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***For Family, God, and Country: A Comparative
Study of the Emergence of Anti-gender
Movements in Southeast Europe***

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Abstract

My PhD project investigates the emergence of anti-gender politics in Southeast Europe. Specifically, I explain the development of the movement's collective identity through its framing and ideology, its collective actions and practices, as well as the networks and relations of its main actors. How and why do anti-gender movements emerge and mobilize? What is the role of the radical right and of churches in anti-gender contention? How does the relationship between churches and radical-right movements vary across national contexts? I adopt an interpretivist approach and utilize the research agenda bridging the scholarship on social movements with that on the radical right. Developing an agentic and constructivist analytical framework, I pay special attention to the actors' perceptions of political and discursive opportunity structures, as well as their strategic mobilization of resources, frames, and networks. To answer my research questions, I conduct a comparative case study analysing anti-gender mobilization in three similar cases: Croatia, Bulgaria, and Serbia. The differences in the occurrence of gender backlash in Southeast Europe are puzzling given the similarities in the predominance of religious nationalism, high trust in churches, and conservative positions on morality issues of local populations. I argue that differences in church-state-society relations together with a variation in contingent political and discursive opportunity structures influence actor's strategies differently. While some opt for movement mobilization, others prefer lobbying the halls of power and participating in party politics. The goal of my comparison is thus to shed light on diverging trajectories of anti-gender politics. I triangulate protest event analysis, semi-structured interviews with anti-gender leaders, and qualitative content analysis to answer my research questions. I contribute to the existing literature on radical-right movements and movement parties, and particularly, I argue for the importance of analysing religious agency in contemporary illiberal politics. In addition, I add to the literature analyzing the backlash against gender equality and democracy by exploring previously neglected Southeast European (SEE) cases of anti-gender mobilization. Accounting for the developments in SEE helps us to overcome the bias in existing literature that takes CEE countries like Poland and Hungary as representative for Eastern Europe. Finally, I join the calls to go beyond externalist analyses of radical-right actors by using an emic approach to capture the internal complexity and self-understanding of the anti-gender movement via qualitative interviews. In fact, my findings point to the importance of intramovement relations and relations with mainstream conservative actors as more relevant for the emergence of collective mobilization than a movement-counter movement framework would allow.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADF	Alliance Defending Freedom
AG	Anti-Gender
BAS	Blaženi Alojzije Stepinac
BCP	Bulgarian Communist Party
BNA	Bulgarian National Agency
BNR	Bălgarsko Nacionalno Radio
BOC	Bulgarian Orthodox Church
BROD	Bălgarski Roditeli Obedineni za Deca
BSP	Bulgarian Socialist Party
BSR	Biological and Social Reproduction
BTA	Bălgarska Telegrafna Agencija
CARR	Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right
CD	Christian Democracy
CEC	Croatian Episcopal Conference
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CM	Countermovement
DOS	Discursive Opportunity Structures
DS	Demokratska Stranka
DSB	Demokrati za Silna Balgariya
DSS	Demokratska Stranka Srbije

ECI	European Citizens Initiative
ECPM	European Christian Political Movement
EDW	European Dignity Watch
EE	Eastern Europe
EHRC	Equality and Human Rights Commission
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
EPP	European People's Party
EVS	European Value Survey
FARPE	Far-Right Protest in Europe
GE	Gender Equality
GERB	Graždani za Evropejsko Razvitie na Bălgarija
GI	Gender Ideology
GROZD	Glas Roditelja za Djecu
GSE	Gender and Sexual Equality
HDZ	Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica
HEA	Home Education Association
HRAST	Hrvatski Rast
HSP	Hrvatska Stranka Prava
HSP-AS	Hrvatska Stranka Prava – Ante Starčević
IC	Istanbul Convention
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
IFAM	International Family News
ILGA	The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
INF	In the Name of Family
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IOF	International Organization for the Family
LDP	Liberalno Demokratska Partija
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer
MRF	Movement for Rights and Freedoms
MSR	Mainstream Right
MSSD	Most Similar Systems Design
NAPS	Nacionalna Asociacija “Pohod za Semejstvoto”
NDSV	Natsionalno Dvizhenie za Stabilnost i Vazhod
NFSB	Natsionalen Front za Spasenie na Bălgariya
PCA	Political Claims Analysis
PEA	Protest Event Analysis
POS	Political Opportunity Structures
PR	Public Relations
PRR	Populist Radical Right
RM	Resource Mobilization
ROD	Roditeli Obedineni za Decata
RR	Radical Right
SAA	Stabilization and Association Agreement
SDP	Socijaldemokratska Partija

SDSS	Samostalna Demokratska Srpska Stranka
SEE	Southeast Europe
SKAC	Studentski Katolički Centar
SMO	Social Movement Organization
SNS	Srpska Napredna Stranka
SOC	Serbian Orthodox Church
SOGI	Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
SPS	Socijalistička Partija Srbije
SRS	Srpska Radikalna Stranka
SVA	Society and Values Association
UDBA	Uprava Državne Bezbednosti
VMRO	Vnatrešna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija
VMRO-BNM	Vnatrešna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija – Bălgarsko Nacionalno Dviženie
WCF	World Congress of Families

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Where did They Come From? The Appearance of Anti-Gender Contention

9 October 2010

Thousands of protesters, mainly young men, football hooligans, students, and Orthodox families are walking the streets of Belgrade in a ‘Family March’ to oppose the holding of the Belgrade Pride Parade. One of the founders of the far-right NGO Dveri organizing the March addresses the audience gathered in front of the Faculty of Philosophy: “The state should support the family and not gay parades that are trying to penetrate our schools, kindergartens, and homes! We are here to tell you – cancel the parade because it is against the constitution, public morals, the opinion of the majority of Serbs and the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church [...] Either you are for the family or against the family, there is no third option!” (Dveri 2010). The crowd marching the streets stood behind the main March banners: ‘We are Defending the Family’ and ‘Movement for Life’. The March will become an annual gathering in cities across Serbia promoting the right to life, marriage, birth, and family. In 2014, Orthodox priests joined the March by waving censers in the streets that followed the Pride Parade route to ‘cleanse’ Belgrade from homosexuality.

December 1, 2013

Precisely five months after Croatia’s ceremonious entry into the EU, a referendum was held asking Croatian citizens: “Are you in favor of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia being amended with a provision stating that marriage is matrimony between a woman and a man?”

Just under one million people went out to the polls to circle ‘Yes’, leading to an overwhelming victory for the anti-gender movement and a heteronormative constitutional definition of marriage. The movement’s leaders dubbed the occasion a ‘festival of democracy’. Several months prior, the referendum organizers thanked all volunteers and citizens who “realized that together we can build a democratic society in which the people have the right to say what they want, what they stand for, and to have their opinion respected, as guaranteed by the Croatian laws and the constitution.” (In the Name of Family 2013). Hundreds of volunteers and regional coordinators of the NGO ‘In the Name of Family’ marched with pink and blue balloons, patriotic song, waving flags and carrying heavy boxes with signatures required to initiate a referendum towards the parliament square.

October 3, 2019

Dozens of panicked parents rushed to schools in Sliven and several other Bulgarian cities to withdraw their children from school, worried that the social services would take them. The panic spread via Facebook groups that criticized a Child Strategy drafted by the national government, with several Protestant pastors involved in spreading the narrative. An important role in the episode was allegedly played by Alexandar Urumov, head of the press office of the Ministry of Defence, led by the far-right minority coalition partner VMRO. Urumov is an outspoken Evangelical supporter of ‘traditional family values’, served as chairmain of the Bulgarian Organization of Parents for Children, and a former collaborator of the communist secret services. Fears regarding the Child Strategy came two years after a similar outrage against the Istanbul Convention and the allegedly sinister plan of foreign elites to introduce a ‘third sex’ into Bulgaria. The campaign involved spreading viral fake news over social media. Parents collected their children swiftly, scared that social services would give their children up for adoption abroad, including to gay couples.

These three sketches represent instances of intense coordinated collective action to protect the ‘traditional families’ of Serbia, Croatia, and Bulgaria. In all three cases, the family was allegedly under attack by ‘gender’ or ‘homosexual’ ideology and its sponsors. Different emotions were central in mobilizing protesters in the three instances. In the first case, hatred and anger glued conservative citizens together in protest against the perceived indecency of a ‘homosexual parade’. In the second case, pride was channelled through a march of victorious volunteers that managed to ‘defend the family’ by constitutionally safeguarding the heteronormative marriage. In the third case, parents were struck by fear, anxious that their children would be taken away from them by the state. While emotions were certainly an important ingredient of galvanizing

for collective action, forming solidarity and collective identity, anti-gender movements are a result of a carefully crafted, intellectually backed strategy of Christian churches and lay movements to challenge secularism and liberalism. Reducing them to a mere moral panic or hatred-filled backlash against societal changes would be a serious misrepresentation of the project of illiberal Christian right politics. In this thesis, I am motivated by illuminating how and why anti-gender movements emerged in the Balkans by going beyond the usual externalist approaches and understanding the movement's values, strategies, relations, and mobilization from within.

During the final stages of my studies in political science at the University of Zagreb, the 2013 referendum came as a baffling shock. Where did these thousands of volunteers and supporters of the homophobic referendum come from? Many of them were young, educated students like myself or well-off families from urban areas, not the usual far-right nationalists from economically forgotten rural areas of the previously war-torn Croatia. Moreover, local political scientists and sociologists seemed almost as baffled as I was. While the former were too busy analyzing institutional and party politics to see a challenge from the streets and the parishes, the latter seemed lulled by secularization theory into disregarding any signs of serious religious incursions into politics. Furthermore, the phenomenon could not be placed neatly in any of the two delimited academic disciplines, falling into the liminal area of political sociology. Yet, as I would soon learn, even social movement studies remain overwhelmingly focused on studying 'friendly' left-wing, progressive movements, with concepts and theories maladapted for analyzing far-right politics, especially beyond Western liberal democracies. On the other hand, while political sciences developed an ever-rich understanding of populist radical right parties, religiously inspired movement actors fell outside of their analytical lenses. Nevertheless, scholars of religion, gender studies and sociology that faced the same actors in their own countries started writing about a seemingly new phenomenon – anti-gender politics. I decided to join this emerging new field of literature to answer the unaddressed questions by going beyond externalist analyses of single cases.

1.2. State of the Art – The Importance of Analysing Radical-Right Movements

Scholarship on radical right parties and movements has so far predominantly focused on Western Europe (Minkenberg 2015). Although the successes of radical-right parties in Central and Eastern Europe have lately, indeed, been followed by an increasing scholarly focus on the

region, major comparative studies still tend to exclude Southeast Europe, especially the post-Yugoslav region (Rydgren, 2011; Norocel & Szabó, 2019; Pirro, 2015; Pytlas, 2015; Minkenberg, 2018; Caiani, 2021). However, common reasons for excluding the region when selecting cases seem dubious. For example, Minkenberg's (2018) explanation for doing so is that post-Yugoslav countries had different starting points of democratization and do not fit the following criteria: they were not under Soviet control and did not enter the EU in 2004 or 2007 (p. 7). However, none of the established criteria are actually argued as crucial for understanding or explaining the radical right in the book, which makes them seem arbitrary. In fact, if we look at the historical legacies, transformation processes and opportunity structures, there would be no reasons to exclude post-Yugoslav cases. The point to be made is that, while the experience of war had delayed transition of the post-Yugoslav countries, the legacies, and conditions which (dis)favour right-wing radicalism are present and have high explanatory power. Furthermore, taking the cue from Western European literature, the previously mentioned scholarship on parties and movements in Eastern Europe has primarily focused on anti-immigration and nativism, overlooking the centrality of religion and gender as mobilizing issues in the region. Therefore, my comparative study makes an empirical contribution to the literature by analyzing overlooked country cases and issues of mobilization. Given the volatility of nationalisms in Southeast Europe and the increasing autocratization in the region (Kmezić, 2018; Bieber, 2019; Kapidžić & Stojarová, 2021), a shift of focus away from the 'usual suspects' of Hungary and Poland has been long overdue.

In addition to the gaps in political science literature, scholars of social movement studies developed their theoretical frameworks and concepts mostly by studying left-wing movements, overlooking the importance of the radical-right movement sector (Blee & Creasap, 2010; Caiani, 2017). However, the benefits of applying the analytical framework of social movement studies on regressive movements are manifold. I argue that this is particularly the case when analyzing Christian right and illiberal actors. Firstly, religion has been recognized as a fundamentally important resource in seminal studies of social movements (Zald & McCarthy, 1987; Tarrow, 1998; Morris 1986). Secondly, anti-gender movements follow a movement-counter-movement dynamic that has been established as crucial in explaining the dynamics of new social movements and 'culture wars' around gender and sexual equality (Laraña, 1994; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). Therefore, to benefit from this rich scholarship in my thesis, I apply social movement concepts and methods to the emergence and development of anti-gender movements in Southeast Europe and contribute to the growing research on radical-right social

movements. Particularly, conducting interviews with anti-gender movement leaders provides a rare insight into the internal dynamics, strategies, and identity building of regressive movements, helping to overcome the externalist bias in the field (Goodwin, 2006).

Finally, helping explain the emergence of anti-gender movements addresses a socio-politically important aspect of the current global democratic backsliding. It has practical value for policymakers aiming to strengthen human rights, gender, and sexual equality as vital parts of contemporary constitutional democracies. In 2018, the European Parliament acknowledged anti-gender movements as a serious backlash against gender equality and women's rights (EIGE 2019). While Western European countries have seen a rise in far-right parliamentary representation, Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries such as Poland and Hungary have gone down worrying paths of de-democratization. Autocratization in Eastern Europe (EE) takes form not only as an attack on institutions, but also as a cultural backlash against progressive sociopolitical changes (Krizsán and Roggeband 2019). Therefore, the process of democratic backsliding itself is gendered. Illiberal actors in EE present gender and sexual equality (GSE) policies, and the civil society actors promoting them, as foreign and hostile to the authentic traditionalism of local societies. In large part, the regional version of anti-gender framing is highly Eurosceptical and nationalist, rejecting the Brussels elites' imposition of Western individualism onto Eastern Europe. Going beyond the discursive elements, Krizsán and Roggeband (2018) identified several dimensions of policy backsliding: the discontinuation and dismantling of GSE policies (policy decay); undermining implementation; erosion of consultation mechanisms, and discursive deligitimization. On the one hand, gender equality erosion is expected from radical right and nativist actors who espouse traditional gender relations and family models as crucial for the survival and prosperity of a nation. On the other hand, this erosion has been reinvigorated by successful campaigning of the relatively recent transnational anti-gender movement.

1.3. Thesis Structure Outline

In Chapter 2, I present the theoretical framework of the thesis and elaborate on the relevant bodies of literature I will be contributing to with my work. The chapter starts with central concepts and definitions, mainly addressing the concept of anti-gender movements and the 'gender ideology' frame. Anti-gender movements are defined in relation to radical-right politics and religious populism. I then go deeper into the analysis of the movement's underlying

ideology of conservatism and the movement actor's attempts at reaffirming an ultraconservative interpretation of Christian democracy. Following that, I lay out the central concepts from social movement theory that will help me explain anti-gender movement emergence. Specifically, the latter is defined as one of the stages of the life cycle of social movement organizations (SMOs). To answer my research question on the role of churches in anti-gender politics, I rely on resource mobilization (RM) theory. I then critically address countermovement theory as a potential explanation of anti-gender movements as a reaction or backlash against progressive movements for GSE. Furthermore, I lay out the main contributions of the political process model as an addition to resource mobilization and consider in detail the specific political and discursive opportunities (POS and DOS) available to radical-right movements in general, and anti-gender movements more specifically. Having identified the main theoretical approaches that will help answer my research questions, I define my analytical framework by relying on more recent theories of the radical right as a social movement. Finally, I end the chapter with an overview of the state of the art of the specific instances of anti-gender contention in my cases, namely, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Serbia.

Chapter 3 proceeds from the theoretical framework and main research questions to the comparative design and methodology used to answer them. I start by defining my comparative case study as a small-N comparison of the most similar systems by locating my analysis within the region of SEE. I proceed by justifying the unique characteristics of the region to help bolster my choice of small-N comparison. By focusing on one area and including a negative case, I aim to overcome the 'many variables, little cases' problem and to avoid limitations identified with selecting on the dependant variable. The focus of my study is centered around the meso-level of analysis, namely, social movement organizations, parties, and less formal initiatives and associations of anti-gender actors. Having addressed the issues of reliability, validity and limitations of my research design, the chapter proceeds with the specific methods used. First, protest event analysis (PEA) is presented as the initial method used to identify the intensity, qualities, and variation of anti-gender collective action in the three cases, with detailed explanations of the use of sources, data collection, definitions of issues and keywords. Second, semi-structured interviews with anti-gender leaders and experts are presented as my main method, with an outline of the details on the interview protocol and process, recruitment, ethics, and positionality. Finally, I present the two steps of my qualitative content analysis, namely, thematic analysis and the causal chain approach used for an in-depth interpretive reading of

organizational texts as an additional source of data to triangulate with interview and protest event data.

Chapter 4 lays out the historical legacies and political context relevant for each of the three cases under analysis. Each of the three subchapters addresses the context of one of the countries relevant for anti-gender contention, as identified in the research design and theoretical framework. First, I address the relations between the dominant churches and the state in the post-communist setting, the political and cultural penetration of religion in civil society, and the positioning of the churches on GSE. Second, I present the state of the art on the characteristics and development of civil society and the presence of progressive, namely feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements in the broader context of EU conditionality. Finally, I analyze in detail the legacies and characteristics of the party system from post-communism to contemporary times and pinpoint the ideological positions, interactions, and successes of the main political parties, with a particular focus on far-right and center-right parties.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are the empirical chapters of the thesis – Croatia, Bulgaria, and Serbia, respectively. The chapters are divided according to three groups of elements that make up a movement: 1) structures and actions; 2) ideology and framing; 3) relations and networks. Data collected and interpreted from various sources and methods is combined to investigate the role of the radical right and religion in movement emergence, the actors' own perceptions of political and discursive opportunities, accounts of what motivated them to initiate mobilization, and discussions of movement strategies. First, I describe the central movement structures such as NGOs, civic initiatives or parties and the collective action undertaken by them across time. Second, I analyze the values expressed in interviews and text as guiding movement emergence with a particular focus on the role of religion, ethnonationalism and the actors' understanding of 'gender ideology'. Third, I analyze the movement actors' relations with churches and religious communities, intra-movement relations, and relations with political parties.

In Chapter 8, I move beyond the individual cases to interpret the conclusions we can draw from comparing each of the three instances of anti-gender politics. Two central factors identified in the analytical framework are unpacked as varying across cases: 1) the differences between Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant denominations and church-state relations and the resulting variability of resources available for movement mobilization; 2) different opportunity structures available to anti-gender actors, namely, available far-right allies and left-wing adversaries and varying DOS resulting from media access and alignment of ideology with the attitudes of the broader population and mainstream parties' positions. Each of the elements of movement

emergence are compared: structures and actions, ideology and values, and movement relations. In Croatia, a proper social movement of lay Catholic activists and networks resulted from elaborate doctrinal and institutional support of the Catholic church in terms of movement resources. Anti-gender actors used the vacuum in institutional far-right representation to form anti-gender movement parties and challenge the socially liberal left-wing and moderate center-right party. In Bulgaria, small Protestant communities with Western transnational connections brought the GI frame to form a coalition with stronger far-right nationalist parties of Orthodox creed in a context of a widely conservative political mainstream to challenge the ruling pro-EU populist GERB. In Serbia, scarce resources owing to a lack of Orthodox presence in civil society and a relatively closed opportunity structure resulting from an increasingly authoritarian regime of the pro-EU SNS did not allow full movement emergence. Instead, a nationalist far-right NGO used politicized homophobia and anti-gender mobilization to transform itself into a movement party championing ‘family values’.

Finally, in Chapter 9, I finish by discussing my findings and conclusions by engaging with existing literature and theories to accentuate my own contributions to the fields of political science and sociology, more precisely, the study of radical-right politics, anti-gender movements and social movements more generally. First, I argue that existing literature on religion and right-wing radicalism should pay more attention to churches and lay religious movements as political agents in their own right. Second, I demonstrate the benefits of an internalist approach, arguing that anti-gender movements cannot be explained as a mere backlash to progressive movements, but as resulting from important interactions and dynamics within the broad field of right-wing politics. Third, I address overlooked aspects of anti-gender contention: its relation to traditional media as a fundamental aspect of DOS; familial identity politics as part of an affirmative conservative agenda that goes beyond regressive reactivity; and anti-gender movement parties as an overlooked model of movement-party relations within existing scholarship.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Concepts and Definitions – What are Anti-gender Movements?

