempt by the Church to regain its influence in secularizing parts of the world (among which Europe is central), and to reaffirm the faith of its followers. Against a privatization of religion, it insists on the public role of religion, inviting lay Catholics to defend their ideas publicly and to mobilize into politics and onto the streets. The evangelizing role of the family and the importance of its defense by political authorities are often emphasized, and new technologies, especially the Internet, must be explored as new evangelization devices. Lay believers are crucial in this endeavor, and key actors include new ecclesial communities such as the Opus Dei, the Charismatic Renewal or the Neocatechumenal Way, which are also mobilized against “gender ideology”.

Having said this, numerous factors mitigate the success of this offensive on the ground and it would be misleading to picture the emergence of this social movement as a campaign entirely engineered from the Vatican. Anti-gender mobilizations did not happen everywhere in the Catholic world and did not happen with the same intensity. Moreover, Catholics are not the main driving force behind this movement everywhere, and the

actual cooperation between anti-gender movement and the Roman Catholic Church varies significantly, depending on the current (moral) position of the Church and its historic role in each country. The factors that explain the influence of the Catholic Church on national politics include the nature of the relations between Rome and the national Church, the divisions within the Church in each country, the specific pattern of state-church relations (Dobbelaere & Pérez-Agote, 2015; Gryzmala-Busse, 2015; Manuel, Reardon, & Wylcox, 2006; Pérez-Agote, 2012), past legacies like the involvement of the Church under authoritarian regimes and the association between Catholicism and the construction of the nation (Ayoub, 2016; Gryzmala-Busse, 2015). The role of the Church varies from very few connections to the movement in Germany to closely intertwined collaborations, where the Church is a key actor in the movement, such as in Poland or Italy and to a certain extent in Spain and Croatia.

#### 4. The Impact of Right-Wing Populism

Several scholars have pinpointed striking resonances between right-wing populism and anti-gender mobilizations (e.g., Chetcuti-Osorovitz & Teicher, 2016; Graff & Korolczuk, 2018; Grzebalska & Soós, 2016; Hark & Villa, 2015; Kemper, 2016; Köttig et al., 2017; Kováts & Pöim, 2015), as well as right-wing populist attacks on gender and the role of gender in right-wing populism more generally (Norocel, 2013; Scrinzi, 2014; Spierings, Zaslove, Mugge, & de Lange, 2015). In such accounts, anti-gender campaigns are sometimes presented as another element of the right-wing populist wave that Europe is currently facing, especially in activism and policy circles. Two elements are often emphasized by these scholars: on the one hand, populism as a distinctive political style, a specific way of doing politics and, on the other hand, the conservative nature of the claims, which often posits anti-gender campaigns on the right of the political spectrum. Our project confirms that the current right-wing populist wave has decisively contributed to the success of anti-gender campaigns in Europe. In several countries, it has allowed anti-gender campaigns (originally a handful of people in many places) to grow significantly and to resonate more broadly in European societies. The vague notion of “gender ideology” or “gender theory”, with all it involves, appears as a cement which binds together various actors who might not share the same ideological stands across all issues they address (Kováts & Pöim, 2015), while populism offers a springboard allowing the anti-gender cause to appeal to a much wider audience. This observation reminds Mudde’s idea of populism as a “thin-centered ideology” (2004, p. 543), as this political scientist insists on the capacity of populism as an ideology to be combined with other ideological tenets.

More precisely, findings show that anti-gender campaigns resonate with right-wing populism in four different ways. First, in some countries, right-wing populists

are among the main drivers of anti-gender campaigns. This is for instance the case in Germany and Austria (Hark & Villa, 2015; Kemper, 2016; Mayer & Sauer, 2017; Villa, 2017). To a lesser extent, the French “Manif pour Tous” has sometimes used a populist toolkit, especially at the height of its opposition to François Hollande’s government, and dissenting voices split up to create the *Printemps français* (French Spring), presented as an emulation of the recent Arab Spring (Perreau, 2016). Similarly, in countries like Russia, Poland, Hungary or Italy, actors behind anti-gender campaigns are closely connected to the political parties in power (which are often considered as populists), turning to some extent the struggle against “gender ideology” into a state policy (Graff & Korolczuk, 2018; Kováts & Pető, 2017; Moss, 2017).