2.1.1. Common Sense vs. Deviant Ideology: Gender and the Populist Radical Right

In the following section I present the main concepts used in the thesis and carefully develop how they relate to existing bodies of literature as well as my research questions. The appearance

of actors mobilizing against “gender ideology” (GI) has sparked the interest of scholars from various research domains. From Colombia and Brazil where GI was utilized to sabotage the peace process and to remove LGBT and feminist topics from education to Eastern Europe where referenda and petitions were signed to block same-sex marriage and gender equality – “gender ideology” appeared as a new specter haunting the globe. Opposition to gender equality and LGBT rights has been given fresh wind in the last decade. This is largely a result of the innovative and gravely misleading discursive formulation(s) or denunciatory frame(s) concocted at the heart of the Vatican (see Bracke & Paternotte, 2016; Case, 2016; Garbagnoli, 2016): ‘gender theory’ ‘genderism’, ‘gender ideology’ or plainly ‘gender’. “Gender ideology” is allegedly a dangerous threat spreading an unscientific, politically motivated ideology distinguishing gender from biological sex to bring about the destruction of the traditional heterosexual family and marriage, to indoctrinate children and confuse them about their own gender/sex.

This framing of the generally accepted sociological category of gender is closely linked to right-wing populist discourses which present GI as a tool of cosmopolitan, decadent elites being forced on the people and nations as a means of control and social engineering (Mađarová, 2015). Depending on the political context, the elites are usually comprised of “traitorous” national politicians working together with EU officials and deviant sexual minorities and are presented as an amalgam of neomarxist, liberal and left-wing conspirators which have established cultural hegemony and have mainstreamed GI in most Western democracies. This allows the anti-gender activists to present themselves as a threatened minority, as victims fighting for the people against an international conspiracy. In their discourse, the people are presented as a homogenous national actor imbued with common sense, a respect for traditional values and represented by the image of the heterosexual family usually portrayed in the movement’s symbols (Tranfić, 2022). So far, the most comprehensive comparative work on “anti-gender movements” has argued for this novel concept as appropriate to denote the equally innovative forms of right-wing organizing (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). The anti-gender movement mobilizes against women’s and LGBT activism, sexual and reproductive rights, same-sex marriage and adoption, sexual and civic education, gender mainstreaming policies and seeks to reaffirm differences between men and women. “Gender” is denounced as an inauthentic value system which promotes a “culture of death”, a threat to children, a “totalitarian ideology of social engineering”, or a “covert political strategy and conspiracy of deviants and minorities” (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017, 6-7). Despite a rapidly growing literature on anti-gender

movements, no precise definition of the concept has been proposed as of yet. Based on existing research, I propose the following definition: anti-gender movements are a heterogeneous network of conservative, religious, and radical-right actors opposing ‘gender ideology’ in favour of heteronormative family values.

Various transnational actors linked to different Christian churches have played a crucial role in elaborating and disseminating the GI frame, including Ordo Iuris, the World Congress of Families, Alliance Defending Freedom, and the European Center for Law and Justice, to name a central few (Kemper, 2016; Mos, 2018). Scholars have interpreted the GI frame as a symbolic glue used to unify the far-right, a tool of the new populist illiberalism, and an empty or bridging signifier (Hark & Villa, 2015; Kováts, 2015; Mayer & Sauer, 2017). The compatibility of the GI frame and right-wing populism has been elaborated by authors working on the subject (Ajanovic et al., 2018; Hennig, 2018; Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018). ‘Gender ideology’ is articulated as an enemy of the natural family – a tool created by deviant elites that threatens the heterosexual nature of ‘the people’ inscribed in the family as the fundamental unit of society (Hennig, 2018). In addition, both populist and anti-gender campaigns use the same discursive strategies belonging to what Ruth Wodak calls the ‘politics of fear’: victim-perpetrator reversal, scapegoating, and the construction of conspiracy theories (Wodak, 2015). Radical right populism is characterised not only by a vertical exclusion of the elites but also by a horizontal exclusion of the undeserving, deviant, or foreign others (Brubaker, 2017b). The underpinnings of populist radical right ideology include nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2007). The prioritisation of a heteronormatively defined family is precisely where the radical right’s nativist positions on ethnicity, gender, and religion intersect. As demonstrated by Norocel (2015) in the CEE context, religion can be utilised and implicated in ethno-nationalist projects as an ethnicity marker, while strengthening the reproduction of a ‘heteronormative conception of the nation, portrayed as an enlarged family under the guidance of a man’ (p. 145). In post-conflict societies like Croatia or Serbia, repressive heterosexist gender regimes thrive since ‘the birth rate became a question of national military defense’ (Korac, 1998, p. 160). However, my study will show that a crucial aspect of anti-gender politics in the Balkans is precisely about recentering radical right politics away from ethnonationalism towards an illiberal familism that puts focus on topics of biological and social reproduction. As I will demonstrate, anti-gender politics should be understood as a specific subtype of radical right politics that is partly fuelled by the need for strategic innovation and the infusion of the political agenda with new issues. The heteronormative hierarchical relations framed by Christianity as

‘complementarity of men and women’ establish gendered dichotomies, while also intersecting with populist articulations of social divisions. ‘The people’, normatively privileged but deprived of power, are allegedly oppressed by deviant minorities and feminists-as-elites, since the latter challenge the gendered hierarchy which marginalises them for the benefit of the heterosexual male. Finally, although recent literature has written about the ‘opportunistic synergies’ (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021) between anti-gender and radical-right politics, there is still a need for conceptual clarity and comparative analyses that show both the specificity of anti-genderism in the larger right-wing sector, the varying pathways in which anti-gender politics converge with the rise of the populist radical right, and the movement’s relation to mainstream conservatism and Christian democracy (CD).

2.1.2. A New Christian Crusade – Religion and Anti-gender Politics

In its religious or religiously inflected forms (Zúquete, 2017) populism sacralises ‘the people’, transforming the populist division of the social space into a kind of ‘absolute, non-contingent reality which presents normative claims over the meaning and conduct of social life’ (DeHanas & Stherin 2018, p. 180). Mobilized public religion plays, in fact, a crucial role in anti-gender politics. According to Rogers Brubaker, the appearance of ‘identitarian Christianity’, employed by the far-right, is not a defence of religious values and religiosity as such (Brubaker, 2017a, p. 1198). On the contrary, because ‘We’ are Christian, we can be secular, unlike ‘the Muslims’. This civilizationist discourse groups Christianity, Europe, the West, and secularism against the uncivilised, fundamentalist, Muslim other. However, it should be noted that anti-secular religious discourses feature much more prominently in the Central and Eastern European radical right parties’ programmes compared to their Western counterparts (Minkenberg, 2015). Therefore, it is crucial to investigate why supporting or even joining the radical right might be a rational choice for religious actors. In liberal democracies, as Maciej Potz (2020) argues, churches need to reassert and legitimise their presence in the public sphere by adopting strategies that mimic political actors while also having certain unique, religion-specific strategies at their disposal. As Giorgi (2014) found in the Italian case, Catholic engagement with politics can take different routes and strategies, from non-partisan lobbying dispersed across institutions and associations to a unified religiously inspired party. Thus, to understand the emergence of anti-gender movements we must investigate the strategies and politics of both Christian clergy and lay movements. As previously mentioned, existing research has uncovered in detail the role of the Vatican, the Catholic church as well as other Christian

churches in anti-gender politics. Authors have analyzed the Catholic roots of the GI frame, the theological and doctrinal understandings of the complementarity between women and men, as well as the socio-political relevance of Christian fundamentalism and integralism for the anti-gender movement (Bracke & Paternotte, 2016; Garbagnoli, 2016; Corrêa et al., 2020; Tranfić, 2022). In addition, individual case studies delved deeper into the role of clergy in movement mobilization (Tricou, 2016; Avanza & della Sudda, 2017). Finally, some of the most fruitful early attempts to conceptualize and theorize the phenomenon came from studies of religion (Casanova, 1996; Vaggione, 2005). However, most of these works focus on the religious dimension of anti-gender movements by elaborating on the importance of history, context, religious doctrine, or church-state relations.

In my work, I aim to broaden the analytical lense, arguing for a fruitful expansion that bridges anti-gender studies with debates on religiously inspired collective action. Novel analytical approaches have been developed through the cross-fertilization of social movement and religious studies (for some examples, see Burns & Kniss, 2013; Hannigan, 1991; Kirmani, 2008). Following this strand of scholarship can help us to understand how religions provide movements with resources, beliefs, and identities and to grasp the specificity of religious movements. If we look at resource mobilization, organizational networks, identity-building, and cultural production of the movement, the core of the transnational anti-gender efforts is clearly formed by networks of Christian right actors. The Christian right can be defined as a broad range of (trans)national organizations, coalitions, and networks promoting an “orthodox Christian vision and a defense of the traditional nuclear family” (Buss & Herman, 2003), including a rejection of abortion rights, as well as gender and sexual equality (Lo Mascolo, 2023). In addition, religion-specific strategies and repertoires are ready-made and accessible to anti-gender actors. Osa’s work (1997) on the communist-era Catholic strategy of indirect confrontation with the state illustrates how rituals and events are politicized within the Catholic associational sphere. Similarly, Davis and Robinson (2012) identify a state-bypassing strategy used by various denominations in constructing parallel conservative civil societies. In conclusion, to analyze the role of religion in anti-gender emergence, I use a resource mobilization approach as part of a larger political process model to add to previous gap in the literature that focused primarily on framing, discourses, and political opportunities (Gergorić, 2020); or limited its analysis on individual case studies of religious influence.

Yet, before moving onto the movement’s ideology and its religious foundation, we should address the non-religious side of anti-gender politics. Secular parties without a pronounced

clerical ideology, far-right organizations, and groups, as well as illiberal governments also mobilize against gender ideology, as exemplified in the Estonian, German, and Hungarian cases, to name but a few (Velmet, 2019; Villa, 2018; Pető, 2017). In the Russian case, opposition to gender ideology and political homophobia are part of the hegemonic national identity serving occidental representations of a decadent West (Moss, 2017). Here, a coalition of powerful individuals and oligarchs close to Putin such as Alexandar Dugin, Alexei Komov and Konstantin Malofeev act as anti-gender political entrepreneurs both locally and on a global level. Furthermore, the anti-gender discourse is supported by state ministries, the Russian Academy of Sciences, as well as the Russian Orthodox Church and its ‘Patriarchal Commission on Family’. As Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) summarize across cases, the anti-gender movement encompasses various family associations, anti-abortion groups, religious conservatives, Catholic dignitaries, nationalists and populists, far-right groups, and others (p. 259). In addition, recent works identify a small number of specific cases where left-wing actors have strategically used the gender ideology frame, most notably Rafael Correa, the former president of Ecuador, individual left-wing politicians in France and Italy (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018), and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (Darakchi, 2019). Such occurrences might point to the overlapping of anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist themes contained in the GI frame which are more easily shared between right-wing and left-wing populism and might be linked to the religious sources of anti-genderism. Nevertheless, we should be careful when conceptualizing parties as left-wing. If we follow Norberto Bobbio’s (1996) influential definition, left-wing actors are necessarily egalitarian, which is incompatible with quite a few socially conservative parties that identify as socialist or social-democratic. Importantly for this thesis, EE parties such as the Serbian or Bulgarian Socialist party are, in fact, conservative, following a tradition of national(ist) communism, despite their left-leaning economic policies (Mudde, 2000). With this in mind, I argue that the anti-gender movement should be situated within the broader field of far-right collective actors defined as “those political parties, social movements, and groups located on the ‘right’ end of the ideological left-right continuum” (Castelli Gattinara and Pirro 2019). I rely on Pirro’s (2023) concept of far right as an umbrella for both the anti-liberal radical right and the anti-democratic extreme right. Thus, it is fruitful to analyze the movement itself from the perspective of the far right as a social movement organization. As such, the movement draws from its resources to act and interpret a field of political and discursive opportunities which influence its choice of repertoires and frames (Caiani and della Porta 2018).

2.2. Ideology – Who is Afraid of ‘Gender’ and Why?

Having established the central claims and frames of the anti-gender movement, in the following subchapters, my aim is to provide an in-depth overview of the current literature on the ideology underpinning anti-gender politics. I start by analysing the role of conservatism and continue by investigating how conservative politics come into play in the development of contemporary Christian democracy. I do not engage here with the theological arguments dealing with the ontology and epistemology of sex and gender. As Garbagnoli (2016) argues, the creation and politicization of the division between previously non-existent ‘pro-gender’ and ‘anti-gender’ camps is precisely one of the important victories of the religious actors, so one should not fall into the political game of defending the concept of gender – an established sociological fact. While it is certainly true that there are important discussions about the meaning of gender, with a more post-structuralist negation of the sex binary sometimes coming into conflict with a constructivist approach that acknowledges biological dimorphism (Kováts, 2022), that debate is beyond the scope of this thesis as it is primarily a debate within gender studies and the feminist movement. Despite its nature as a contested concept, there is widespread consensus in the social sciences that there are, in fact, socially constructed roles, identities and ways of expressing oneself that do not stem strictly from biological, sexual dimorphism but are associated with hegemonic, binary opposites of masculinity and femininity.

Nevertheless, the question remains – how do we conceptualize the bundle of issues around which anti-gender movements mobilize under the umbrella of ‘gender ideology’? Existing scholarship uses several concepts. Political science literature favors the concept of morality politics, denoting highly contested policy issues “related to fundamental questions, such as death, reproduction and marriage” (Engeli et al., 2012). While there are good reasons to rely on findings from this field of scholarship as they pertain to the issues of abortion and same-sex marriage, they do not fully cover the issue of gender roles in society which are central to anti-gender movements. Two other concepts come closer, namely, intimate, and sexual citizenship, denoting issues including family choice, gender, reproduction, and rights to sexual expression and consumption (Richardson, 2000; Odasso, 2021). More comprehensively, Mieke Verloo (2018) has conceptualized the following as *cathexis*: “the system that produces and organizes bodies, intimacy, sexuality, sexual reproduction, and kinship, located predominantly in families and private intimate relationships”. As such, *cathexis* is firmly interconnected to political economy, social and family policy. However, issues of education and children’s rights are not fully included in this model. Instead, I propose the use of concepts of biological and social

reproduction (BSR), since they cover both the issues of family choice and reproductive rights, gender roles as well as the transmission of cultural values and norms to offspring via primary socialization and the public education system. Additionally, both in Bourdieu's analysis of the reproduction of economic and cultural capital (see Nash, 1990 for an overview), and in feminist analyses (see Paltasingh & Lingam, 2014) the BSR approach provides a conceptual bridge to consider socioeconomic issues that the movement addresses. To understand the movements preoccupation with biological and social reproduction, we must first address its root ideology.

2.2.1. Social Conservatism as a Crucial Element of Right-Wing Radicalism

Although I conceptualize 'gender ideology' in my work as a diagnostic frame (Benford and Snow 2000) that identifies problems and attributes blame, the framing processes used by anti-gender actors have a strong and coherent ideological background. On the one hand, ideologies are deeply rooted value systems linking theory, norms, and values, while framing, on the other hand, is a strategic process of outward-facing movement 'branding' usually developed on an organizational level (Oliver & Johnston, 2000). In the case of anti-gender movements, the ideological content is provided by conservatism. In a recent special issue on gender and illiberalism (Bogaards & Pető, 2022), anti-gender movements are analyzed as part of a worrying process of democratic backsliding. The special issue points to a broader oversight in anti-gender literature. Concepts of populism, illiberalism, autocratization and radicalism are successfully put to work in the twelve contributions to the special issue. However, with a few passing mentions, one concept is curiously missing from the issue – namely – conservatism. This oversight reflects a broader tendency in the scholarship on anti-gender politics that glances over conservatism as either too broad or too moderate (evident from the occasional references to 'ultraconservatism') to successfully capture the phenomenon. Additionally, conservative ideology is usually understood as a core of mainstream center-right parties (MSR), delineated from right-wing radicalism. Yet, if we are to understand extremist politics as a radical interpretation of mainstream values, or, a 'pathological normalcy' (Mudde, 2010), we have to start from the core ideology behind anti-gender politics. Utilizing theories of conservative ideology will allow me to address the wide gap in anti-gender scholarship that ignores both intramovement disagreement and the relationship between the radical and mainstream right. Furthermore, fundamental elements of conservatism as an ideology can indirectly help explain the emergence of anti-genderism and its defining feature – its innovativeness. Finally, we cannot respond to the recent calls to explore the affirmative, productive side of anti-gender politics

(Paternotte & Verloo, 2021; Mancini & Palazzo, 2021; Holzleithner, 2022) without addressing conservatism as one of the most influential ideologies since the French revolution.

As previously mentioned, existing literature on anti-gender politics primarily explores its connection to populist right-wing radicalism. Focusing on social conservatism as one of its aspects, as Erzeel and Rashkova (2017) point out, the radical right supports traditional gender roles and family values. The populist division of the social space positions ‘feminists, LGBTQ activists, and human rights NGOs that support them as enemies of “the people” (who are imagined as naturally and authentically gender conservative)’ (Graff, Kapur, & Walters, 2019, p. 551). The radical right opposes abortion and same-sex marriage, given its intolerance to deviation from mainstream norms and the ‘unacceptability of moral “others”’ (Minkenberg, 2017, p. 15). Thus, one way of understanding the ideology of the anti-gender movement is to lump it under nativist exclusion of foreign, i.e., non-native, cultures, and ideas (Mudde, 2007; Caiani & Kröll, 2017; Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2018), thereby expanding nativism beyond its ethnonationalist core. However, I find Lenka Bustikova’s account of radical-right elements more convincing and analytically useful for exploring anti-gender politics. According to Bustikova (2019), building on Douglas and Wildavsky (1982), two ideological dimensions corresponding to two modes of social control – group and grid – define the radical right. These dimensions are nationalism on the one hand (control over group boundaries), and sociocultural conservatism on the other hand (control over internal social distinctions). In this sense, anti-gender actors can vary along the two dimensions – while all actors are high on politicizing the ‘grid’ exclusion of gender and sexual minorities, not all are high on politicizing the ‘group’ exclusion of minority ethnic/religious groups. Importantly, even when ethnonationalism is not a salient issue, Bustikova’s approach still firmly identifies ‘grid exclusion’ rooted in social conservatism as radical-right wing politics. This helps us include cases of de-ethnicized (Krasteva, 2016) but gendered exclusionary politics of far-right parties that are centered around morality issues.

Delving deeper into the particular ideological arguments of anti-gender actors, antigenderism consists of three elements according to Korolczuk and Graff (2018). The first is a conservative, religious understanding of natural law and the sex binary pointed against social constructionism. The second is an antimodernist narrative rejecting the sexual revolution, (neo)marxism and feminism, all of which are supposedly to blame for the decline and destruction of the Western Christian culture. The final element is a resistance of “cultural colonialism” and neoliberalism, based in a critique of the uprooting nature of globalization

which allegedly threatens “authentic” national cultures. In defining “political genderphobia”, Hennig adds to these elements an exclusionary populist nativism based in the politics of fear (Hennig, 2018). The latter is especially important since the argument against “gender” is almost always attached to a populist division between the(trans)national elite forcing the unnatural and deviant “gender ideology” onto “the people” (Tranfić, 2022). In conclusion, most of the abovementioned elements can be traced back to the history of conservative ideology. In the following section, my task is to present the central elements of conservatism, how they relate to Christian democracy, and help us explain the emergence of anti-gender politics.

2.2.2. Conservative Reclaiming of Christian Democracy

Two seminal works that gave us an in-depth understanding of conservatism as a coherent ideology with specific core concepts are Karl Mannheim’s (1986) and Michael Freeden’s (1996) seminal studies. According to Mannheim, conservatism should be understood as a politicization of a basic human psychological disposition to cling to the ‘old ways’ – i.e., *traditionalism*. Tradition is defended as a safe and stable set of norms and customs that have allowed a certain community to develop and flourish and should thus be protected against (rapid) change. Secondly, unlike liberal individualist conceptions of freedom, conservatism is *collectivist*, emphasizing the totality within which individuals fulfill certain functions, and thus realize their liberty. This collectivism is embodied in the concept of a *social organism* – a harmonious collection of organic communities which are the basis of human fulfillment and meaningful life. In addition, *inequality* is a natural state that should be accepted as contributing to a harmonious social organism in which individuals are free insofar as they are unequal, i.e., fulfill their specific roles. Finally, traditional communities must be safeguarded by respecting the natural *order and harmony* that have been established either by God or the state. Social conformism thus takes precedence over individual self-expression.

Importantly for our argument on the differentiation between nationalism and conservatism – the nation is secondary, only one in a long line of organic communities. This is most evident when we think of imperialist and monarchical variants of right-wing radicalism¹. Unlike the nation, we can immediately see how the anti-gender focus on the family is deeply rooted in conservative ideology. Both Mannheim and Freeden express its centrality in several ways.

¹ Interestingly, European aristocrats figure as important patrons and sources of revenue for the transnational anti-gender movement (Datta 2018)

Firstly, the family is the guarantor of social order and harmony since it protects and facilitates natural procreation as a crucial element of organic social development. Secondly, the family constrains ‘ultra-individualism’ as a collective association transmitting social morality and linking freedoms to duties and collective responsibilities. Thirdly, the family serves as a locus of communal life and its direct, local, and organic bonds rooted in common values, practices, and language, as juxtaposed to abstract contractual relationships. Thus, although anti-gender movements rely on familism privileging the normative ‘family values’, strategically developed by the American Christian right to oppose feminism, abortion, and gay rights (Dowland, 2009; Möser et al., 2021), we should not ignore a deeper ideological link between conservatism and familism rooted in the idea of restraining the pitfalls of individualism.

Similarly to Mannheim, Freedman (1996) identifies the central elements of conservatism but reduces them to three core concepts. Firstly, conservatism is preoccupied with controlling change by making it safe and gradual. Secondly, it is rooted in the belief in an ‘extra-human origin of the social order’ which is independent of human will – whether it is God, history, biology, or science. Finally, conservatism is a mirror-image, a countermovement to progressive ideas. The latter is taken directly from Mannheim’s dialectical analysis of the shifting nature of conservatism as a force that “is not the bearer of events, or authentically creative, but rather ‘reactive’ in the sense that it first becomes aware of itself as antitheses, as antithetical to the new, and that it can become creative only in this form” (Mannheim, 1986, p. 53). This conclusion clearly resonates with the countermovement characteristics of anti-gender movements which I will further develop in subsequent chapters. For now, it is important to establish this mercurial, adaptable, and reactive nature of conservatism as an ideology. Freedman (1996, p. 432) summarizes it best when describing conservatism as:

... a structural mirror-image reaction to whatever ideological configuration is perceived as the most immediate or menacing source of externally induced change. The ideological response of conservatives is to come up with what they believe is the most effective and successful conceptual strategy for resisting it.

In this sense, the ‘gender ideology’ frame is an innovative conceptual strategy, or a ‘rhetorical counterstrategy’ (Corredor, 2019), adapting to a specific moment in time defined by progressive reinterpretations of gender and sexuality. As I will show in my empirical analysis, anti-gender framing, although rooted in collectivist, religious and even ethnonationalist ideology in part, represents a conscious, strategic departure from this ideology by assuming a quasi-liberal position of protecting universal human rights rooted in a Christian outlook on politics. That way, the conservative mirror-image of freedom aims at “deconstituting the main political

concepts out of progressive hands by endowing them with meaning that rendered them safe for conservatism” (Freedden 1996, p. 369). Importantly, such a position is not anti-modernist but anti-postmodernist and illiberal, responding to an identitarian turn in progressive politics (Kovats, 2022). More precisely, whereas the Catholic church accepts modernism inasmuch as it accepts human rights as universal and abstract natural laws given by God, the more recent ‘declination’ of human rights which recognizes the specific social positions and categories such as gender and sexuality is rejected (Prearo, 2020).

Although we have established so far that anti-gender politics are rooted in conservative ideology, this only complicates its relation to mainstream conservative parties. Returning to my initial observations on anti-gender politics and radical right-wing politics, there are some problems in delineating between the extreme right, the populist radical right and (mainstream) political conservatism, as noted by Mair and Mudde (1998). While extreme-right nationalists assert the importance of traditional and religious ethics, focusing on the “breakdown of the nucleus family, community, religion and traditional morality” (Mudde, 2000, p. 189), these issues are “not a defining feature of the populist radical right family” (Mudde, 2007, p. 28). However, as hinted earlier in the text, the study of the PRR mostly stems from Western European analyses that pinpoint anti-immigrant nativism as a core issue, with Central and Eastern Europe showing somewhat different ideological constellations (Minkenberg, 2019). From a theoretical standpoint, and in relation to my research question on the role of the radical right in anti-gender politics, an important task for my empirical analysis will be to ascertain where anti-genderism fits in the SEE context and how it relates to ‘neighboring’ party and ideological families, especially ethnonationalist parties, moderate conservatism, and Christian democracy. As I will argue based on my data, despite a clear reactive nature of anti-gender politics, hinted already in the very concept, contesting ‘gender’ is not necessarily manifested in a concrete political countermovement to liberal, feminist or LGBTIQ+ movements. Instead, anti-gender actors are largely driven by the desire to counter the liberalizing tendencies of mainstream conservative parties and to reclaim Christian democracy as a conservative, illiberal force.

One of the defining concepts of Christian democracy (CD) is rooted in conservative ideology, namely, an understanding of social morality and duties “based on respect for human life, the family and established social and gender roles” (Accetti, 2019). In addition, CD relies on a particularly religious inspiration of politics that provides space for religious authorities to ‘police the content’ of political action, foster religious practice and education through state

institutions, and limit religious pluralism insofar as it threatens society's 'Christian soul' (Accetti, 2019, p. 348). However, the whole project of Christian democracy had a fundamentally pro-democratic character, with the Catholic church accepting human rights and constitutional, liberal democracy. In addition to Catholic social doctrine and a religious inspiration, CD is also rooted in a political doctrine of class compromise, integration, accommodation, and political mediation, manifesting itself in practical terms as a decidedly centrist pragmatism within European party systems (Van Kersbergen, 2003; Kalyvas & van Kersbergen, 2010). The problem facing CD parties over time was that their religious *credo* was hollowed out and secularized, with their critics questioning the CD's redefinition of religion into "a nebulous humanitarian and moral concept" (Kalyvas & Kersenberg, 2010). Similarly, scholars of morality politics (Engeli et al., 2012; Hurka et al., 2017) show how these awkward 'unsecular' – neither religious nor fully secular – policy positions result from an electoral logic that required CD parties to reach beyond the confessional voter base and ignore morality issues as much as possible. As I shall demonstrate in the empirical chapters, this process of liberalization and secularization of mainstream right-wing parties, particularly within EU, also influenced greatly the policy positions of EE right-wing parties hoping to accede to the EU (and the European People's Party). EU accession criteria demanded increasingly progressive and liberal policy positions on morality issues. As mainstream right parties uneasily implemented socially liberal reforms, this opened the doors for competitors to mobilize around morality issues (Engeli et al., 2012), i.e., to contest 'gender ideology'.

2.3. Starting a Crusade – Movement Emergence and Resource Mobilization

So far, I have addressed the characteristics, defining features and ideologies in which anti-gender politics are rooted in a more descriptive manner, with only hints as to why and how anti-gender movements emerge. In this subchapter, I critically reflect on existing social movement literature explaining how (counter)movements come to be, i.e., the causes and conditions of anti-gender movement emergence and mobilization. I will do this in three steps. First, I address the concepts of movement emergence and coalescence in strictly analytical and theoretical terms, given that this is the central *explanandum* of my thesis. Second, I engage with resource mobilization theories and the rich literature dealing with the role of religion in mobilizing for collective action. Third, I engage critically with countermovement theories to argue for a more

internalist approach sensitive of intramovement differences and interactions with the mainstream right.

2.3.1. From the Parish to the Streets – Social Movement Stages

What do we mean when we speak of social movement emergence? How can we operationalize or break down this concept? Whereas the protest cycle model elaborated by Sydney Tarrow (1998) refers specifically to the rise and fall of protest activity characterized by intensified conflict and interactions between challengers and authorities, Shultziner and Goldberg (2018) zoom in on collective action to discern specific sequences or stages in social movement build-up. Social movement emergence can thus be understood as a specific stage in a life cycle of a movement and its leading SMOs. Several social movement scholars have explicitly elaborated and defined the particular stages of movement trajectories, either in four-stage (della Porta & Diani, 2006; Christiansen, 2009) or three-stage models (Goldstone, 1998; Moss & Snow, 2016; Shultziner & Goldberg, 2018). According to Christiansen (2009), movement emergence is the period preceeding contention in which only smaller groups of agitators attempt to spread discontent to initiate mobilization, followed by movement coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline. In a more simplified three-stage approach, Shultziner and Goldberg (2018) talk of movement origination, protest and outcomes. By combining the central characteristics of the initial stages and the activities undertaken by SMOs, we can define movement emergence more broadly as the appearance of organizations and networks making public claims by framing specific problems, culprits and solutions and engaging in repeated collective action and interaction with third actors. Simply put, in my thesis, I aim to explain the appearance of anti-gender organizations and networks, the ‘gender ideology’ frame, and collective action of those actors. Importantly, I do not focus in-depth on the later movement stages of institutionalization and movement outcomes. However, my model of movement emergence goes beyond that of Blumer (1951) and Christiansen (2009) to include an analysis of protests and interactions with other actors once the movement fully takes off and triggers responses of the authorities, opposing movements and the media (Moyer, 1987). Thus, explaining the emergence of anti-gender movements in my cases includes an analysis of the trajectories following initial mobilization, stopping short of explaining outcomes which depend on a variety of factors that would go beyond my explanatory model.

As I will elaborate in detail when addressing my comparative design and methodology, one of my selected cases was chosen as a negative case with an expected non-emergence of an anti-

gender movement to avoid the problem of selecting on the dependant variable (Geddes, 1990). As Christiansen (2009, p. 17) points out, the emergence of a social movement means that its actors “have overcome some obstacles which many never overcome”. Thus, my interviews have been conducted with core anti-gender activists and moral entrepreneurs in each of the cases, which does not mean that each of the cases is an instance of a fully fledged anti-gender social movement. In the case of anti-gender politics, scholars have even avoided using the term ‘movement’, utilizing instead ambiguous concepts such as ‘mobilization’ or ‘campaign’ (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Paternotte, 2023). In my thesis, I rely on the definition of social movements used by della Porta and Diani (2020) that delineates movements as “dense, informal networks of actors with a shared collective identity who engage in political and/or cultural conflicts to promote or oppose social change”. On the one hand, I disagree with Paternotte (2023) when he rejects the concept of social movements arguing that it mistakenly points only to civil society actors whereas ‘anti-gender campaigns’ also includes state actors and politicians. Following this reasoning, there would be no feminist nor environmental movements simply because there are also institutionalized actors identifying with feminist or environmentalist struggles. Besides, none of the state actors or institutions in my cases brought the anti-gender struggle to the agenda – they responded by either (partially) co-opting or rejecting it. On the other hand, social movements should, indeed, be delineated from similar phenomena, particularly other instances of collective action performed by actors from the ‘third sector’ of civil society. Drawing from existing social movement literature (Diani & Bison, 2004; della Porta & Diani, 2006; Císař, 2013), I have identified interest groups and coalitions as similar, but distinct phenomena according to their main distinguishing characteristics (Figure 1).

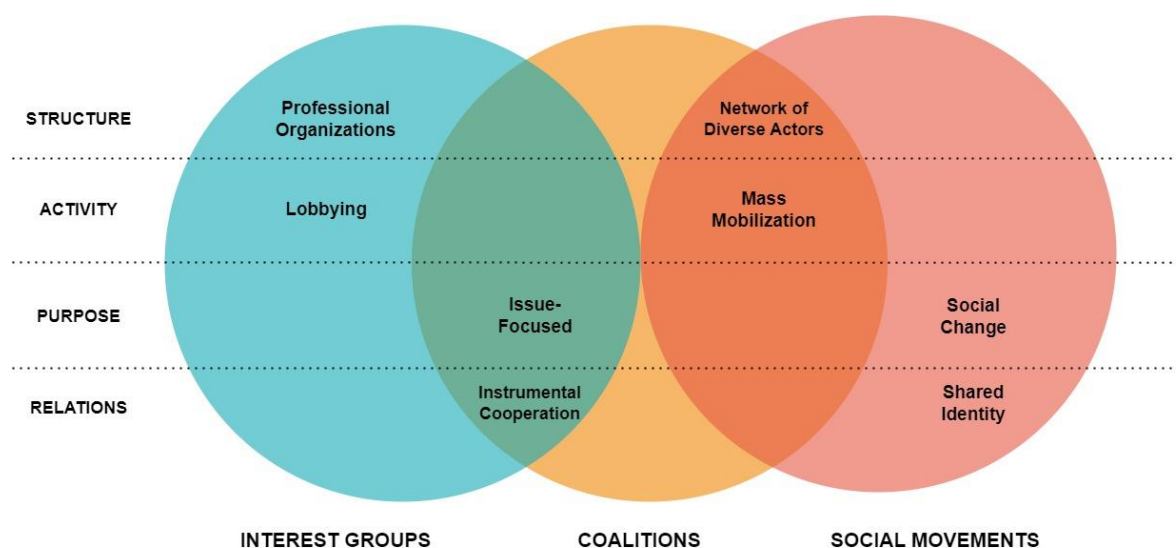


Figure 1 - Different Forms of Collective Action

As we can see, types of collective actors differ based on their purpose, internal organization and the types of relations and activities they engage with. Here, it is important to note that social movements appear as the most encompassing phenomenon, able to contain both coalitional processes and interest groups. Furthermore, movement mobilization is not always necessary to achieve political goals, especially if strong interest groups such as Churches have direct access to lobbying the halls of power (Potz, 2020) or when actors are able to form coalitions with powerful political parties to affect policy change. Thus, my aim is not only to explain how and why anti-gender movements emerge, but also, how, and why they do *not* emerge, and whether there are other concepts appropriate to describe the phenomenon in some of my cases.

In conclusion, having defined what I aim to achieve in my analysis, I continue by defining two central approaches recognized by movement scholars as crucial factors explaining the emergence of social movements. First, relying on resource mobilization theory, I look at the various material, symbolic and human resources at the disposal of anti-gender entrepreneurs, particularly those provided by religious actors and churches. Second, I reflect critically on countermovement theory that helps explain both movement emergence and trajectories. In my final subchapter, I move towards the political process model by addressing the political and discursive opportunity structures facilitating and constraining anti-gender movements.

2.3.2. Both Shepherd and Flock – Resource Mobilization and Religion

In most of the cases, the central social movement organizations of the anti-gender movement stem from religious organizations, defined by Potz (2020, 20) as “social entities which, insofar as they enter a political system to engage in power relations, become political actors” (p. 20). Consequently, we should treat them accordingly as other political organizations, i.e., as having internally defined goals, interests, and strategies they adopt in pursuing them (Potz, 2020). Churches, sects, and religious associations can either opt for directly lobbying decision makers or indirect political influence through civil society; by inspiring a social movement (Casanova, 1999; Sheerkat, 2006; Potz, 2020). While social movement research has repeatedly shown the importance of religion in providing various types of social movements with resources, values, and identities (Smith, 1996; Tarrow, 1998; Beckford, 2001), the anti-gender movement should primarily be understood as a religiously *inspired* social movement (Sheerkat, 2006). Revisiting the Western social movement literature, we recognize the same or similar patterns of

organization as those of traditional pro-life groups in the US. As Zald and McCarthy (1987) have demonstrated, drawing from McAdam (1982), churches, acting as movement midwives (Smith, 1996) often form ‘front groups’² as organizational vehicles that later take on a life of their own:

“The choice of generating new, separate, organizational vehicles based upon religious infrastructures seems best understood as a tactic to avoid criticism and buffer the potentials of social control that might be aimed, otherwise, directly at the religious group itself.” (Zald and McCarty 1986, p. 72)

In some cases, these groups and organizations may even be ‘empty nutshells’ (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017), forming a kind of movement Potemkin village which obscures the actual actors, strength and support of/for the movement. Still, the frames, coalitions and its transnational character arguably makes the anti-gender movement a *sui generis* phenomenon with "new discourses and forms of organization in which established and new conservative actors seek to reach beyond their traditional circles and to connect with a wider audience." (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017, p. 272). Anti-gender movements rely on a resource-rich universe of churches and clergymen, lay communities of activists, as well as transnational faith-based think tanks, universities, and NGOs. As a religiously inspired social movement, anti-gender actors have at their disposal religion-specific resources like transcendental motivation, shared transnational identification with Christianity, and a rich, decentralized network of supporting organizations, networks, and resources (Smith, 1996). Furthermore, according to Sidney Tarrow’s definition, the anti-gender movement fits the definition of a transnational movement, as it is comprised of “socially mobilized groups with constituents in at least two states, engaged in sustained contentious interactions with powerholders in at least one state other than their own, or against an international institution, or a multinational economic actor” (Tarrow 2001, p. 11). The movement has appeared in contexts as different as Western liberal, post-communist and post-colonial. According to Beatrice Spallaccia (2019), the movement could be also considered as “transcultural”, as it has “travelled across a single culture and because its discourse results from the hybridisation of different cultural traditions, e.g., mixing discursive elements borrowed from Catholicism, secularism, anti-capitalism and anti-communism” (p. 10). Since different national cultures act as constraints in the process of transnational diffusion of protest (Della Porta, Kriesi & Rucht, 1999, p. 9), such adaptability is highly conducive for transnationalization. Thus, the networks, resources and legitimacy of transnational anti-gender actors are significantly strengthened since they are backed by religious actors, especially the

² I will refer to this particular strategy as the fronting strategy.

Catholic Church which has the unique position to act internationally as a sovereign state, an interest group and as a global moral actor (Manuel, Reardon, & Wilcox, 2006, p. 18).

As Edwards and Kane (2014) rightly point out, despite the relevance of resource mobilization for explaining movement emergence, the explicit utilization of RM theories and analytical framework is scarce among SM scholars nowadays, partly because they have become taken for granted and well-ingrained in research. On the other hand, the RM approach has been criticized and complemented by the political process model. Most importantly, McAdam's critique (Edwards & Kane, 2014) admits that RM might be suitable for analyzing "elite-driven, professionalized reform movements or interest group politics, but not for explanations of confrontational, mass protest movements" (p. 206). Hence, my own work utilizes the RM approach precisely to the extent that anti-gender movements *are* driven by ultraconservative, elite lay Christian Right moral entrepreneurs forming professionalized countermovement organizations to resist change and advance their own vision of moral politics. Whereas most existing scholarship on anti-gender movement recognizes religion and Christian churches as 1) sources of the 'gender ideology' frame and movement's ideology, and 2) the political opportunity structure via church-state relations, I complement these theories by looking at resource mobilization and church-society relations. Different types of resources can be mobilized by a movement, including moral, cultural, social-organizational, human, and material resources (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). Additionally, there are several types of access to these resources – self-production, aggregation, co-optation/appropriation, and patronage (Edwards & Kane 2014). Relying on this conceptual apparatus, I will analyze how the differences in predominant Christian denominations across my cases account for varying resources available for mobilization by anti-gender entrepreneurs. In addition to social movement theories, studies of social capital and religion (see for example Bahovec et al., 2007; Kassa, 2013) demonstrate that different Christian denominations correlate differently with social capital and social activism. Importantly for my study, correlation between religion (regular attendance) and volunteering in religious organizations is negative only in the case of Orthodox communities (Norris & Inglehart 2004). What I will demonstrate in my empirical analysis is a significantly weaker Orthodox civil society, resulting in less opportunities for anti-gender actors to co-opt the social-organizational, human, and material resources for movement mobilization when compared to Protestant and Catholic churches.

2.3.3. Countermoves against Whom? – Towards a Political Process Model

Beyond resource mobilization, countermovement theory explains conservative collective action as emerging to resist the mobilization and successes of (progressive) social movements. The elaboration of movement-countermovement interactions, stemming predominantly from American sociological studies of the contention around abortion, aims to provide us with a more dynamic assessment of movement developments and outcomes (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). According to Dillard (2013), “SMs create the grievances and political opportunities for the emergence of CMs through actions that advocate for change, threaten established interests, mobilize constituents, and that demonstrate the use of collective action as a means to effect or resist social change” (p. 1). As such, countermovement theory is a strong contender to answer my central research question on how and why anti-gender movements emerge. In a case of accurate social-scientific prediction, the Argentinian sociologist Juan Marco Vaggione (2005) wrote about “reactive politicization” against gender and sexual equality, following Casanova's work. Most importantly, as Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) note, he announced two influential conservative, religious innovations that the anti-gender movement would fully adopt: NGOization and discursive secularization. Most scholars have since focused on the latter while leaving questions of agency, strategy, and organizational forms unanswered.

Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) synthesize findings from Western liberal-democratic polities about patterns of movement-countermovement dynamics which are highly relevant for anti-gender contention. They are interested, for example, in which cases victories and defeats might trigger or slow down further mobilization or how interactions with elites change through conflict and cooperation. It is, indeed, important to acknowledge the specificities of countermobilization and backlash politics as they unfold in (partial) opposition to modernity, liberalism, and secularization, as well as the latter's progressive movement champions. After all, as previously established, the reactive nature of anti-gender politics is rooted in the mirror-like conservative ideology. Two points are important here. First, the anti-gender movement's repertoires, frames and even organizational forms develop in oppositional interaction. Second, its leading actors support the *status quo (ante)*, meaning that they have a somewhat privileged position within the power structures when seeking allies. However, as Avanza (2018), Verloo and Paternotte (2018) rightfully warn us, we should not make the mistake of obscuring the emergence of the anti-gender movement as an “ugly movement”. Adopting an emic analytical and methodological approach that discards this ideological bias means that we should study “distasteful” social movements on their terms and not just in relation to the progressive goals

they oppose. In the words of Korolczuk and Graff (2018), it seems that the anti-gender movement is carefully constructing a new type of illiberal universalism that aims to replace individual rights with family rights. Moreover, there are at least two critical problems with adopting the countermovement approach to analyze anti-gender movements in (South)East Europe. First, and most critically, to fruitfully apply the tools of movement-countermovement dynamics, a movement has to *exist*. This should not be a given or evident in any case in post-communist politics. As noted by Rawłuszko (2019) when asking herself “And if the Opponents of Gender Ideology are Right?” – opposition to GI is in part a reaction to a top-down, technocratic process of liberal EU norm enforcement in Eastern Europe. One which is not always followed or preceded by extensive grassroots feminist and LGBTIQ+ mobilizing, as we shall see in Chapter 4. Buechler (2011, p. 122), for example, admits that social movement sectors with oppositional movements emerge in “capitalist societies with rational-legal procedures and dense networks of formal [civil society] organizations”, the satisfaction of the latter requirement being particularly dubious in Southeast Europe. Second, the heterogeneity of anti-gender actors and the contention which unfolds in different arenas on various levels challenge the simplistic model of triangulated contention between a movement, a countermovement, and the state.