Second, central elements of anti-gender and right-wing populist discourses look alike, as indicated by examples from three recent debates in which right-wing populists were vocal: skepticism towards European integration, national and racial anxieties, and resistances to globalization. Right-wing populists equally attack the so-called Brussels elites and oppose their skepticism on the European project, sometimes denounced as a form of neo-colonialism, to the authenticity of national sovereignty. The nostalgia of a lost golden age, when everything was simpler, also nourishes a quest for firmer foundations at the time everything is seen as disappearing, which means nature and the nation (Villa, 2017). These debates often intersect with fears about national and racial identities, particularly in the context of the so-called refugee crisis and a global discussion about Islam, which profoundly interrogates European secularism (Bracke, 2013; Scott, 2009). These discourses also reflect demographic anxieties, which are particularly strong in Russia and parts of Eastern Europe, and connect to the worries about what it means to be French, German or Polish in a globalized world. This explains—in both discourses—the specific focus on the child as the future of the nation. Similarly, opposition to specific forms of parenting, kinship and reproduction partly ensues from worries about the (re)production of the nation (Fassin, 2014; Perreau, 2016). In some cases, these are not only debates about national identities, but also about the collective destiny of Europe, understood as the standard-bearer of civilization, often in opposition to Islam.

Third, these discourses employ similar rhetorical mechanisms, identified by Wodak (2015, p. 4) as the necessary toolkit of populist rhetoric: victim-perpetrator reversal, scapegoating, and the construction of conspiracy theories. They rely on the:

“Politics of fear”, which seeks to instill the fear of real or imagined dangers while instrumentalizing minorities or other social groups to create scapegoats, and play on emotional registers “to raise the affects of the people and arouse their immediate feelings”. (Benveniste, Campani, & Lazaridis, 2016, p. 12)



As pointed out by Müller (2016), both discourses cannot be disproven, and rely heavily on the idea of common sense, as opposed to elitist knowledge.

Fourth, repertoires of action crucially resemble each other. Anti-gender activists and right-wing populists make skillful use of social media, which they also employ as a critique of traditional media, often denounced as being kidnapped by “corrupt elites” and as such unworthy and fake (Pajnik & Sauer, 2017). They rely heavily (and rather successfully) on the use of referenda (e.g., Slovenia, Croatia, Slovakia), and petition political authorities to initiate a referendum in other countries (e.g., France). Both types of activism claim to give a voice back to the people.

### 5. Disentangling Anti-Gender Campaigns from Right-Wing Populism

All this may give the impression that anti-gender campaigns are just another component of rising right-wing populism in Europe. However, in the remainder of this section, we try to develop a more complex understanding of these encounters. Because of the four reasons discussed below, we argue that, despite the crucial role played by right-wing populism in several European countries, these two phenomena should not be conflated with each other, for instance by considering them as two faces of the same coin. They should rather be disentangled in order to understand how they resonate and/or interact with each other and may significantly contribute to their mutual development. This alternative research strategy would also allow a better understanding of the specificities of each enterprise.

First, despite a lack of conceptual clarity and the variety of definitions and understandings of populism (Priester, 2012; Taggart, 2000), a historical perspective unveils the different roots of these projects. As we have shown, “gender ideology” was born out of a Catholic project and first responded to specific concerns within the Church. It takes its roots in contemporary debates within Catholicism as well as from the project of New Evangelization. As such, it is not originally linked with right-wing populist ideology. Furthermore, as emphasized by Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy (2016), the relations between right-wing populism and religion are not straightforward. Right-wing populism is not a religious phenomenon and, as highlighted by these authors, the instrumentalization of religion may happen in extremely different ways within specific political projects. In such a context, right-wing populists may have used the “gender ideology” discourse without being aware of its Catholic roots. One should also not overlook that the Catholic Church has historically maintained uneasy relations with right-wing populism, as illustrated by a 2017 article published in the Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*. Written by

clergymen belonging to Pope Francis’s close circle, it explicitly mentions Donald Trump and Steve Bannon and denounces the “surprising” alliance between “Evangelical Fundamentalism” and “Catholic Integralism” in the United States (Spadaro & Figueroa, 2017).