These problems are partly addressed by the comprehensive and methodical adaptation of social movement scholarship for analyzing contemporary opposition to gender+ equality, undertaken by Dutch feminist scholars Mieke Verloo (2018) and Conny Roggeband (2018). As argued by Roggeband (2018), in some cases, governments and state actors should be conceptualized not as allies but as members of the countermovement networks. This is because countermovements often emerge from those in power resisting change, with a vested interest in preserving the *status quo* of inequality. A particularly crucial finding here for an analysis of the (non)emergence of anti-gender contention in Southeast Europe is Mottl's (1980) argument that countermovements use “already highly aligned constituencies”, i.e., religious, and political institutions and organizations, to resist change advocated by the movement. Roggeband (2018) brings the point home:

“If, for instance, they [countermovements] believe or trust that the government (or other powerful political actors) will represent their interests effectively, they will not organize as a social movement. As institutional or informal opposition thus prevails over mobilization/organized opposition, oppositional actors are not always clearly visible as a collective actor.”

This finding is significant in the various instances of anti-gender politics that stop short of forming a movement, i.e. engage in continuous collective action and form a collective identity. Roggeband (2018) and Mottl's (1980) points about conservative and religious political players choosing between different arenas to contest GSE resonates well with Jose Casanova's more structural, historical analysis. He traces the Catholic Church's post-Vatican II disengagement from state establishment and political society towards acting within the public sphere of civil society. As such, the Church "takes part in ongoing processes of normative contestation, discursive legitimation and redrawing of boundaries between private and public, religious and secular (...)" (Casanova, 1996, p. 367). In post-socialist Eastern European contexts, this process of deprivatization is furthermore complicated by specific historical legacies. However, as argued by more agential approaches, we must look at why conservative religious actors, no matter the denomination, choose some strategies instead of others, including organizational forms, arenas, allies, and repertoires. Finally, we must understand the internal complexity both of churches as meta-movement organizations, as well as factionalism and conflict in the broad field of right-wing politics. As della Porta (2020) hints, understanding backlash politics means acknowledging the differentiation of far-right actors according to the 'crucial ideological characteristics and specific features of the main groups that are targeted for exclusion in their discourse' (p. 5). To this end, I build on the works of Lavizzari's (2020) and Prearo's (2020) rich empirical analyses of Italian anti-gender politics. What is particularly important in their works is the analysis of the various Catholic groups, players and competing interests, their emic understanding of the episcopal divisions of the lay faithful into associations, groups, and movements. Unpacking the "black box" of a "compound player" (Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015) such as the Catholic church is crucial if we want to understand anti-gender mobilization. Lavizzari rightly warns us about the dangers of assuming intra-movement harmony between the Church hierarchy, ecclesial movements, and conservative political actors when analyzing the anti-gender movement. In conclusion, although countermovement theory helps explain the dynamics of movement trajectories, as well as movement outcomes, it casts a binary shadow of two opposing movements, assuming a kind of homogeneity of each of them. One of the central contributions of this thesis is to challenge this logic and show how both intramovement relations and relations between Christian, radical-right and mainstream right factions account for anti-gender movement emergence.

Following the research agenda bridging far right and social movement studies (Caiani & della Porta, 2018) is particularly useful for such an endeavor. The core actors of the anti-gender

movement should be conceptualized as movement activists and movement organizations (Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2019). As such, they enter into various interactions with far-right parties. In EE, Caiani and Cisar (2018) deliver the most comprehensive typology of such interactions across the party and protest arenas, including cooperation, co-optation, agenda appropriation or penetration, completion, attack, exclusion, indifference. Anti-gender movement actors can count on potential allies for political coalition-building within both the centre-right and the extreme right through such interactions. Regarding the latter, previous research on the far-right movement sector has shown that in cases like Catholic Italy, LGBT issues account for more than a third of all instances of extreme-right mobilization before 2012 (Caiani, della Porta & Wagemann, 2012). Furthermore, social conservatism is an important predictor of radical-right electoral support in Eastern Europe (Kehrberg, 2015).

Finally, in addition to relational explanations addressing movement emergence, understanding the role of religious and far-right actors in anti-gender politics will also require looking at their repertoires of action. Here, I follow the still nascent literature (Caiani, 2017; Caiani & della Porta, 2018; Castelli Gattinara et al., 2022) that aims to fill the gap in the scholarship on far-right action repertoires and challenge the unfounded overemphasis of previous scholarship on either electoral or violent action forms. As I will demonstrate in my empirical analysis, analyzing the repertoires of anti-gender action reveals a lot about the movement's internal composition, strategies, and framing. Additionally, the moderate, middle-class expression of familial identity politics correspond to postmodern repertoires of action (Alimi 2015) and points towards important innovative characteristics of the anti-gender movement in terms of far-right politics. Unpacking the interactions between various players in the broader far-right field might help us understand to what extent anti-gender movements appear due to a strategic moderation in (far) right repertoires and discourses on gender and LGBTIQ+ issues. To understand these mechanisms and dynamics, we must, however, move away from resource mobilization and countermovement theory towards the analysis of political and discursive opportunity structures.

2.4. Political and Discursive Opportunity Structures

2.4.1. Overview of the POS and DOS for Radical-right Actors

To identify the relevant discursive and political opportunities for the anti-gender movement, we should theoretically and conceptually situate it within the literature on both far-right and religious movements. In simplified terms, I'm interested in the changes in the discursive and political fields that constrain or provide opportunities for anti-gender mobilization and/or the appearance of the 'gender ideology' frame in contention. The traditional political opportunity approach to analyzing social movements, used both in explaining their emergence and success, deals with how activists' and organizations' actions and strategies are constrained or facilitated within a specific context of the polity, or in relation to the institutional sphere of politics. Tarrow (1996) defines political opportunities as "consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements" (p. 54). Most famously, McAdam (1996) synthesized a set of elements of the political opportunity structure identified by various authors, presuming a liberal democratic context, that influence social movements: "1. the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system, 2, the stability or instability of a broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity, 3. The presence and absence of elite allies, and 4). The state's capacity and propensity for repression" (p. 27). Since its origins, various debates and controversies regarding the approach have appeared, most notably about the lack of agreement on the significant dimensions of political opportunities, the extent to which they are relevant if not perceived or recognized as such by actors, as well as the disregard of cultural and discursive opportunities (della Porta & Diani, 2006). However, even the most ardent critics of the political opportunity structures concept accept its analytical usefulness for explaining movement emergence: "if they [POS] are going to be independent variables, it is most likely at this stage, when movements do not yet exist" (Goodwin & Jasper 2011, p. 18).

Given the centrality of the 'gender ideology' frame as the defining discursive weapon of the anti-gender movement, the concept of discursive opportunity structures (Koopmans & Statham, 1999) is especially relevant to address the cultural context(s) in which a frame can or cannot find receptivity and resonance. As summarized by McCammon (2013), various elements of the cultural context have been addressed in social movement research so far as having an impact on movements, such as the dominant public discourses, citizenship models, the role of media and emotions, to name a few. When it comes to radical right protests, Caiani and della Porta

(2018) cite Prowe's (2004) findings which identify the spread of nationalism, intolerance, xenophobia, authoritarianism, opposition to the left, and anti-parliamentarism as important aspects of discursive opportunities for the right. More specifically related to sexuality and morality politics, others have related the intensity of mobilization around specific topics such as LGBTIQ+ issues as highly context-dependent, explaining it as a strategic adaptation of far-right actors to the temporally opportune publicized debates and national discourses (Caiani, della Porta, & Wagemann, 2012). Conversely, Minkenberg (2017) highlights the elements of public discourse and political opportunities in CEE that stem from more enduring historical legacies, such as the prevailing concepts of nationhood. With respect to anti-gender actors, we can expect movement framing to respond to the dominant political discourses on GSE reproduced by mainstream political actors, institutions, and the media, as well as any anti-discrimination legislation put in place by governments. Specifically, the appearance of anti-gender rhetoric can be viewed as a response to the discursive threat of an increasingly liberal and tolerant public discourse which prompts a "declarative liberal recognition of equality concerns that is diluted and used to whitewash the radically conservative makeup of a group" (Gaweda et al., 2022). Additionally, we can hypothesize that a particular discursive opportunity in the case of anti-gender mobilization appears when there is a gap between a relatively socially liberal positioning of MSR parties and its more conservative voter base.

2.4.2. Movement-specific Opportunities – Towards an Analytical Framework

As Giugni (2009) argues, authors have been working of developing more nuanced and interconnected accounts of political and discursive opportunities which are issue-specific or relevant only for certain types of movements. With that in mind, I move on to the opportunities which have been identified in existing literature as relevant for the emergence of the anti-gender movement. In the first comprehensive review article published on anti-gender movements, Gergorić (2020) demonstrates that only a minority of published articles use the analytical approaches of political opportunity structures (23.2%) and activist networks (26.8%), while 50% deals with cultural artefacts and framing. She thus signals a growing lacuna in the field concerning the role of anti-gender networks and actors mobilizing within different political and discursive contexts. Indeed, given the novelty of the topic, various cases and authors from different fields identify a different 'shopping list' of political and discursive opportunities. The lists include everything from nationalism and sovereignty to 'culturalization of religion', papal doctrines and neoliberal feminism (Fassin, 2014; Robcis, 2015; Kuhar & Paternotte,

2017; Kováts, 2017; Velmet, 2019). In the most encompassing comparative analysis of 12 European cases of anti-gender campaigning, Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) summarize the somewhat tentative and not clearly defined political and discursive opportunities found among the various cases. In addition to the importance of institutional allies and divisions within elites, they add church-state relations, and specifically, the authority of the Catholic Church in each case, depending on its historical role: “The more the Church is seen as a moral authority, the more visible it appears in the anti-gender movement” (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017, p. 267). The historical legacies and models of church-state separation, the authors argue, influence the strategies that the Catholic Church uses in contestation of sexuality and morality issues, and its relation to civil society and the state. In their interpretation, anti-gender movements are partly understood as one of the many different ways in which churches engage in politics, in this case, namely, through movement mobilization. As for the discursive opportunities, Kuhar and Paternotte list the importance of Euroscepticism, nationalism, and racism (primarily in countries with anti-immigration as a salient issue), as well as anti-globalization. In Eastern Europe, the relative presence of anxieties regarding the reproduction of the nation and demography also plays a role.

Finally, the changes in, or Europeanization of, gender equality policies have been recognized as important triggers and political opportunities for (counter)mobilization in some cases (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Hennig, 2018). Moreover, when looking at Balkan countries which entered the EU in later waves of enlargement, and especially candidate members such as Serbia, gender and sexuality become important proxies for assessing the democratic progress and satisfaction of the political criteria of accession (Slootmaeckers, 2016), thereby arguably increasing the saliency of these issues in the region. More specifically, human rights and anti-discrimination legislation or laws identifying sex, gender identity and sexual orientation as protected categories can not only trigger (counter)mobilization but can also act as constraints for far-right actors. Based on the overview of literature on political and discursive opportunities (for the anti-gender movement), I offer the following tentative operationalization of the context of anti-gender mobilization (Table 1). This operationalization and definition of relevant background factors will help me structure the historical and contextual analysis of my cases in Chapter 4, as well as the interview protocol.

	POS	DOS
Alliance/Opponent Structure	Strength of Right and Left-wing Parties	Party and Media Discourses on GSE
Church-State-Society Relations	Legal and Social Authority of Churches	Acceptability of Religion in the Public Sphere
Europeanization	Liberalization of Mainstream Political Parties	Minority Rights and Anti-discrimination Legislation

Table 1 – Elements of the Political and Discursive Opportunity Structures

In summary, in this chapter I have argued for an actor-centered definition of anti-gender movements, starting from the ideological and institutional roots of the movement through an analysis of the complex ways in which issues of religion, gender and radical-right politics intertwine. I proceeded by looking at factors that are both internal and external to anti-gender actors that can help explain movement emergence and collective action. First, I described the centrality of Christian churches and lay religious movements for the resource mobilization of anti-gender movements. Second, I critically assessed the usefulness of countermovement theory to explain anti-gender movement emergence in the Balkans by emphasizing the importance of intramovement dynamics and relations with the mainstream right and the churches. Third, I presented a critical overview of the most commonly addressed political and discursive opportunity structures to define the contextual analysis of my cases and point towards and informed list of the most probable factors influencing anti-gender movement emergence. To what extent these are recognized by movement actors will be a matter of empirical investigation. Moving forward, rooted in the theoretical and conceptual blocks of the research agenda bridging far right and social movement studies (Caiani, della Porta & Wagemann, 2012; Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2018; Caiani, 2019), I present the analytical framework for analyzing how and why anti-gender movements emerge in each of my cases (Figure 2), before continuing to develop my comparative design in the following chapter.

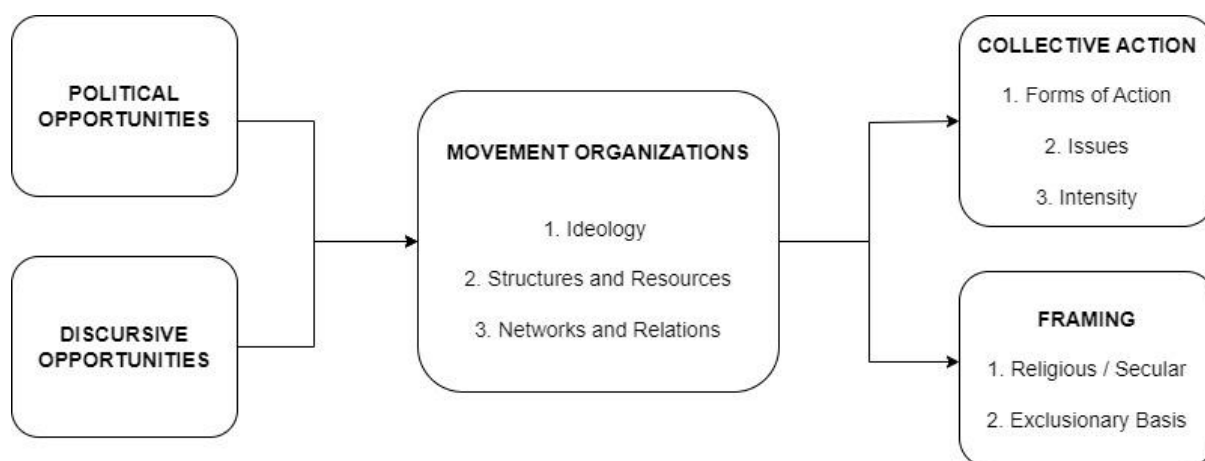


Figure 2 – Analytical Framework for Anti-gender Movement Emergence

The analytical framework represents a synthesis of my theoretical approach to explaining movement emergence. It is centered on following the development of social movement organizations and tracing their activities through the various movement stages. More specifically, I explain movement emergence and trajectories, i.e., the appearance of movement organizations, collective action, and anti-gender framing, as a result of both internal mobilization of resources, ideology and networks among various collective actors and moral entrepreneurs, and of (their perception of) the political and discursive opportunities facilitating and hindering their activities.

3. SETTING THE SCENE – ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENTS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

3.1. The Transnational and Regional Contexts

In this chapter, I situate anti-gender politics more firmly within the Southeast European region by giving a detailed overview of existing local scholarship. The transnational character of the anti-gender movement has been firmly established in existing literature that points to a conservative backlash to feminist advances at the level of transnational institutions such as the UN and the EU (Antić & Radačić, 2020; Buss & Herman, 2003; Corredor, 2019; Mos, 2022; Zacharenko, 2020). On the one hand, national actors disseminate their strategies, share best practices, and help spread know-how and resources to develop new transnational anti-gender fora. On the other hand, regional and global anti-gender actors help support the creation of new local initiatives or chapters of existing pro-life and anti-gender organizations. Different types

(or paths) of transnationalization are possible with regards to social movements and mobilizations: the formation of international non-governmental organizations; the organization of transnational, global events and forums; and direct and indirect diffusion between different national cases, with active roles both for transmitters and recipients (Della Porta, Kriesi & Rucht, 1999, p. 26). Anti-gender movement actors utilize different mechanisms conceptualized by social movement scholars under diffusion. These include: i) relational, direct diffusion through pre-existing social or interpersonal relationships, ii) non-relational, indirect diffusion through traditional and social media, and iii) mediated diffusion through third parties acting as brokers (Soule & Roggeband, 2018). While processes of transnationalization and diffusion are not crucial elements of my analytical framework, they might help explain how anti-gender movements emerged in my cases. As Lavizzari and Siročić (2022, p. 2) recently found in the comparison of the Italian and Croatian case, localization plays an important role in movement mobilization, defined as a “process through which anti-gender movements adapt transnationally coordinated frames, organizations, and tactics to meet the requirements of local discursive and political opportunity structures”. Thus, we can expect a complex interaction of movement and discourse ‘transmitters’ and ‘recipients’ in the different cases.

Furthermore, transnationalization and diffusion can occur within specific areas or regions with a history of cultural and political proximity. What makes Southeast Europe a region? The emergence of anti-gender movements in various contexts can be pinpointed around the year 2012 (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). In the post-2008 period, Southeast Europe can be identified as a specific region of Europe’s semi-periphery, facing the European austerity regime and a high sense of powerlessness worsened by “unresponsive elites and a (perceived) lack of agency over larger socio-economic processes” (Brentin & Bieber, 2019). The particular historical legacies of interethnic conflict, forced population exchanges (Mazower, 1998) and religious diversity gave birth to powerful discourses of religious nationalism in the Balkans. The region’s populations exhibit highly conservative and traditionalist values, even when compared to Central and Eastern Europe (EVS 2017). Furthermore, all of the cases under analyses missed the ‘big bang’ enlargement of the EU in 2004 that saw most CEE countries acceding to the powerful economic and political bloc. This also had significant consequences for GSE, since subsequent stabilization and association agreements (SAAs) included chapters on fundamental rights, increasingly paying attention to gender and sexual minorities (Slootmaeckers, 2023). Hence, before moving on to methodological choices, I conclude by presenting the state of the

art on local anti-gender contention appearing in the region and in my three cases specifically: Bulgaria, Croatia, and Serbia.

3.2. Bulgaria – A Heterogenous Network

In his pioneering article on heteronormativity and nationalism in Bulgaria, Shaban Darakchi (2019) was the first scholar to rightfully contextualize opposition to the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria as part of a larger, transnational anti-gender movement. His paper presents a rich descriptive analysis of ultraconservative and nationalist actors, noting the origin of local anti-genderism in small Protestant communities of the predominantly Orthodox Bulgaria. Darakchi analyzes the discourses and arguments against GI as motivated both by a nationalist sovereignism rejecting ‘foreign values’ and a religious Christian conservatism. The article figures as a great exploratory investigation on troubles with ‘gender’ in a previously unexplored country-case of anti-gender politics. However, Darakchi’s analysis does not go beyond the discursive analysis of conservative arguments, ignoring the role of (radical) right-wing political parties in anti-gender contention. It is as if actors appear out of the blue to politically exploit homo/transphobia by copy-pasting it from transnational anti-gender discourses.

While also mostly focusing on the role of discourse, Behrensen and Stanoeva (2019) look at the broader picture, i.e., the nationalist consensus among Bulgarian elites and voters. They attempt to explain both anti-gender and anti-immigrant contention as a symptom of a hardened nationalism, a collective ‘hypochondriac identity’ that seeks to protect the national community from threats foreign to its body. Although the article convincingly presents important continuities between communist and post-communist politics across the left/right divide, it overlooks the constitutive tension of anti-gender politics in Bulgaria between far-right nationalists and their previously bitter enemies – ultraconservative Protestant communities. A more systematic comparative project on anti-gender opposition to the Istanbul Convention that includes Bulgaria is developed in Krizsán and Roggeband’s (2021) recent manuscript. The book contains the most detailed, careful process tracing of anti-gender claim-making with a stronger analysis of the broader political context, recognizing the importance of shifting alignments and divisions within the mainstream right for anti-gender success. However, their analysis is limited to the issue of violence against women and deals mostly with policy outcomes and feminist reactions, and not the emergence of anti-gender contention itself. Finally, two of the most recent

articles published by Merdjanova (2022) and Slavova (2022) address the centrality of religion and language for anti-gender contention in Bulgaria, respectively. Both actors emphasize the importance of transnational actors, identifying some of the crucial players and interactions. While Merdjanova investigates the deprivatization of religion and the increasing activism of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church within a wider global context of Russian-inspired resurgent Orthodoxy, Slavova scrutinizes the manipulative strategies of Bulgarian anti-gender actors. Most importantly, both works hint at the relevance of coalition building between the BOC, far-right nationalists, and Evangelicals that I will expand on in detail throughout my thesis. In conclusion, existing research on anti-gender movements in Bulgaria is mostly limited to process tracing and discourse analysis and departs only from the most recent, visible, and highly publicized contention around the Istanbul Convention in 2018. I continue by building on their work with a more internalist endeavor, aiming to understand the reasoning of anti-gender actors, their own perceptions of the political context, and the longer process of movement emergence that precedes the period of public protest and policy influence.

3.3. Croatia – Catholic Civil Society

Given that the Croatian anti-gender movement was not only among the earliest cases in Europe (Paternotte, 2023), but also one of the more successful ones, there has still been relatively few in-depth analyses of the movement's emergence. Two pioneering studies of the Croatian anti-gender movement (Hodžić & Bijelić, 2014; Hodžić & Štulhofer, 2017) take an investigative approach, engaging in in-depth process tracing of the main actors, networks and discourses of the movement. Hodžić and Bijelić (2014) were the first to point out the highly manipulative nature of anti-gender actors' strategies of hiding their religiosity behind secular, civic front-groups, while Hodžić and Štulhofer (2017) highlight the use of strategic litigation and online mobilization. While both works emphasize, and rightly so, the political nature of anti-gender contention, focusing on a small core group of activists backed by the top of the Catholic church, neither answer the question of how the movement managed to successfully mobilize thousands of supporters. Focusing on manipulative 'astroturfing' strategies, transnational links and financing leaves a blind spot for the budding Catholic associational spheres that proved to be crucial for movement mobilization. Building on (the gaps in) their work, I will argue that the central role in movement emergence was played by local level lay Catholic networks, parishes and informal groups that amounted to a proper grassroots Catholic movement. Another study by Anić (2015) provided a much-needed historical perspective on the movement, looking at the

(post)communist dynamics and the feminist struggle in the Croatian context, focusing on the anti-communist framing of anti-gender actors. A focus on framing is also taken up by Vučković Juroš et al. (2020) in the most methodologically and analytically elaborated analysis of the Croatian case up to date, proving how anti-gender actors adopted human rights and democracy frames from the LGBT movement, while never truly renouncing the morality-based core of their argumentation. However, their work is limited to analyzing one episode of contention, namely, the marriage referendum, using frame analysis to explain outcomes rather than movement emergence.

Whereas most previously mentioned works are limited by an underdeveloped understanding of the larger national context, carrying out their analyses of the movement almost as if in a political and institutional vacuum, two works address the issues of political opportunity and movement – party interactions with more care. Lavizzari and Siročić (2022) point out the centrality of alliance formation with right-wing political parties in affecting the localization of transnational anti-gender movements and their trajectories. Specifically, in the Croatian case, they note how the internal struggles within the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* – HDZ) opened a window of opportunity for the movement towards institutionalization. While this finding plays a crucial role in my own work as well, their argument about the importance of parties is not geared towards explaining movement emergence as much as movement institutionalization and outcomes. Finally, the most serious analysis of the anti-gender movement in Croatia that uses social movement concepts to explain its emergence was undertaken by Petričušić, Čehulić, and Čepo (2017). Specifically, the authors elaborate how the change in referendum rules in Croatia provided an opportunity for the anti-gender movement to amend the constitution in favor of a heteronormative definition of marriage, thereby demonstrating both the strengths and weaknesses of the POS model. Petričušić et al. (2017) skilfully explained the importance of the Croatian elite's abolishment of the voter turnout threshold for a nationwide referendum for the anti-gender movement's success. They interviewed some of the leading members of the AG movement and successfully captured their perception of POS – a valuable, ground-breaking insight in studies of the anti-gender movement. However, the authors write about the movement's “gaining of political power” and policymaking without clear explanations of the diversity of actors within the movement, their goals, successes and failures or interactions with opponents. We are told that the following main political opportunities were detected: “deep distrust in mainstream politics, as well as the economic crisis [...as] instigators of change that were conducive to the claims of the religious-

political movement” (Petričušić, Čehulić and Čepo, 2017, p. 79). Yet none of these factors seem to be corroborated by their analysis. As it often happens with the POS approach, the authors seem to conflate long-term structures, events, and short-term windows of opportunity. Nevertheless, their study provides an excellent springboard for adapting POS for the anti-gender movements in the region.

3.4. Serbia – Discourse without a Movement?

As previously mentioned, Serbia has not witnessed the emergence of an anti-gender movement, at least not within the period I am analysing in my thesis, ending with 2019. At the time of writing, renewed contention has unravelled around GSE in Serbia, but we still cannot speak of a movement comparable to those in countries like France, Romania, or Croatia. Correspondingly, there has only been one or two academic articles dealing with the anti-gender movement in Serbia (see Zaharijević, 2018; Dekić, 2020). However, the scholarship dealing with (radical) right-wing opposition to LGBTIQ+ and women’s rights, particularly anti-Pride contention in the context of Serbia’s accession to the EU is much larger (Igrutinović et al., 2015, Kahlina, 2015, Mlinarić, 2016). Authors working on Serbian EU accession (for recent works see Kahlina, 2023 and Slootmaeckers, 2023) recognize the importance of anti-Western and anti-NATO discourses and national identity in opposing LGBTIQ+ rights. In this sense, Serbia differs from Bulgaria and Croatia as it was the target of a NATO bombing campaign as recently as 1999, fostering an increased Russophillia and opposition to the ‘decadent West’, especially in conservative and nationalist circles.

In a short but pioneering text on the case of an education package on the prevention of sexual violence in kindergartens and schools in Serbia, Adrijana Zaharijević (2018) identifies the appearance of anti-gender discourse as a consequence of the scattered and largely unorganized action of conservative academics in Serbia. Similarly, Dekić (2020) analyzes the same contentious episode by focusing on discourses, but recognizing important links between anti-gender academics and the political party Dveri which Zaharijević ignores. From the viewpoint of religion and politics and the activities of the Serbian Orthodox church, Igrutinović (2015) recognizes some important processes in religious nationalist protest that are congruent with anti-gender mobilization, namely, the secularization of the Church’s discourse followed by politicization of religious rituals such as lities or processions. Although Igrutinović (2015, p. 218) emphasizes a process of de-ethnicization, noting “diminished explicit focus on ethnicity and increased focus on reconstructing ‘traditional’ gender roles”, she rightfully places the focus

on traditional gender roles within the existing religio-nationalist preoccupation with birth rates. While the previously mentioned scholarship recognizes important tendencies in the emerging Serbian anti-gender politics, it remains exclusively focused on analyzing discourses. Still, Dekić (2020) offers some interesting hypothesis in her work on why an anti-gender movement did not fully emerge in Serbia, noting its weak organizational structure. She claims that the movement did not find a strong political party-ally that would help with movement mobilization, but also the possibility that, since the state is itself generating conservative familial policies, such movement is not needed. I will start my empirical analysis of Serbia precisely from these findings, additionally informed by resource mobilization and other social movement approaches. Having addressed the specificities of anti-gender politics in the region as a final ingredient of the theoretical framework, I now turn to the research design and methods used in my thesis.

4. COMPARATIVE DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1. Small-N Comparison of Similar Cases

With the primary goal of understanding movement emergence variability and the driving mechanisms in radical right and religious organizing against “gender ideology”, I employ a cross-national comparative case study of three cases: Croatia, Bulgaria, and Serbia. Following an actor-centered approach to movement emergence, I locate my study on the meso level of analysis, investigating the creation of frames, networks and mobilizing structures against ‘gender’ as “structural but subsocietal phenomena” (Staggenborg, 2002). From this perspective, the central objects of my analysis are anti-gender SMOs, political parties, informal networks, civic initiatives, and religious groups mobilizing around the issues of biological and social reproduction. Nevertheless, my study sheds light on both the micro and macro levels of movement emergence, including the motivations and decisions made by individuals, i.e. anti-gender moral entrepreneurs, and the importance of macro-level processes of secularization, party system dynamics and historical legacies in Southeast Europe.

I chose to focus on the region of Southeast Europe for three reasons. Firstly, anti-gender actors themselves recognize Eastern Europe in general as crucial for their activities — a kind of “stronghold of resistance in the European union”, a region which, unlike Western Europe, maintained its Christian identity (Korolczuk & Graff 2018, p. 812). Secondly, the resurgence

of public religion, nationalism and geopolitical concerns make right-wing mobilization in Eastern Europe particularly complex and arguably more successful (Minkenberg, 2017). Thirdly, previous research on religious and sexual nationalism has pointed to an importance of investigating the power struggles over defining collective identity in Southeast Europe specifically as it relates to matters of gender, homosexuality, religion, and nationalism (Sremac & Ganzevoort, 2015; Sloomaeckers, Touquet, & Vermeersch, 2016). Finally, Southeast Europe remains understudied in the quickly developing field of anti-gender movement studies, with most research focusing either on Western, Central and Eastern Europe or Latin America.

My research is designed as a qualitative, case-oriented comparison of anti-gender mobilization in Croatia, Bulgaria, and Serbia. As generally established in political science, and comparative politics more specifically, there are particular trade-offs when choosing a small-N comparative study rather than a large-N one in terms of the epistemological approach, logic of comparison, ability to make causal inferences and generalizability of findings or external validity. Thus, to justify the choice of a small-N strategy, I shall briefly return to the main goals of this study framed from a particularly methodological angle. The main object of my inquiry are anti-gender actors, or more specifically, relatively small groups of elite moral entrepreneurs using resources and political/discursive opportunities to advance ultraconservative politics by blocking progressive change in the area of biological and social reproduction and replacing it with illiberal family politics. As such, my study is firmly situated in the field of interpretive social and political science, largely aiming to provide a dynamic, in-depth description and interpretation of how actors perceive their surroundings and why they make the strategic decisions on framing, action, and relational movement-building processes that they do. The goal of a case-oriented study such as this one is thus to gain an in-depth understanding of specific contexts (Collier, 1991; della Porta, 2008) and explain the “causes of effects”, rather than the “effects of causes”; i.e., to provide a robust narrative explanation of how certain outcomes came to be (Zimmerman, 2022).

However, in order to make sure that my comparison can actually *explain* rather than merely *describe* the anti-gender phenomenon, granted, with limited generalizability and capability to strictly account for alternative explanations, I followed certain instructions for qualitative researchers as guidelines for my comparative design (Collier, 1991; King et al., 2021). First, I collected data in a structured, focused way, making sure the same information is collected with the same methods in the different contexts. Furthermore, I did not rely on secondary sources to approximate the variation in the outcomes (anti-gender mobilization) but rather I developed an

original protest event dataset of anti-gender collective action in the three cases to increase methodological precision. Second, I focused on similar cases to reduce the problem of “many variables, little cases”, which is particularly appropriate for area studies (Landman, 2000). Third, I elaborated my theory carefully by focusing on a relatively small number of explanatory factors (see Table 2), trinangling three fields of study: religion and politics; social movement scholarship; and far-right studies to make as precise and as theoretically informed hypotheses as possible.

Contextual Features	Comparison of Most Similar Systems		
	Croatia	Bulgaria	Serbia
Post-socialist SEE Country	✓	✓	✓
(Flawed) Liberal Democracy	✓	✓	✓
Religious Nationalism	✓	✓	✓
A Quasi-Established Church	✓	✓	✓
EU Conditionality	✓	✓	✓
Conservative Population	✓	✓	✓
Key Explanatory Factors			
Majority Religion (RM)	Catholicism	Orthodoxy	Orthodoxy
Strength of RR Parties (POS)	Weak	Strong	Moderate
Strength of LW Parties (POS)	Strong	Weak	Weak
Outcome to Be Explained			
Movement Mobilization	Strong	Moderate	Weak

Table 2 – Most Similar Systems Design

Finally, to avoid the risks associated with selecting on the dependant variable, namely, that explanatory factors which seem crucial might actually be present even in cases where there is no such outcome, I chose Serbia as a negative case. As della Porta (2012) argues, the goal of a case-based comparative logic is to explore diversity by thick description of a small number of cases. While Croatia will thus appear as a typical case of anti-gender movement mobilization, Serbia appears as an extreme case (Zimmerman, 2020) with very low occurrence of anti-gender contention. Given that the research on anti-gender movements is still novel, although rapidly expanding, small-N cross-case qualitative inference of the kind achieved in this study is a great tool in theory-building, sharpening conceptualizations, exploring the scope and diversity of outcomes, and clarifying causal mechanisms (Seawright, 2021). To strengthen the robustness of my findings I employed both theoretical and methodological tirangulation. First, I combine different but complementary theoretical frameworks to benefit from a multimodal perspective on the phenomenon under analysis (see Hussein, 2009; Pitre & Kushner, 2015; Rheindorf, 2022). This includes theories on church-state-society relations, social movement theories, and the scholarship of far-right party politics, all of which help explain a part of the puzzle, i.e. the

causal mechanisms of anti-gender mobilization. Second, I triangulate several types of qualitative methods to cross-check the validity and robustness of the data (Ayoub, Wallace & Millán, 2014), which is particularly important to verify claims made by far-right interviewees.

As evident in Table 2, my study employs a most similar systems design (MSSD) rooted in Mill's method of agreement aiming to reduce the number of varying factors in order to single out a few explanatory factors and scrutinize their effects. Accordingly, all of the three cases under analysis here are post-socialist Southeast European countries, which bears heavily on two sociopolitical aspects important in explaining anti-gender politics: the experience of state atheism and single-party rule during socialism and the subsequent resurgence of religion and multi-party politics after 1990 dominated by nationalist opposition parties with not much sympathy for *liberal* democracy. Second, in the years taken as the beginning of my time period for empirical analysis, all three countries are flawed liberal democracies, with similar scores on the V-Dem 'libdem' scale (0-1): 0.7 for Croatia, and 0.6 for Bulgaria and Serbia (V-Dem 2011). The scale measures both the quality of electoral democracy as well as civil liberties and minority rights – a measure particularly salient for comparing anti-gender politics. Third, ethnic and cultural identities of the majority populations in all three cases are closely intertwined with religious identity, with religion serving as a cultural marker of belonging, which increases the trust and importance of the dominant Catholic and Orthodox churches in the three largely monoconfessional countries (Madeley, 2003). Furthermore, the Catholic church in Croatia and the Serbian and Bulgarian Orthodox churches can all be classified as quasi-established churches (Petkoff, 2005). In short, although the three constitutional regimes observe a secular separation of church and state, the majority religions are privileged in terms of symbolic and material recognition and support, with a cooperative relationship between the churches and the states. Additionally, although at different points in time, all three countries applied for EU membership and entered a lengthy process of conditionality, screening, and benchmarking to satisfy the various membership criteria that impacted gender and sexual equality policymaking greatly. Finally, the majority of the three countries' populations predominantly condemn homosexuality and abortion (EVS 2008) – two issues that can be taken as proxies for a larger set of attitudes on gender and sexual equality and were the dominant issues around which anti-gender contention emerged in the three cases. Finally, after identifying the similarities, I combined the resource mobilization (RM) and political opportunity structure (POS) approaches from social movement theory to craft my previously elaborated hypothesis about two key explanatory factors responsible for the varying pathways towards anti-gender politics in the three cases.

4.2. Protest Event Analysis

The central goal of protest event analysis (PEA) is to systematically collect and analyze large amounts of data on protest events to better understand the dynamics of collective action. More precisely, the method enables the “mapping of the occurrences and characteristics of protests across geographical areas, across issues/movements and over time” (Hutter, 2014). This includes the quantification of various properties of protest events, including the timing, duration, location, frequency, claims, size, forms, carriers, and targets (Caiani & Parenti, 2013). In my work, I follow the newer developments in PEA which aim to expand the criteria used for defining coding units, thus approaching the more inclusive political claim analysis (PCA) which covers a broader set of collective actions and activities. Specifically, I follow the definition developed by Caiani and Graziano, focusing on all political events, which includes different action repertoires ‘relating to collective social problems and solutions’ as opposed to individual strategies (Caiani & Graziano, 2018). Similarly, Weisskircher (2018, p. 7) uses an encompassing definition of protest events as all “politically motivated ‘unconventional’ actions”. Such a broader definition of criteria is more suitable to anti-gender campaigns which heavily make use of actions such as public prayer and vigils alongside the more traditional demonstrative actions and mass protests.

Given the lack of empirical research on anti-gender politics in Southeast Europe, I use PEA to shed light on some fundamental features of the outcome I am explaining, namely, anti-gender mobilization. My first goal is to map out the frequency and time span of instances of anti-gender campaigns, protests, and other collective performances and actions in the three cases. Since there is a large disparity between the protest activity among the cases, including one (assumed) negative case, PEA is useful for assessing and enumerating anti-gender occurrences in each of them. More specifically, I focus on three aspects of collective action: actor types, issue fields and forms of action. These aspects help me address the central research questions of my project, namely, the presence and role of religion, religious actors, and repertoires in anti-gender campaigns, as well as the presence and role of radical-right actors and issues. PEA thus provides me with empirical data necessary to analyze the political strategies, relations, and ideologies of anti-gender actors. Protest event analysis of daily press was carried out for an 11-year period (2010-2020); a period informed by the existing literature on the emergence of anti-gender

movements (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017) which pinpoints 2012 as the beginning of anti-gender mobilization in most cases³.

Ideally, existing databases on protest events would have been used to offset the time-consuming nature of data collection for protest event analysis. However, databases such as the Far-Right Protest in Europe Project (FARPE) of the Center for Research on Extremism or those of the Center for the Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) are not pertinent for the analysis of anti-gender mobilization in Southeast Europe. The databases do not include the country cases covered in my PhD project, nor the issues of gender and sexuality, which are often instances of mobilization that do not fall under the mainstream definitions of core issues of far-right ideology. The second step was to check whether newswires and news databases such as LexisNexis and Factiva, commonly used for protest event analysis, contain relevant newspapers and time periods. Unfortunately, as Hutter rightfully acknowledges (Hutter, 2014), existing databases do not systematically cover newspapers and/or events in smaller (South)East European countries. The only Serbian news source in Factiva, for example, is RTV B92, which has been flagged by Twitter recently as ‘state-affiliated’ (Jeremic, 2021) and did not return any results for even the most inclusive keywords such as “abortion” in the pre-test. However, the Bulgarian News Agency (BNA), along with major Bulgarian newspapers, show more promising results, and were used to complement events collected from newspaper site-searching. Relying on Factiva for the Bulgarian case also helped me mitigate the language barrier since the database only contains articles in English.

Given the resource-intensive nature of data collection for PEA, I opted for collecting protest data from two quality newspapers in each of the three cases. Following Hutter’s (2014) recommendation on pre-testing and selection criteria, I started with a small pilot study to assess the feasibility of the project. Two quality national daily newspapers were chosen for each of the cases. The initial decision was to select one centre-left and one centre-right newspaper to account for political bias in reporting and to work with digital archives of the printed versions. Several obstacles were encountered. First, online newspaper archives were not available in most cases or did not cover the time periods under analysis. For example, the digital archive of the second most circulated newspaper in Croatia, Jutarnji list, contains digital versions of printed papers only from January 2017. Second, the democratic backsliding and authoritarian grip on

³ I started collecting data from 2010, i.e. two years earlier, since at least one of my cases – the Croatian one – was one of the earliest instances of anti-gender contention in Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). The time period ends in 2020 when data collection started and the COVID-19 pandemic brought public actions to a halt.

the media in Serbia and Bulgaria, ranking 90th and 111th in the 2019 World Press Freedom Index respectively (Reporters Without Borders, 2019), create additional problems for newspaper selection. In the case of Serbia, the central anti-gender actor, Dveri, is denounced by President Vučić as a neo-fascist party (Večernji.hr, 12 January 2021). This implies that the government's high level of control over media might result in serious (self)censorship of the reporting on Dveri's activities. Although Serbia is a negative case and frequent occurrences of anti-gender activities were not expected, events such as the annual rally against abortion are not reported in mainstream media. In the Bulgarian case, I used the DeepL AI-powered translation software to parse through online newspapers in Bulgarian. Additionally, issue-based keywords responding to their English counterparts were defined in collaboration with a Bulgarian native speaker to check for the relevance of individual words in the local context and prepare the tools for site search analysis.

Given the aforementioned problems in newspaper selection and availability of data, I decided to use the Google Site Search tool for automated keyword searches of content published by websites of quality newspapers in each case as a corrective addition to their internal search engines. Although using the Google Site Search tool is not as reliable as using digital newspaper archives due to the volatile availability of online sources, researchers have demonstrated increasing reliability in its information retrieval and search result quality, even when compared to search engines integrated into various websites (Mandl et al., 2015). Using the site search tool, I was able to work around the problem posed by the incomplete digital archives for the time period under analysis, since all of the newspapers have had news websites since 2010. Furthermore, online data has the advantage of not being susceptible to human error due to coder fatigue during manual reading of newspapers (Earl et al., 2014). In fact, collecting data for PEA from online versions of newspapers and other sources has been increasingly recognized as a valuable addition to physical 'hard copies' of newspapers and archives (Almeida & Lichbach, 2003; Berntzen & Weisskircher, 2016; Andretta & Pavan, 2018). As Kriesi et al. (2020) note, adopting a 'multisource perspective' by adding online sources increases our chance of finding relevant protests, since online news are not limited by publication space like physical newspapers, and are more likely to publish information on events advertised by organizations on their online platforms.

4.2.1. Defining Issues and Keywords

In the Croatian case, initial PEA data was extracted from two newspapers of record: Jutarnji.hr (centre-left) and Večernji.hr (centre-right). In the Bulgarian case, the most read online newspaper, Dnevnik.bg, was included as an addition to the Bulgarian News Agency articles extracted via Factiva. Finally, two centrist newspapers of record were included from Serbia, namely, Politika.rs and Danas.rs. Articles were extracted via search queries and keywords as proxies between January 2010 and January 2020. An issue-based criterion for defining and detecting an anti-gender political event was adopted according to the existing definitions of issues around which the movement mobilizes. Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) include the following: opposition to the concepts of ‘gender’, ‘gender mainstreaming’, ‘gender ideology’, or ‘genderism’; opposition to LGBT rights, reproductive rights, sexual and gender education, gender studies and democracy (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017, p. 256). More recently, gender-based violence, especially the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, has become an additional contentious issue (Krizsán & Roggeband, p. 2021) and was thus included in the criteria for defining an anti-gender protest event.