Second, unlike defenders of “gender ideology”, right-wing populists do not necessarily oppose gender and sexual equality.<sup>6</sup> For instance, as widely discussed in the literature on femo- and homonationalism (e.g., Bracke, 2012; Farris, 2017; Mepschen, Duyvendak, & Tonkens, 2010), some actors labeled as right-wing populists have increasingly endorsed women’s and LGBT rights, especially in Northern Europe. This is particularly true when these rights are used to stigmatize specific populations like migrants and people with a Muslim background.

Third, anti-gender campaigns are not restricted to Europe and locating them—that means looking at the forms they take in different parts of the world—further contributes to a more complex analysis. Latin America is the other world region where this war on gender is waged intensively. Debates on “gender ideology” actually started earlier in this part of the world (Corrêa, 2018), but mass demonstrations against gender only appeared in the last years (e.g., Corrêa, 2017; Miskolci & Campana, 2017; Viveros Vigoya & Rodríguez Rondón, 2017). As claimed in a recent piece authored with Sonia Corrêa (Corrêa, Kuhar, & Paternotte, 2018):

The populism analytical frame, so common in European and the US, is inappropriate to study mobilizations in Latin America. Indeed, populist imaginaries and practices have long been deeply ingrained in the regional political culture.

Consequently, “populism has no side” and cannot be easily mapped onto the left-right divide in the region” (Lavinias, 2017; see also Grigera, 2017). Moreover, ongoing research highlights a distinctive set of actors. The role of Evangelicals in the region and their unprecedented collaboration with Catholics cannot be overlooked. Research on countries like Brazil (Miskolci, 2018) reveals even more complex constellations including ambitious politicians, extreme-right activists, center-liberals connecting their opposition to the state to anti-gender arguments, middle-class campaigners longing for social order and transnationally connected Jewish right-wing activists. In brief, locating anti-gender mobilizations in a specific setting and comparing them to similar developments in other parts of the world reminds us that populism designates different realities across the globe (Hadiz & Chrysosgelos, 2017), while it unveils more complex sets of anti-gender actors.

Finally, anti-gender campaigns should not be restricted to the right, especially as left-wing leaders have endorsed this struggle in different parts of the world.

<sup>6</sup> This is also true of the Catholic Church and religion more generally. Religious actors do not necessarily oppose gender and sexuality rights because of their faith or their doctrine, and several religious denominations (including Catholicism) are currently experiencing fierce internal debates on these issues.

Again, a comparison with Latin America is insightful. In that region, anti-gender campaigns are no monopoly of the right and the leftist Ecuadorian president Rafael Corréa was one of the first to attack “gender ideology”. As early as 2013, he denounced it as an instrument aimed at destructing the family in one of his weekly TV programs. More recently, the Mexican leader López Obrador won the general elections in coalition with the Evangelical party Encuentro social, that opposes “gender ideology”.

However, left-wing support to mobilizations against “gender ideology” are no Latin American exception, and similar cases are found in Europe. In France, the Socialist Party has always been divided on LGBT issues, particularly in relation to family rights, and reproductive technologies more generally. During same-sex marriage debates, several leaders such as former Prime ministers Rocard and Jospin openly disavowed the government, and Jospin’s wife, Sylviane Agacinski, was even invoked as a reference by anti-gender activists (Borrillo, 2017; Paternotte, 2018; Perreau, 2014). Sara Garbagnoli has also described how important Marxists voices in Italy have publicly endorsed anti-gender claims (2017, p. 166).