A test run using Boolean operators to compare search results which combined keywords for both issues and actors and those only searching for issues (e.g., “abortion AND church” vs. only “abortion”) was conducted in January 2021 on the Croatian case. Even adding the broadest actor keywords such as ‘*desnica*’ (the right) or ‘*crkva*’ (the church) drastically reduced the number of codeable events found by the search strings, which is why I opted for issue-based search criteria only. Although such a strategy increased the number of irrelevant articles including actions organized by left-wing and liberal actors, it minimized the risk of missing out on a large number of protests. Finally, since gender studies either do not exist as academic disciplines in the cases under analysis, or have not (yet) been politicized, this issue was not included since it was not found as relevant. The same goes for ‘opposition to democracy’, since such a broadly defined issue is unworkable and too vague for operationalization, and excluding it was not expected to lead to a loss of protest events during data extraction. The list of issues and keywords used as proxy is listed in Table 3.

GENDER	LGBT	ABORTION	EDUCATION
“Gender ideology”	“LGBT”	“Abortion”	“Sex education”
“Gender mainstreaming”	“Homosexual”	“Termination of pregnancy”	“Health education”
“Genderism”	“Gay”	“Conscientious objection”	“Gender studies”
“Istanbul Convention”	“Trans”		
	“Pride parade”		

Table 3 – List of Issues and Proxy Keywords

Only events organized and carried out within the offline and online spaces of the three country-cases of Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia were included into the dataset, regardless of the country of origin of the actors undertaking the action. The unit of analysis is the event, not the newspaper article, which means one data source might have contained several events that required coding, but no such occurrence was registered. The unit of analysis consists of the following elements (variables for coding): the date, the source, the actor who initiates the protest event, the form of action, and finally the issue field of the event. In addition to the online newspaper data, I also included protest events that were subsequently reported by my interviewees during fieldwork while responding to questions about their activities and action forms. To mitigate the risk of including events that have not actually happened, I only included those events mentioned by respondents that were proven to have actually taken place via a triangulation procedure. More specifically, to enter the event catalogue, events mentioned by interviewees had to be corroborated by at least two of the three following sources: 1) online news sites, 2) actors’ websites 3) social media, at least one of which had to have a photograph of the event displayed on the webpage.

The following Table 4 lists the total number of articles that came up as the search was conducted and the number of events analyzed after eliminating redundant and irrelevant data. In addition, the final column lists the number of additional protest events that were not captured in online newspapers but were collected during fieldwork and included in the dataset after the aforementioned triangulation procedure.

Case	Total No. of Newspaper Articles	Newspaper Articles with PE	PEs Collected via Interviews
Croatia	1436	45	13
Bulgaria	988	33	7
Serbia	1013	18	4

Table 4 – Breakdown of Collected PEA Data

4.3. Semi-structured Interviews

In the only comprehensive review article of existing scholarship on anti-gender movements, Gergorić (2020) found that scholars focus mostly on the ‘gender ideology’ frame, discourse, and the political opportunity structures, while critical discourse analysis and textual analysis of newspaper articles, press releases, social media and speeches are used as the main methods. This reveals a twofold gap in the literature: a lack of focus on the agency of anti-gender actors and their perceptions of political opportunities, and a corresponding lack of ‘internalist’, ethnographic research using interviews, which has also been recognized in the broader field of far-right studies (Blee, 2007; Castelli Gattinara, 2020). I use interviews to shed light on the role of religion and right-wing radicalism in the formation of anti-gender movements. In addition to qualitative content analysis, this helps me compare the different actor constellations and perceptions of opportunities in the three cases. It enables me to gauge how they affect the intensity, radicality and type of repertoires and frames used against gender and LGBT equality, i.e., the (non)emergence of contention and radical-right framing of ‘gender ideology’.

Interviewing leaders and coordinators of anti-gender social movement organizations and initiatives allows us to understand the circumstances surrounding the emergence of anti-gender campaigning, the actors’ perceptions, and relations with their environment, all of which is crucial in understanding and explaining their mobilization efforts and entry into the political arena. Exploring the agency of movement actors also entails recognizing a degree of social construction involved in the understanding of the context, i.e., the windows of political opportunity. As Gamson and Meyer put it: “By influencing perceptions of opportunity among potential activists, organizers can actually alter the material bases of opportunity” (Gamson & Meyer, 1996, p. 286). In addition, interviews allow us to inquire about the broader field of actors, the emergence of alliances, conflict and cooperation among various players which is a key factor of understanding movement strategies. I would argue that this is particularly relevant

in the case of the anti-gender movement which has been identified as a complex, heterogenous network of transnational actors coming from various political, religious, academic, and civic circles (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

I opted for perhaps the most common type of interviews used in qualitative research – semi-structured interviews. The rationale behind this choice is in combining the ‘best of both worlds’. Namely, a combination of a standardized list of themes and topics ordered within an interview guide which allows for comparability across cases, and the flexibility of slightly varying, open-ended interview questions adapted for each context and actor, along with some space left for interview participants to pursue other related topics of interest. My interview guide (see Appendix 1) is centered around three thematic groups corresponding to three broad social movement concepts: frames, actions, and relations. The first group of questions is operationalized into questions about the organization’s values and ideology. Specifically, these are questions about the claims, frames, the role of religion and the actors’ understanding of ‘gender ideology’. The second group of questions concerns the actions and the corresponding context of those actions. Specifically, these entail questions about the organization’s founding, its activities, specific forms of action undertaken by the organization and participation in actions organized by others, as well as the perception of the political and discursive opportunities. The third and final group of questions addresses the broader field of actors with which the organization engages and establishes relations. Specifically, the questions ask participants to identify whom they cooperate with, organize activities, and feel ideologically proximate to. This also includes questions about the specific relationship with international organizations, churches, and political parties. The participants were interviewed as representatives of their respective organization/initiative and were prompted to respond as such.

4.3.1. Selecting Interviewees

Given the lack of empirical data on anti-gender movements and actors, which is even more acute in the cases of Southeast Europe, and the partly exploratory nature of research on the novel phenomenon of anti-gender mobilization, the selection of interview participants was correspondingly inclusive and loosely defined. By relying on Kuhar and Paternotte’s (2017) identification of issue-areas around which anti-gender movements mobilize, I use the existing literature to identify anti-gender social movement organizations in each case. Given my focus on relations and strategies, I include a broad array of actors using the ‘gender ideology’ frame,

and/or those organizations cooperating with anti-gender SMO's, namely: social conservative associations, NGO's, grassroots initiatives, and anti-gender movement parties. The individuals recruited as interview participants are key persons within each of the organizations, defined as decision-makers in leading positions, including founders, leaders, coordinators, or party cadres responsible in the relevant issue-fields such as family and social policy. Around 15 interviews per case was expected to ensure theoretical saturation, with 2-3 individuals targeted per organization. All the organizations that have been selected were founded and/or active during the 11-year time period under analysis (2010-2020). If the interview participant is no longer actively involved within the movement, they were asked about the defined time period in which they were holding the leadership positions. Thus, using purposive sampling and snowballing, I aimed to increase the diversity of respondents and organizations to ensure the representation of different factions within the broader movement (see Appendix 2 for breakdown and acronyms).

Interview participants were contacted primarily via email, with a short description of the PhD project and assurances about the privacy and data protection. If the contacted individual did not respond to the interview request, additional reminder emails were sent, and then the persons were contacted via phone when accessible. In some instances, social media accounts were used to establish primary contact. Finally, the offices of those organizations which were not reachable by using email, social media or phone were visited to attempt in-person recruitment. Important gatekeepers were identified in all three cases and contacted first. These were persons expected to be important nodes in the anti-gender networks that could, if rapport is established, help open up access to other actors. The snowballing method was used, and each interviewee was asked to recommend another person and provide their contact if possible. With the limitations posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on mobility and fieldwork, a majority of interviews – 24 out of 43 – were conducted online via videotelephony, while 19 interviews were conducted in person.

Despite the pandemic, I committed a total of six months to fieldwork, spending two months in each of the three countries' capitals to conduct in-person interviews, visit anti-gender SMO spaces, attend rallies and radical-right marches when possible, and meet local experts and informants to collect additional contextual data on each of my cases. While offline interviews provided a significant advantage in establishing rapport and trust with key persons in the anti-gender networks when compared to the online ones, the overall quality of the data collected via the interview process did not differ between the two modalities. The average interview lasted from 45 to 90 minutes, with several interviews going up to 150 minutes. The overall average acceptance rate across all cases was a high 46% (see Table 5 for details).

	Persons Contacted	Persons Interviewed	Organizations Included
CROATIA	47	22	14
BULGARIA	32	11	9
SERBIA	21	10	7
Total	100	43	30

Table 5 – Number of Organizations and Persons Interviewed

While there is a visible asymmetry in the number of interviews conducted in the three cases, I covered all main anti-gender organizations in each of my cases. Furthermore, the numbers reflect an asymmetry of the cases themselves in terms of the number of existing organizations engaging in collective action. As visible in Zaharijević's work (2018) a full-blown anti-gender movement did not exist in Serbia prior to 2018, whereas the Croatian one has been active since at least 2008 (Hodžić & Štulhofer, 2017). As an example, we can compare the two cases where I conducted the most and the least number of interviews, Croatia, and Serbia, respectively. There are at least 20 cities with a 40 Days for Life initiative in Croatia and more than 10 Marches for Life, whereas in Serbia there are a few Marches and only one 40 Days for Life initiative. This is precisely why Serbia was initially envisioned as a negative case in my comparative design and analytical framework, and some of the interviewed SMOs should be considered more as latent movement organizations than publically visible actors. Furthermore, the seemingly modest number of interviews undertaken overall corresponds to the data collection strategy and purposes. Given that my research and interview questions concern specific issues regarding organizational emergence, decision-making and relations, only high-ranking officials could answer them. Thus, following Pirro and Castelli Gattinara (2018), I privileged the relevance of the position of interviewees within their respective organizations rather than the sheer quantity of conducted interviews.

4.3.2. Interpretation, Ethics, and Positionality

I utilized two software tools to structure and make sense of the interviews undertaken across the three cases. I used Transcribe by Wreally LLC to transcribe the interviews via dictation and Atlas.ti 9, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to organize and code the interviews. A standardized analysis procedure was implemented according to instructions by qualitative researchers (Roulston, 2014; Willig, 2014; Lareau, 2021). First, the interviews were

read with prior assumptions in mind to note down general comments and highlight key responses. Second, initial inductive codes were developed in line with the three central interview themes corresponding to the main research questions, namely, the role of the radical right and religion in anti-gender mobilization, i.e. anti-gender framing, actions, and networks. Third, the developed codes were standardized into theoretically informed groups of codes corresponding to social movement concepts and deductively used to compare and extract repeating themes and patterns across interviews. An iterative process including memo writing was used to analyze text in a back-and-forth manner between the individual citations and interviews as a whole. Finally, initial findings were challenged through a systematic search for disconfirming evidence and negative cases. The write-up was centered around the strongest findings in terms of most often appearing and repeating patterns of data. I was unable to recruit interviewees in two organizations, Vigilare in Croatia, and Center for Life in Serbia, both of which are relatively important in the broader anti-gender networks. However, their organizational documents were included in the overall corpus of texts analysed.

Prior to conducting interviews, whether offline or online, all participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form explaining the terms and conditions of participating in the study. This included the right to withdraw consent and to access the transcribed material. They were also presented with the option to request anonymity through pseudonymization of their responses. After fieldwork, I decided to pseudonymize all participants, including those who did not request pseudonymization, for two reasons. The first was of a practical nature – citing some interviewees by real name and others by pseudonym would create confusion and disbalance in data presentation. The second was rooted in an ethical concern, namely, that crediting individuals with their full name might give them importance and provide a platform for their expressed opinions (Mondon & Winter, 2020). Additionally, I have also decided to fully pseudonymize expert interviewees since some of them expressed a worry that the disclosure of their participation might endanger their professional or academic status.

Acquiring access and rapport with anti-gender actors was not as complicated as I initially predicted, which is visible from a high average acceptance rate for interview participation of 46% across all cases. Establishing rapport and trust with several key gatekeepers and leaders of each of the three networks was crucial for a subsequent snowballing strategy of recruitment. Thus, I came to the same conclusion as Antonis A. Ellinas (2021) when interviewing Golden Dawn members:

Overall, my experience parallels that of other scholars in this field, who ‘found no support for the common perception that radical right parties deny access’ (Art 2011: 26). On the contrary, on a number of occasions, and mostly during an interview, I gained a sense similar to the one Rosanna Hertz and Jonathan Imber describe, that my interviewees might have had ‘a vested interest in creating constituencies, including social-scientific ones’ (1995: ix).

Precisely because of Ellinas’ latter point, having felt that at least some of my interviewees saw my research as a potential outlet for the dissemination and normalization of their issue-positions and agenda, I fully pseudonymized the list of interviewees in all my cases. Additionally, whereas the Western Eurocentric literature on the far right often presupposes that far-right subjects will be weary and sceptical towards academics (Blee, 2007; Ashe et al., 2021), this is seemingly not as big of a problem in the Balkans, especially in cases where nationalist *intelligentsia* occupied high-ranking positions at universities after the transition from socialism, and where majorities of populations are conservative. Finally, whereas I personally did not share almost any of the opinions of my interview subjects, my lack of proximity to the ‘ugly movement’ (Tarrow, 1994) was not as blatantly obvious as an obstacle to rapport or the interview process overall.

Unlike Damhuis and De Jonge (2022) who highlight both the political and sociological distances between the researcher and far-right actors, I found a lot of similarities with my interview respondents. Firstly, since most of my interviewees were professionals working in (higher) education, culture, public sectors jobs or free professions, we shared quite a few sociodemographic characteristics. This middle and upper-middle class status of anti-gender leaders previously recognized by Geva (2019) who writes about “Catholic bourgeois contestations” in the French case, might be a specificity that differentiates anti-gender actors from other radical-right organizations. Secondly, despite a vast ideological divergence, I could easily relate to my interviewees’ high interest in politics, commitment to social participation and activist engagement, and a general dislike of mainstream political parties and media, having previously been an activist myself. My positionality as a highly educated man from a predominantly white Catholic country thus helped despite my previous record with human rights activism. Finally, as a result of my fieldwork experience, I agree with Damhuis and De Jonge (2022) that there are more merits to engaging with and grasping the ‘repugnant other’ via interviews in times of radicalization and polarization than ignoring their politics due to fears of “amplification, hype and legitimization” (Mondon & Winter, 2021). If anything, writing about far-right collective action in a critical and scrutinizing way can hopefully help dispel the alluring simplicity and power of their agenda and framing.

4.3.3. Expert Interviews

In addition to interviewing actors, I opted for conducting expert interviews with several goals. First, it would allow me to gain more in-depth knowledge and familiarize myself with all the country-cases and contexts. This is particularly important since existing literature on anti-gender movements, especially in Southeast Europe, relies on insufficient empirical data on a relatively recent phenomenon. As Bogner, Littig and Menz (2009, p. 3) note, expert interviews can be used to “quickly obtain good results”. Second, such an information gathering strategy allows me to work around the impenetrable ‘black box’ of church strategies and actions which result from a privileged status of the dominant Catholic and Orthodox churches in my cases and their nontransparency. Third, targeting sociologists of religion and theologians with online interviews allowed me to expand my access to the field of religious right in the difficult circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. My recruitment strategy relied on maximizing variation among the types of expertise that are sought after, including sociologists of religion, theologians both close to the mainstream and the marginal doctrinal positions, and other informants holding valuable insider information. Initially, my intention was to conduct expert interviews in the latter stages of the project after doing interviews with movement members. My recruitment strategy for the latter, given the difficulties in accessing the field of the radical right, was to visit their spaces and events to gain initial contacts, establish rapport and identify potential gatekeepers. However, the restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and the strict limitations on the number of people allowed to gather in closed and open spaces prevented me from pursuing such a strategy of access. Public forums, protests, and initiatives usually organized by anti-gender actors were cancelled throughout the year 2020 and the first several months of 2021.

For expert interviews, semi-structured interview guides with open-ended questions grouped into three broad areas were developed for each of the cases (see Appendix 3). A loose interview protocol was centered around broad areas of interest. Free space left for interview participants to pursue other issues they found relevant was developed to offset one of the common pitfalls of expert interviews – extensive structuring and intervention from the side of the interviewer (Bogner, Littig & Wenz, 2009). The first group of questions inquired about the church-state-society relations from a socio-political and legal perspective, and the relations between the Church and right-wing parties. The second group of questions addressed the internal divisions within the different national churches, asking participants to identify the various individuals,

factions and doctrinal strands among the clergy which might take different positions on issues of gender, sexuality, and socio-political issues more generally. The final group of questions inquired about the links between the churches and the anti-gender movement. Specifically, questions target the role of church networks and associations, resources, and doctrines in relation to the movement actors and their campaigns. The first two groups of questions correspond to the relevant elements of the political and discursive opportunity structures previously identified and grouped under church-state-society relations. These include legal and political arrangements, relations with parties, church influence and discourses on gender and LGBT equality. In addition, the final group of questions regarding the relations between the churches and the anti-gender movement correspond to the outcome in my project, namely, the appearance of anti-gender campaigns and networks.

4.4. Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis allows researchers to explore the context and nuances surrounding the text, providing a deeper understanding of the meaning behind words and phrases. Texts often contain rich and complex themes that cannot be adequately captured by automated quantification. In addition to semi-structured interviews, I used the anti-gender actors' websites and online archiving tools to collect organizational documents elaborating values and principles from different points in time between 2005 and 2020.⁴ Corresponding data from national NGO registries was also collected. In addition, organizational statutes, mission, and vision statements, expressed goals and self-descriptions from 'About us' sections of the actors' websites were all included in the corpus of texts. In the case of political parties, party and electoral programs and policy-elaborating documents concerning family, gender and sexuality were collected together with statements made by party officials concerning the main anti-gender campaigns identified in each of the cases. Two steps of qualitative content analysis were undertaken. As a first step of data interpretation, thematic analysis was applied to the collected texts. Thematic analysis is a method of qualitative research used to identify recurring themes in a given body of text and is often used as a starting point for more elaborate methods such as discourse analysis. Themes are identified through the process of comparing different concepts and revealing similarities which enables the researcher to group them under a higher order, or a more abstract concept (Ryan & Bernard 2003, p. 87). A combination of inductive and *a priori* reasoning based in theory was used here to recognize themes and subthemes, to interpret and relate them. A six-

⁴ The period roughly corresponding to the emergence and mobilization of anti-gender movements.

phase process described by Braun and Clarke was used to extract initial codes, identify key themes, review them through reflexive reading and finally define and name them (Braun & Clarke 2006, 87).

Then, in a second step, I followed the *causal chain approach* (Mudde 2000) to qualitative textual analysis to unpack hierarchies of values by ordering the central organizing themes in organizational documents. Since political objectives are always derived from deep-seated value priorities functioning as chains of arguments (Naess 1984), it is helpful to distinguish core from peripheral argumentation. Together with interviews, this allows us to differentiate how the ideology of social conservatism is ultimately elaborated and strategically framed. Combining interviews and organizational documents helps minimize the problem of catching only the movement's more moderate, socially acceptable 'front stage' (Mudde, 2007). Moreover, capturing what movement actors '*really think*' is not that central here, since the crucial aspects of anti-gender movements concern precisely the innovative, outward-facing framing and identity building around a demonstratively moderate civic identity. The 'back stage' versus 'front stage' debate also relates to the differences between ideologies as deeply rooted value systems and framing as a strategic process of outward-facing movement 'branding'. I follow Snow and Benford's (2005) understanding of ideology as a cultural resource for framing, meaning that frames often work by accentuating pre-existing beliefs and values. Movement *values* are understood here as building blocks of ideology, the moral and ethical commitments defining right and wrong, distinguishing the important from the unimportant (Oliver & Johnston, 2000). By ordering the central themes across the corpus of texts, I unpack how conservative ideology is accentuated in each case, especially with respect to elements of discourse related to my research questions, namely, the role of illiberalism, ethnonationalism and religion, but also arguments about social and economic issues more broadly. The qualitative data analysed and collected from various movement documents was used primarily as a supplement to interview data, particularly to include specific organizations or groups that I was not able to interview but represent fairly important actors within the broader anti-gender networks. In contrast to the dominant strand of scholarship defining the anti-gender movement *ex negativo* (as against 'gender' or liberalism), I followed the calls for unpacking affirmative value systems and ideology of anti-gender actors that can help us explain the wider anti-democratic project of anti-gender actors (Paternotte & Verloo, 2021; Mancini & Palazzo, 2021; Holzleithner, 2022). Understanding which values drive anti-gender actors and what they understand as 'gender ideology' also allows me to address my research question, namely how

anti-gender contention emerges in different cases, and why the GI frame appears as central in movement mobilization. Prior to that, however, we must establish the relevant contextual factors of the social, historical, and political processes in which anti-gender contention emerged in each of the three cases.

5. HISTORICAL LEGACIES AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

In the following chapter I rely on secondary sources and the state of the art of three main fields of literature, each addressing a pertinent aspect of the national contexts of each of the three cases. First, I address the political, cultural, and symbolic strength and presence of churches in the states and societies of the cases under analysis. Second, I analyze their respective party system and their development, with a particular focus on far right and mainstream right parties. Finally, I look at how Europeanization has affected the development of civil society, particularly in the areas of gender and sexual equality.

5.1. BULGARIA

5.1.1. Consensus on Tradition – Church, State, and Society

Although Orthodoxy is an important cultural marker in Bulgaria, the historical reliance of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) – made independent by the modern Bulgarian nationalist movement – on the state makes the latter the stronger partner of the relationship (DeDominicis, 2016). Unlike bitter political and ideological battles fought between the church and state in other parts of Europe, Bulgarian political and religious elites mostly fought together against the dominance of the Ottoman Sublime Porte. After the fall of the Empire, throughout the twentieth century, the Bulgarian state has been heavily involved in influencing the and intervening in Orthodox clerical disputes as well as regulating the activities of other religious groups. Although Bulgaria is a secular state, its Constitution defines Eastern Orthodoxy as the “traditional religion” in Bulgaria. The influence of the BOC since the 1990’s has been weakened by a schism which also resulted in a peculiar set of alliances not typical of post-communist countries (Matetskaya, 2017). The mainstream BOC was backed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, continuing the legacy of Church cooperation with the communists, while the schismatic “sect” breaking off from the Church was supported by right-wing parties because of its criticism

of communist collaboration of the mainline church. Compared to other (Orthodox) countries, the BOC is thus, arguably, much weaker as a political actor, given that the schism lasted until 2015. Its position is further challenged by the large presence of religiously unaffiliated and undeclared citizens – around 30% according to the 2011 census (National Statistics Institute, 2011) – and a significant Muslim minority (10% of the population). Additionally, although Protestants make up only 1% of the population according to the census, their numbers have been growing steadily over the last decade. Another specificity of organized religion in Bulgaria, when compared to Serbia and Croatia, stems from the role it played in fostering pro-Russian and pro-Soviet sentiment during the communist era, since the multiconfessional, multiethnic and geopolitically non-aligned Yugoslav communists had no interest in such instrumentalization of religion. As argued by Groen regarding the position of Orthodoxy in communist Bulgaria:

“It was both persecuted and privileged. On the one hand, the communists regarded it as a means of rapprochement between the Bulgarian people and the Orthodox populations of the socialist brother-states... in their common battle against “imperialism”. On the other hand, the Communist Party tried to marginalize Orthodoxy.” (Groen, 2009).

Therefore, although Orthodoxy is tied to ethnicity, which is politically important and used by the radical right to *other* the Muslim minority, the Church was also tied to, and infiltrated by, the Bulgarian Communist Party and the latter’s nationalist politics. The Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova has described this communist-era ideological formation as “nationalism translated into an idiosyncratic Marxist slang” (Todorova, 2018). Hence, the embracing of religion, nationalism and the ties of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) with the BOC might help explain why the BSP joined the BOC in condemning the Istanbul Convention as a dangerous gender ideology in the name of “traditional values”. Finally, the BOC, and Orthodoxy in general, is much more insulated and monastic when compared to Protestantism and Catholicism (Krasteva 2015, p. 430). Survey data seems to show support for this thesis, with only 4% of Bulgarians reporting membership in a religious or church association, compared to a relatively high 19% in Catholic Croatia (European Value Survey 2017).

In conclusion, on the one hand, the relative weakness of the BOC as a political actor and its marginal presence in civil society could be considered as negative for movement development, providing anti-gender actors with weaker allies and less resources to mobilize and affect change. On the other hand, the high salience of socially conservative and nationalist issue-

positions among political parties both of the right and the left might mean less necessity for any movement mobilization in the first place.

5.1.2. A Radicalized Mainstream – Party System and the Far Right

The Bulgarian party system has been characterized by relatively high fragmentation and low ideological polarization (Enyedi & Casal Bertoa, 2011) with extreme right-wing cadres emerging not only from different right-wing party splits, but also from the former Bulgarian Communist Party's (BCP) hard-line Stalinist circles (Todorov, 2012). The peculiar anti-gender alliances in Bulgaria are partly a consequence of longer trajectories, especially the nationalism of the BCP. The socioeconomic crisis of the 1980s combined with falling birth rates contributed to repressive assimilation policies banning ethnic Turkish names, radios, print and even the public use of Turkish language, as well as pro-natalist policies and restrictions on abortion (Brunnbauer & Taylor, 2004; Crampton, 2005). Consequently, Bulgaria's democratic opposition in the 1990s was not as firmly coalescing around conservative and nationalist social policies as countries such as Poland or Croatia where conservatism was equated with anti-communism. Furthermore, owing to low ideological polarization among political parties post-1989 (Koedam et al., 2023), the far-right party "Ataka" briefly even supported a socialist government formed between the BSP and the main party representing the Turkish minority – the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). The nationalist positions of (parts of) the BSP and Ataka, as well as their shared pro-Russian stances, enabled limited cooperation between socialists and far-right parties in Bulgaria – an 'unholy alliance' which would be impossible in most EU countries.

In terms of the existence of far-right elite allies as a favorable political opportunity of the anti-gender movement, the Bulgarian polity is arguably the most conducive among my three cases. As the initial party system cleavage of the 1990s that was formed around the opposition between (post)communist parties and the democratic opposition lost its relevance, populist parties of the left and right started capitalizing on Euroscepticism and the voters' dissatisfaction with corruption, privatization, and growing inequality (Todorov, 2018). Similarly to Serbia's SNS and Aleksandar Vučić, a pro-EU, populist right-wing party GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), centered around Boyko Borisov's leadership, slowly became a hegemon within the party system. Unlike Serbia, the party has been unable to form governments

without forming coalitions with far-right parties. The rise of GERB in 2009, supported by the then most prominent RR party Ataka, moved the whole party system significantly to the right, with GERB adopting anti-Turkish, anti-Gypsy and more conservative, traditionalist discourse pointed against LGBT rights and gender equality (Pirro, 2016; Pytlas & Kossack, 2015). Compared to a relatively small Serbian minority in Croatia, Muslims (Turks and Pomaks) make up around 10% of the population in Bulgaria, make them an ever-salient group used by the populist radical right (PRR) for othering and exclusion. Given the fragmented and weak party system, both GERB and the BSP have had to rely on radical right support in different mandates. In recent years, Ataka has joined the coalition of PRR parties ‘United Patriots’, together with VMRO-BNM and NFSB, winning 9% of the vote in 2017 and forming the third Borisov government with GERB. According to Popova (2013), unlike the mainstream parties’ adversarial, *cordon sanitaire* approach to Ataka after its successful national debut in the 2005 general elections, which denounced both the party and its ideological positions, the post-2009 period was characterized by GERB’s accommodative strategy towards Ataka, marked not only by formal political cooperation, but also by GERB’s cooptation of Ataka’s extremist positions and issues. Popova (2013) argues that while the first, confrontational strategy contributed to the rise of Ataka’s popularity, due to the low trust in mainstream parties which are perceived as corrupt and incompetent, the anti-establishment appeal of Ataka quickly dropped after its unconditional support for GERB and its government, as evident in the post-2011 fall of electoral support for the party.

Michael Minkenberg (2015) laid out the important context and opportunity structures for the far-right in CEE, with Bulgaria being among the more conducive breeding grounds of extremism, owing to: a cultural nation type; high fusion of religious and national identity; increasing ethnic heterogeneity after the mid 2000’s; a conflictual and contested regime change in the 1990s; lack of a clear distinction between political camps, and a lenient state not prone to using repression or containment against the far-right. Furthermore, far-right parties are able to draw ideologically both from the fascist period and the interwar authoritarian regime, as Minkenberg demonstrates:

“Ataka’s leader Volen Siderov recycled interwar anti-Semitism, Orthodox mysticism, and fascist slogans, and mixed them with a Eurasian vision of a “new order” which opposes American hegemony, a concept popular among segments of the Russian radical right” (Minkenberg 2017, p. 77).

These factors have led to an expansion and radicalization of right-wing radicalism in public discourse, the radicalization of the mainstream right and a shift of policy making to the right (Minkenberg, 2017), mostly resulting from weak counter-mobilization, a lenient state, and an accommodative/cooptive MSR strategy. According to Avramov and Minkenberg, not only did GERB move to the right during the 2000's, but also the DSB and the BSP, while parties remaining on the left suffered electoral losses (Minkenberg 2017, p. 132). In addition to the previously mentioned Euroscepticism and mainstreaming of anti-LGBT rhetoric, this would make the discursive opportunities for the anti-gender movement in the Bulgarian case particularly open, as attacks on gender ideology are likely to find resonance within a public discourse desensitized to nativism and populism. Finally, as we will see in the Chapter 5, anti-gender actors looking to put GI on the political agenda will easily find (radical-right) allies ready to coopt the issue and ideologically replenish their political program.

5.1.3. The Lost Voice of the People – Social Movements and Europeanization

While the Bulgarian transition to democracy from communism was more a result of an 'elite coup' (Rossi, 2012) than a mass revolt comparable to other post-communist countries, Bulgaria has since seen a rise of mass collective action and contention in the streets to such an extent that one scholar has recently argued for classifying Bulgaria as a 'protest society' (Dinev forthcoming). Over the years, Bulgaria has witnessed several waves of anti-corruption, anti-governmental protests mostly targeting the pro-EU right-wing populist governments of GERB and Boyko Borisov. It is in this context of social mobilization understood by its participants as a rising of spontaneous civil society against corrupt political parties and a captured state that we can also identify early anti-gender campaigns. The mass protests in 2012 and 2013, primarily motivated by socioeconomic grievances and framed as a rising of civil society against the state (Stoyanova, 2018; Gueorguieva, 2018) undoubtedly influenced the framing of anti-gender, parental mobilization that birthed its first anti-statist protest against the Child Act precisely in 2012. Thus, as we will see in the empirical chapters, anti-gender mobilization rises not as a countermovement against a wave of feminist or LGBT+ advances, but as a far-right reframing of a more general anti-statist sentiment that recognizes the corrupt GERB and its EU-friendly policies as captured and controlled by decadent liberal elites from Brussels. In turn, the LGBTIQ+ and women's movements in post-communist Bulgaria can be characterized either as non-existent, weak, or contained to transactional activism around specific issues such as violence against women and discrimination (Todorova, 1994; Kotzeva, 2011; Ivancheva, 2014).

Together with Romania, Bulgaria missed the ‘big bang’ wave of enlargement in 2004 and joined the EU in 2007 instead. Gender and LGBT+ equality was not considered as high on the accession negotiation agenda, and GSE goals were a kind of ‘moving target’ (Chiva, 2009) since the EU itself was evolving in its policy agenda while demanding structural reforms and human rights institutionalization from acceding countries. Bulgaria was particularly late with adopting GSE legislation and institutions when compared to other countries. Most importantly, liberalization of GSE policies was not politically supported, discussed, or backed by grassroots movements that would articulate the actual needs of the population and its minorities (Krizsan, 2012; Doneva et al., 2019). As Krizsan (2012) demonstrates, gender equality institutions that were first envisaged as covering equality of men and women were quickly integrated in 2005 into one Equal Opportunities Unit and a new Commission for Protection against Discrimination that covered 17 different grounds for discrimination, including sexual orientation. Thus, the disinterested and hasty manner of GSE liberalization performed by elites interested in a speedy EU accession helped fertilize the political grounds for mobilization against ‘gender’, as argued by Rawłuszko (2019) in the Polish case. The window of political opportunity for progressives to liberalize GSE policies ended with the electoral defeat of the pro-EU liberal populist NDSV and the ‘Tsar’s Cabinet’⁵. Backlash to technocratic liberalization would have serious consequences. Local scholars in Bulgaria similarly problematize the manner and effects of policy liberalisation:

“The fact that these changes were top down rather than bottom up – brought about by the transposition of EU policies to Bulgaria – rather than resulting from changing attitudes, pressure, and mobilisation within the country – is of lasting significance (Roseneil et al., 2013)

Similarly, Panayotov (2013) questions the efficacy of the Bulgarian Protection against Discrimination Act of 2004 by pointing out that normalization and acceptance of LGBTIQ+ persons cannot merely be enforced through scientific and legal reasoning. Furthermore, the latter is imposed by EU institutions while ignoring popular opinion and excluding the majority from the debate: “what becomes lost in the process is the voice of the people” (Panayotov 2013, p. 158). In fact, not even the voice of LGBTIQ+ people was visible to the wider public, as the first Sofia Pride was organized a year after Bulgaria’s EU accession in 2007. This process of hasty, technocratic Europeanization of GSE policies helps explain how the far-right was able to

⁵ Bulgarians elected their last tsar Simeon II as a prime minister in 2001.

bridge various anti-LGBT, anti-feminist, and anti-EU frames while branding itself as a force for popular democracy.

5.2. CROATIA

5.2.1. Radical Evangelizing – Church, State and Society

Similarly to Poland, Catholicism and the Catholic church played an important organizational and symbolic role as an opposition actor during communism, serving as a “guardian of the nation” (Perica, 2002). The Yugoslav wars further improved the entanglement of ethnicity and religion, making Catholicism a marker of cultural identity. Croatian Catholics drew from a theology of the incarnation of Christianity in an ethnically defined people, as well as Polish-inspired practices of celebrating nationhood within a liturgical context (Sekulić, 2022). According to the 2011 census, 86.28% of Croatians were Catholics. Today’s church-state relations can be described as secular with a dominant Catholic church and legal agreements heavily privileging the Church both financially and symbolically. Unlike Poland, the privileged position of the Church did not always translate to strong direct influence of the clergy in matters of government, primarily because the dominant nationalist party since the 1990s war era, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), had strong popular support and did not have to rely on the Church for political legitimacy (Grzymała-Busse, 2015). Furthermore, President Franjo Tuđman originally envisioned HDZ as a catch-all people’s party drawing both from nationalist and left-wing traditions of pre-communist politics, denouncing clericalism and Church interference in politics and rejecting Church calls for banning or even restricting abortion. Having to rally both the reformed communists and nationalists together under the threat of Serbian military aggression, a big tent ideology was more opportune. Subsequent additions of ‘Christian democracy’ to the party programme were elaborated by Tuđman largely as strategic gestures towards Europe to have HDZ accepted as a modern center-right party (Žižić, 2020).

The Catholic church is traditionally opposed to abortion, LGBTIQ+ equality and is cultivating an image of the “protector of the nation” in Croatia. The nationalist regimes and actors in the 1990s tended to treat women primarily as biological and social reproducers of the nation, pushing women to have more children, promoting restrictive reproductive policies, and establishing a religious-nationalist hegemony in public discourse (Shiffman et al., 2002; Sremac & Ganzevoort, 2015). Simultaneously, ‘the homosexual’ was denounced as a dangerous other,

‘a dark counterpart of the hypermasculine father/defender/warrior’ (Pavlović, 1999). As demonstrated by Norocel (2015) in the Central and Eastern European context, religion can be utilised and implicated in ethno-nationalist projects as an ethnicity marker, while strengthening the reproduction of a ‘heteronormative conception of the nation, portrayed as an enlarged family under the guidance of a man’ (p. 145). In post-conflict societies like Croatia and Serbia, repressive heterosexist gender regimes thrive since ‘the birth rate became a question of national military defense’ (Korac 1998, p. 160). Beyond the state and the military, parts of the Church and individual bishops can still be considered as belonging to radical right actors in the public sphere (Kisić & Tunić, 2016).

However, despite the religious-nationalist ideology of a big faction of the clergy, the Catholic Church supported Croatia’s accession to the EU, affirming the dominant discourse of the “return to Europe” and exiting the Balkans (Lindstrom, 2003). While clergymen have tacitly supported the HDZ in most elections, the Church has also, at times, spoke out against corruption and social problems through the frame of the “sin of structures”. The Europeanization process challenged the cultural hegemony of the Church, empowering human rights NGOs and problematizing the legal discrimination of minority religions in Croatia. The Church, as I shall unpack in Chapter 5, is actively supporting the anti-gender movement financially, organizationally, and discursively. Given Pope Francis’ tolerant approach to refugees and migrants, the Church in Croatia primarily mobilizes on morality issues concerning abortion and sexuality, invoking traditional Croatian conservatism, nativism, and populism. According to the national clergy’s discourse, opposing the Croat people, the families that form its basis, and their traditional way of life is a conspiring cluster of three different elements: the international actors (the ‘Eurocrats’, Brussels, and Western liberals); the deviants (homosexuals, transsexuals and pedophiles) and the domestic corrupt, self-serving political elites and NGO’s (Tranfić, 2022). Nevertheless, the appearance of lay Catholic associations mobilizing against GI and shying away from ethnonationalism marks a shift in rhetoric and strategies, as we shall see in Chapter 6. The anti-gender movement in Croatia should largely be understood within the larger project of the Croatian clergy tasked with ‘new evangelization’, calling on “a critical mass of lay believers” to change the mentality of the people and politicians and imbue them with ‘evangelical radicalism’ in their social and political action (Croatian Episcopal Conference, 2012). Anti-gender mobilization thus served as the main project to test this new spirit of lay radicalism, appearing primarily as a reactive wave of discontent with Croatia’s Europeanization and liberalization of gender and sexual equality.

5.2.2. Moderate Party, Radical Voters – Party System and the Far Right

The Croatian party system is dominated by two mainstream parties – the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the centre-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), both of which usually form coalition governments with smaller parties. In the thirty years since Croatia's independence, the HDZ has been in power for 23 years in total, with SDP forming only two coalition governments, one after the death of the first autocratic president of HDZ Franjo Tuđman in 2000 and the second one after the corruption scandal which ousted HDZ's pro-EU moderate prime minister Sanader in 2009. The predominance of HDZ has been maintained by a skillful combination of cooptation and sabotage of more radical right-wing parties. It should, however, be noted, that until 2004, the HDZ itself should be considered as a radical right party (Mudde, 2007). The only parliamentary extreme right party in the first 15 years was the militant, irredentist Croatian Party of Rights (*Hrvatska stranka prava - HSP*) which, at its best, won around 10% of the vote in general elections. Today, the radical right sector is divided between several smaller parties which occasionally unite in a common platform, exemplified by the coalition 'Croatian Sovereignists' formed in the wake of the 2019 EU elections when it won third place with 9% of the vote. HDZ also has a strong radical right faction among its own ranks that is more Eurosceptical and nationalist and is challenging the leadership of the moderate pro-EU Andrej Plenković. In the 2015 elections, HDZ ran and won with a populist radical right platform called the Patriotic Coalition which included HSP-AS and HRAST – the latter being led by one of the most important figures in the Croatian anti-gender movement, Ladislav Ilčić. The year 2016 thus marked the peak of the anti-gender movement's institutionalization successes. However, the government lasted only for 9 months, with snap elections being held after a corruption scandal that directly compromised HDZ's leader. The party, however, won again with a new, moderate, pro-EU platform under Plenković's leadership.

The significantly weaker institutional representation of far-right parties in the Parliament makes Croatia's political alliance system considerably less favorable for anti-gender actors when compared to Serbia and Bulgaria. However, while the far right has not had electoral success since Croatia's entry into the EU, its movement sector has strongly developed. Furthermore, war veteran groups close to radical right factions in HDZ who form its clientelist network have historically had significant veto power in pressuring HDZ towards more conservative policies (Fisher, 2003). The presence of far-right movement actors such as the war veterans indicates a larger pool of allies for anti-gender actors. Interestingly, anti-immigration has so far not been the most salient issue of contention for the radical right. In fact, according to one study based

on the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Lancaster, 2021), Croatia exhibits the second lowest immigration salience for political elites and voters in Europe. Instead, the new anti-gender movement has brought issues such as abortion, LGBT rights and family values to the fore, combining it with more traditional anti-Serbian and Eurosceptic topics (Kursar & Matan, 2022). While the radical right party sector has, up to recently, been weak, other, syncretic, and centrist populist parties such as MOST and Živi Zid (similar to the early Five Star Movement in Italy) have managed to mobilize the anti-establishment vote. In the mid-2010s, MOST became the third strongest party in Croatia. Presenting itself as a centrist anti-corruption reform party, its catch-all platform depended on careful avoidance of ‘ideological’ topics, even though its leaders were previously members of the anti-gender movement party HRAST (Tranfić, 2015). It is important to note that while MOST, for a long time, did not feature as a radical-right party, it has also relied on lay Catholic social networks and cadres for recruitment. Furthermore, it recently decided to position itself clearly on the radical-right part of the spectrum, with one of their leading MPs recently proposing an anti-LGBT propaganda law (Večernji.hr, 1 July 2021). Finally, the members of the anti-gender movement have also formed two different parties: Project Homeland and HRAST and have since abandoned the former to join other radical right actors in a new party: Croatian Sovereignists. As mentioned, HRAST was able to enter a short-lived coalition government with the center right HDZ in 2016. While the movement parties have had no significant electoral success, the pre-electoral coalition with HDZ ensured them a single mandate in the Croatian Parliament.