## 6. Conclusion

This article examines the development of campaigns against “gender ideology” in Europe, leading to the emergence of a specific family of social movements that we call anti-gender campaigns. These campaigns started as a Catholic project in reaction to the results of the UN conferences of Cairo and Beijing in the mid-1990s. In several European countries, this movement developed significantly after various encounters with right-wing populism, expanding far beyond its original Catholic cradle. While recognizing the importance of these crossovers, we contend the interpretation that mobilizations against “gender ideology” and right-wing populism are the two faces of the same coin, and we plead for a more complex understanding of the ways in which distinct—and sometimes competing—projects can actually converge in specific settings.

The example of anti-gender campaigns helps us illustrate and substantiate the argument we want to make: research on the so-called “Global Right Wing” should disentangle the various components of this phenomenon, and locate them in concrete settings. The concept of “Global Right Wing” (Bob, 2012) is indeed far too vague to be meaningful, and current debates in academia, activism and policy circles in Europe and the United States often conflate different projects under such an overarching label. This prevents us from examining how diverse actors, discourses and strategies can interact with each other, and obscures our understanding of what is currently at stake.

Disentangling these various phenomena, as we do with campaigns against “gender ideology” and right-wing populism, appears as a more fruitful research strategy, which allows us to grasp the specificities of each project

and the ways in which they interact with each other. As we have demonstrated, it permits us to understand the history and the main features of these mobilizations, which are intimately connected to the Roman Catholic Church, as well as to unveil the crucial role played by intersections with rising right-wing populism.

Moreover, locating the “Global Right” in concrete settings allows us to analyze the specific forms taken by the various oppositions to women’s and LGBT rights and, as already mentioned, to distance ourselves from overarching ideas such as a global export of US culture wars (e.g., Kaoma, 2009, 2012). While European actors are connected to US ones in various ways, such an approach usually overlooks the home-grown roots of the phenomenon, the forms it takes in different settings (Ozcano & Giorgi, 2015), and the specificities of the various transcontinental and transnational networks being established on these issues (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, pp. 253–271).

This research strategy also permits a better understanding of the forms taken by the same type of opposition—here campaigns against “gender ideology”—in other settings. Indeed, while the latter are undoubtedly a global project, they take a flavor which is often specific to the context. For instance, in Russia and the countries under its influence, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin play an active role in the development of these campaigns, turning what is usually a social movement into a state policy. Similarly, in Latin America, specific forms of encounters, this time between Catholics and Evangelicals, contribute to the success of these mobilizations, while the connections with populism—which has a totally different history and meaning in the region—are less obvious. Therefore, if a global or a transnational perspective is needed to highlight cross-border similarities, a comparative approach sheds new light on the domestic reception of these transnational trends, and addresses the impact of national and local factors on the circulation of discourses, strategies, actors, etc.

To conclude, these reflections invite us to move beyond a rather naïve and teleological account of gender and sexual politics, particularly in contemporary Europe. Scholars, observers and actors alike were generally convinced that Europe was on an unstoppable way toward “full” gender equality and sexual citizenship. They assumed that such forms of opposition were largely foreign to the European experience or could only subsist as remains of the past, primarily in Eastern Europe or in Catholic countries such as Italy or Ireland. The development of anti-gender movements in a large number of European countries, both East and West, has largely invalidated this understanding of sexual politics. The amendment of this understanding should not, however, propel us into another grand narrative: the one of a global and unqualified backlash against everything achieved in terms of gender and sexuality in the last decades.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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## About the Authors



**David Paternotte** is Associate Professor in Sociology and Gender Studies at the Université libre de Bruxelles, where he is the head of the Atelier Genre (s) et Sexualité (s) and STRIGES. His publications include the monograph *Revendiquer le “mariage gay”: Belgique, France, Espagne* (2011), numerous articles, chapters and edited volumes such as *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality* (2017). He is a co-editor of the series “Global Queer Politics” (Palgrave).



**Roman Kuhar** is a Professor of Sociology at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and teaches courses on gender, sexuality, popular culture and everyday life. He holds a PhD in Sociology and is currently the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and the head of the research program “The Problems of Autonomy and Identity in the Times of Globalization”. His work has been published in numerous academic journals, including *Critical Social Policy*, *Journal of Homosexuality* and *Women’s studies international forum*.