One of the reasons for the relative weakness of far-right parties in Croatia up to a few years ago, when compared to Serbia and Bulgaria, is HDZ’s skillful attraction of more radical voters who do not really subscribe to its leadership’s pro-EU, moderate Christian democratic positions. According to Obućina (2011), analyses of local elections and voter demographics have shown that the average HDZ voter is more similar to far-right voters in Western Europe. The party manages to maintain its voter base when competing against far-right parties, partly owing to the more radical right-wing positions of local HDZ branches when compared to the national party leadership. Although this is beyond the scope of my thesis, it could be argued that HDZ, similarly to Vučić’s SNS in Serbia, also nurtures a fractured discourse (Jovanović, 2019), presenting itself as a moderate party in the EU arena while maintaining its far-right *credo* on local levels. This is all the more important given recent works that show Croatia’s struggling with democratic stagnation, weakening, and even backsliding in areas such as media independence, the judiciary, and other independent and autonomous institutions (Čepo, 2020,

p. 14). Finally, the ideological fit between HDZ and its voters is lowest among other mainstream Croatian parties (Čular & Čakar, 2019), with the party consistently moving towards the center since 2000, and its voters moving towards the right. This gap helps as an opening in the POS for the anti-gender movement in terms of unstable elite alignments and factionalism. Whether or not HDZ will attempt to coopt issues such as “gender ideology” from the far-right is yet to be seen. So far, HDZ’s staunch Europhilia combined with containment of far-right challengers and their discourse; partial accommodation of ethnonationalism and moderately conservative positioning on LGBT and gender equality issues makes the discursive opportunities for anti-gender mobilization within the political system less conducive when compared to Bulgaria and Serbia. This relatively unfavorable DOS is confirmed by the data from the European Value Survey (2017), with 58% of people in Croatia (strongly) agreeing with the statement that gays and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish, compared to 35,5% and 34,8% in Serbia and Bulgaria respectively – a staggering difference of over 20%.

5.2.3. Reformed Nationalists – Social Movements and Europeanization

With the start of Croatia’s post-Tuđman ‘second transtion’ towards democracy in 2000, the opening towards the West, and cooperation with ICTY, came a new, collaborative phase of relations between civil society and the new center-left government. Scholars have interpreted the period as one of professionalization and NGO-isation of social activism, whereby civil society adopted a technocratic and clientelistic relationship with the state (Stubbs & Zrinščak, 2011; Stubbs, 2013), leading to a predominance of the transactional activist model (Císař & Vráblíková, 2013). Feminist and LGBT organizations also utilized the post-2000 opening in the political opportunities as well as the EU conditionality pressures introduced to Croatian legislation with the start of EU accession negotiations (Irvine & Sutlović, 2015), with the former focusing mostly on domestic violence issues (Spehar, 2012). The transactional and often top-down implementation of GSE policies along with the fragility and fragmentation of LGBT activism (Bilić & Kajinić, 2016) would thus help foster an anti-gender backlash framed as democratic politicization of morality politics, similarly to the Polish case (Rawłuszko 2019). Meanwhile, EU pressures jumpstarted HDZ’s long process of moderation, with the party shedding its ethnonationalist radicalism and establishing itself as a center-right, Christian democratic party under the new pro-EU leader Ivo Sanader (Fish & Krickovic, 2003; Raos, 2019). However, HDZ’s moderation did not come without internal strife, with far-right

candidate Ivić Pašalić winning as much as 46.6% of the vote in the battle for party leadership against Sanader. Interestingly, Pašalić was later one of the founders of the foundation Rhema that financially supported anti-gender NGOs. This far-right faction of HDZ will thus become an important element of the anti-gender movements' POS.

During the 2000s, Croatian legislators enacted a series of human and minority rights policy packages and legislative acts, not only under the center-left's coalition government led by SDP, but also under the two subsequent terms of HDZ's increasingly moderate coalition governments backed by the Serbian minority party, SDSS (2003 – 2011). After the 2000 elections, Article 3 of the Croatian constitution enshrined gender equality as one of the highest constitutional values, followed by the first Gender Equality Law and a Law on Same-Sex Unions in 2003, as well as new institutions such as the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality and the 2004 Government's Office for Gender Equality (Irvine & Sutlović, 2015). HDZ adopted two highly progressive laws as EU negotiations were intensifying and entering their final phases after 2008 – a new Gender Equality Act and the Anti-discrimination Act recognizing gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation as protected grounds (Dobrotić et al., 2013). The Catholic church resisted with little success, together with nascent lay NGOs such as the Voice of Parents for Children (GROZD). However, oppositional dynamics were more complex than the backlash narrative would allow, with early shots fired by liberal and feminist NGOs and their ally, the Ombudsperson for Women's rights who attacked the abstinence based sexual education programme TeenSTAR, backed by the Church and GROZD (Juranji.hr, 29 January 2007). Importantly, although full-scale anti-gender campaigning and its visibility would increase during SDP's liberal rule after 2011, it started first as mobilization against an increasingly moderate HDZ during the height of EU accession negotiations.

In the beginning of a new decade, Croatian politics approached a critical juncture (della Porta, 2020) that led to an unprecedented electoral defeat of HDZ in 2011 and brought the socially liberal SDP to power just as Croatia was about to enter the European union. On 10 December 2010, the former prime minister Ivo Sanader, lauded for years by the media as a reformer responsible for bringing HDZ and Croatia closer to the EU, was caught fleeing Croatia and arrested in Austria on accusations of political corruption and war profiteering after the Croatian parliament voted to remove his immunity from prosecution. The breadth of the corruption scandal would have serious political consequences and lead to mass collective action unseen in Croatia since the 1990s, as evidenced in the post-2010 protest spike and wave of anti-corruption protests in 2011-2012 (Balković, 2019; Dolenec, Kralj & Balković, 2021). As we shall see in later chapters, this period, not accidentally, coincided with the rise of anti-gender mobilization,

with lay activists jumping on the protest wave bandwagon, particularly its Eurosceptic, anti-establishment, and pro-democratic framing. On the same day that Sanader was arrested, the new anti-gender movement party HRAST was presented to the public with the goal of “resisting the deep spiritual and political crisis in Croatia” (HRAST 2010) by advancing family and Christian values, patriotism, and humanism (*čovjekoljublje*).

5.3. SERBIA

5.3.1. The Saint Sava Brand⁶ – Church, State, and Society

The Serbian Orthodox Church criticized the 1990s regime of Slobodan Milošević, seeing it as a continuation of a communist authoritarian style of rule, and partially responsible for the “spiritual decline and endangered family values” among Serbs (Veković, 2021). However, factions within the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) have been traditionally tied to the (radical) right and had supported the expansionist Greater-Serbian project during Milošević’s era. Orthodoxy is a strong marker of ethnic identity, and the SOC clergy played a role similar to that of the Catholic church in Croatia during communism, but with less vigour and more cooperation with the local communist party due to a lack of external protection that would be comparable to the Vatican. The SOC keeps a relatively close relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church and is mostly Eurosceptic, condemning EU support for Kosovo’s independence and criticising the Serbian government’s alleged betrayal of Orthodox Serbs in Kosovo – an area of central relevance to the Serbian religio-nationalist myths. The Church is closely tied to the state, with the state playing a leading role in the relationship, similarly to other Orthodox countries. Importantly, the relationship between the Church and the state became increasingly close with the government of Vojislav Koštunica (2004–2008), leading to a favorable Law on Churches and Religious Communities, wholesale return of expropriated property to the Church and introduction of religious education in schools (Veković, 2021). Thus, two parallel processes that would foster the intensification of the 'culture war' and anti-gender mobilization occurred in the 2000s – the strengthening of the SOC and liberalization of GSE policies due to EU accession negotiations.

The SOC has played an aggressive role in protecting its dominance and hierarchy in relation to other Orthodox churches such as the Macedonian and Montenegrin Orthodox Church.

⁶ Serbian religious nationalism is referred to as *svetosavlje* after Saint Sava (*Sveti Sava*), the first Archbishop of the autocephalous Serbian Church and a Serbian prince.

However, the SOC is weaker when it comes to relations with civil society, with the high autonomy of local bishoprics, the lack of central rule and communication weakening its role in society, while maintaining a strong symbolic and cultural role in everyday Serbian politics (Vukomanović, 2008). The Church has a strong link and presence both in the public education system, the media and in the army, collectively baptising soldiers and officers and organizing pilgrimages for members of the Serbian Army (Buchenau, 2009). While it is not anti-democratic, the Church argues for an official definition of the Serbian nation-state as Orthodox, with some fringe paraclerical ultranationalist organizations even demanding for a return to a monarchical constitution. A specific brand of Serbian nationalism is derived directly from a form of Orthodoxy called *svetosavlje*, inspired by the Orthodox Saint Sava. It is based on an organicist vision of church-state-society relations, privileging traditional, exclusive family values, arguing against abortion, gender, and LGBT equality. In addition, it is a particular parochial interpretation of the Serbian nation as sacred, special, and chosen, politically manifesting itself as religious nationalism. The Church has been an important actor in condemning attempts to organize the Belgrade Pride Parade, while violent hooligan and paraclerical groups attacking members of the LGBT community often cite religion as an inspiration in defence of traditional values (Sremac & Ganzevoort, 2015). The Serbian clergy and theological intelligentsia reproduce an anti-Western and Eurosceptic position by presenting the “European civilization” as having forgotten and abandoned its Christian roots (Jovanov & Lazar 2016, p. 148). Such a discourse resonates with (Catholic) anti-gender movements in Central and Eastern Europe and their goal of re-evangelizing the decadent, secular (Western) Europe (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018). The Orthodox use of the “culture of death” appears identical to the Catholic one, denoting the Western tendency to ‘take human rights too far, reflected in issues such as “abortion, homosexuality, transsexuality, euthanasia and women’s rights” (Jovanov & Lazar 2016, p. 149). However, the antiwestern discourse takes on a more serious form, denouncing ‘demonocracy’ or ‘NATO democracy’ in favor of a Christian Orthodox democracy, defined in religious-nationalist terms. Whereas the Church is highly traditionalist on social and cultural issues, it has not developed significant presence in civil society around the issues.

5.3.2. A Variety of Extremisms – Party System and the Far Right

The Serbian party system since the fall of communism has experienced high volatility, not least due to the fragmentation of the famous Democratic Opposition which brought down and

replaced Slobodan Milošević. Social conservatism and nationalism are championed both by the Socialist Party of Serbia (Milošević's party and Communist party successor), the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska napredna stranka* - SNS) as well as the radical right Serbian Radical Party, with liberal and social democratic values represented by several smaller parties such as the Democratic Party and Liberal Democratic Party. Importantly for the alliance structure of progressive and anti-gender movements, "SPS never rejected socialist ideology or bothered to put on a reformed modern Social Democratic face" (Dolenec, 2013), but rather adopted authoritarian, irredentist, and nationalist positions.

The country's political and party system has been primarily defined by issues of territorial sovereignty and EU accession. The declarations of independence of Montenegro and Kosovo in 2006 and 2008, respectively, along with the financial and economic crisis, created conditions favorable for anti-establishment and populist actors. The initial dominant cleavage between the old, Milošević regime and the democratic opposition was replaced by the national/sovereignist versus international/EU cleavage. In the last 8 years, similarly to Poland and Hungary, democracy in Serbia has eroded under the authoritarian grip of Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) (Bieber, 2020; Castaldo, 2020). This means that, similarly to Bulgaria, and unlike Croatia, the populist radical right, although pro-EU, is in power in Serbia. Arriving at the political stage in the early 2010's, the party skillfully managed to combine catch-all, pro-EU, but also, traditionalist political positions, allowing it to successfully keep both liberals and radicals at bay with a populist, anti-establishment and anti-corruption platform. SNS itself has sprouted from a group splintering from the extremist Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska radikalna stranka* – SRS), led by the war criminal Vojislav Šešelj. Because of its pro-EU stance, the SNS has been criticised from the right and the Church as betraying the national interests and abandoning the struggle for keeping Kosovo an integral part of Serbia. Although the SNS and Aleksandar Vučić are paying lip-service to human rights and European values, best exemplified by the appointment of an openly lesbian prime minister, this conservative party has not been consistent in legislating and implementing reforms in areas of gender equality, LGBTIQ+ and minority rights. However, SNS's firm grip on power and an interest in joining the EU keep the more radical and extremist sections of the right wing at bay.

The mainstreaming of traditionalist nationalism in Serbia after the fall of Milošević was fostered by prime minister Vojislav Koštunica between 2003 and 2007, allowing for a stronger political voice of the Serbian Orthodox church, as well as of those critical of the EU and of the appeasement towards Kosovo (Radeljić, 2014). To this day, the discourse of the 'First Serbia',

representing the authoritarian, traditionalist, and nationalist part of the population versus the ‘Other Serbia’, representing the liberal, cosmopolitan and intellectual part of the population, best symbolizes the political cleavage in Serbia, with fault lines usually forming around the topics of EU accession and Kosovo. The EU question is, in fact, so divisive, that even the two extreme-right parties, SRS and Dveri, could not agree on electoral cooperation in the 2014 election because of differing positions. Unlike Bulgaria, and similarly to Croatia’s MSR’s approach to the far right, the irredentist, nationalist SRS has long been a pariah party in Serbia’s political system, with low coalition potential even when winning a relative majority of seats (Todosijević, 2016). However, since Vučić and his SNS sprouted from a split in the SRS, he opportunistically uses his connections with the extremists – his former party colleagues⁷. According to Spasojević (2019, p. 147) “this relationship was similar to the one they [SRS] had with the SPS during Milošević’s rule when they acted as „fake opposition“, that is, opposition that works in collusion with the governing parties”. Nevertheless, Vučić skillfully uses the labels ‘neo-nazis’ and ‘fascists’ to discredit the opposition to his authoritarian rule, as part of his “fractured discourse” (Jovanović, 2019) that he uses to present a pro-democratic, pro-EU stance internationally, and a nationalist one domestically.

The salient issues for the far right in Serbia primarily include topics related to unresolved sovereignty and irredentist, territorial claims, manifesting as anti-Kosovar, anti-Croat, or anti-Muslim ethnic nationalism. The NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 also fostered the conditions for the salience of an anti-Western, Eurosceptic discourse, often accompanied by Russophilia. In addition, the intertwining of religion, ethnicity, and the state, as well as the predominance of nationalist hegemonic masculinity, provide fruitful discursive opportunities for organized opposition to GSE. Although, as we shall see, there is little protest against gender ideology, especially from a comparative perspective, this does not mean that opposition to gender equality and contention surrounding morality politics are absent. A case in point are the notorious protests and violent attacks opposing the organization of the Belgrade Pride March as well as the opposition of religious and ultraconservative actors to abortion. Opposition to gender and LGBTIQ+ equality in Serbia is mostly championed by the extreme right, football hooligans and Orthodox fundamentalist groups such as Obzor and Dveri. The leader of the extreme right party Dveri, Boško Obradović, has spoken in the Serbian parliament against the impositions of “pro-homosexuality” in Serbian society (Index.hr, 20 September 2017), which exemplifies the lack

⁷ Vučić himself was Šešelj’s advisor and colleague during the war, infamous for his warmongering speeches in Serb-held territories in Croatia.

of a “gender ideology” frame in the discursive repertoires of the Serbian extreme right up until recently. A nexus between the state repressive apparatus, factions of the Church and football hooligan/skinheads groups has traditionally stood at the frontlines of defending traditionalism, homophobia and hegemonic, patriarchal masculinity. In addition, the lack of institutionalization of the party system as well as a lack of EU socialization of Serbian political elites (Fink-Hafner, 2008), when compared to Croatia, means that far-right discourse will find easier entry into the mainstream, especially within the specific Serbian context.

5.3.3. NGO “Projectitis” – Social Movements and the Europeanization

The fall of Milošević in the year 2000 brought an influx of financial and organizational support from foreign funding agencies, INGOs and governments. This development fostered a donor-driven process of development of civil society in Serbia where democratization became synonymous with the proliferation of officially registered professional NGOs versed in communication, negotiation, and project-writing skills (Vetta, 2009). The emerging left and liberal movement actors thus developed a collective identity centered around a non-political, anti-partisan credo which posited civil society as separate from state and party politics (Fiket, Pavlović, & Pudar Draško, 2017; Kralj, 2022). Simultaneously, nationalist movement actors, lacking the support and funding from abroad, developed a more political character, styling themselves as popular, patriotic, and national movements, while nevertheless emulating strategies and repertoires of their liberal counterparts (Mikuš, 2018). In the early 2000s, women’s and feminist groups had also established themselves as NGOs while facing two problems. Firstly, state and local authorities did not recognize them as stakeholders worthy of cooperation (Milić, 2004), and secondly, the NGOisation lead to the spread of the “projectitis disease” whereby “dependence on foreign funding increasingly pushed them to work on a project basis, essentially reducing them to writing grant applications for tasks determined by gender “experts” in grant-giving institutions” (Bias, 2019).

Nevertheless, driven by EU conditionality, a Council for the Equality of Genders was established as early as 2004 by the Government of Serbia. However, real impetus towards the institutionalization of GSE policies came with the opening of the Stabilization and Association Agreement negotiations between the EU and Serbia in 2006. The EU accession process sped up the development of GE machinery, including a Directorate for Gender Equality in 2007, the Commissioner for Equality/Discrimination and finally the Gender Equality Act in 2009

(Ignjatović & Bošković, 2013). As Sloomaeckers (2023) argues, in the context of the political crisis over Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008, the EU signed the SAA with the Serbian government to bolster pro-EU parties before the elections – and it was successful in doing so. During the rule of the newly elected Boris Tadić and the Democratic Party, political opportunity structures opened for scattered feminist and LGBTIQ+ actors, leading to the adoption of both the Gender Equality Act and the Anti-discrimination Law of 2009. This period also marks the beginning of a coordinated set of attacks of the Serbian Orthodox Church, conservative intellectuals, and radical-right parties on GSE policies and the centrist government (Drezgić, 2010; Drezgić, 2015; Sloomaeckers, 2023) which would ignite the rise of the anti-gender movement in the coming decade.

Although a recent work on protests in Serbia dubbed the 2017 anti-Vučić demonstrations as the “first mass protests since the overthrow of Milošević” (Draško, Fiket, & Vasiljević, 2020, p. 204), the authors overlook that it was precisely Vučić and his SNS that came to power thanks to mass demonstrations of tens of thousands of people protesting the failed social and economic policies of the DS-led pro-European coalition in 2011 (Al Jazeera, 6 February 2011; Deutsche Welle, 17 April 2011). The anti-governmental protests were organized by the nationalist opposition and followed a wave of worker's protests for labor rights, against privatization and unpaid salaries in the private and public sector, education, and health care in 2009/2010 (Novaković, 2020). It was precisely in this context, during the late winter protests of 2011, that NGO Dveri, emboldened by their anti-gender Family Marches and successes in banning Belgrade Pride, announced an electoral turn and the decision to participate in elections not as a party but as a “broad mass movement” (Dveri, 2011). Hence, as we shall see, the increasing protests against the pro-EU centrist government created an opportunity for the far-right to take an electoral turn with a new issue – family values against ‘gender’ and ‘homosexual’ ideology.

In conclusion, we have seen that the political and cultural influence of the Catholic church in Croatia is more firmly rooted within civil society and is less a function of state co-optation of a religious-nationalist discourse as in the two Orthodox cases. Conversely, far-right parties as potential anti-gender allies are much less available in Croatia than in Serbia or Bulgaria. Finally, all countries have implemented GSE policies under EU conditionality but with little political commitment to liberalization and with weak feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements supporting them. I now turn to an in-depth within-case analysis of the development of anti-gender mobilization in my first case – Bulgaria.

6. BULGARIA – A SURPRISING COALITION

As previously noted, anti-gender movements are comprised of a heterogeneous network of actors, which is perhaps most clearly visible in the Bulgarian case where even the Socialist party picked up the GI frame (Gwiazda & Minkova, 2023). The post-2017 anti-gender protest cycle in Bulgaria emerged around the ratification of the Istanbul convention, the Strategy for the Child, and the Social Services Act, and has been analyzed in-depth in the most recent works on the topic (Slavova, 2021; Merdjanova, 2022; Krizsan & Roggeband, 2021; Darakchi, 2019). Although the ‘gender ideology’ frame, indeed, did appear in the broader Bulgarian public only in late 2017, the same actors have been active in various forms since the late 2000s. Anti-gender scholarship has neglected to include almost a decade of contention due to its fixation on the use of the GI frame. However, if we define anti-gender politics more inclusively, focusing on its general innovative characteristics (Tranfić & Koch, 2022; Paternotte 2023), we can trace the emergence of anti-gender actors more precisely and accurately. Hence, the framing, alliances, transnational connections, and action repertoires that distinguish anti-gender actors from other radical-right, conservative, and Christian groups, have been present in Bulgaria since the early 2010s. In the first sections, I analyze the advent of Bulgarian anti-gender organizations, campaigns and actions forms by relying on a triangulation of interviews, protest data, and textual sources.

6.1. Spreading Fear – Organizational Structures and Actions

6.1.1. A ‘Civic’ Strategy of Utilizing Political Chaos

According to my interviewees, the two central anti-gender organizations in Bulgaria are Society and Values Association (SVA) and Parents United for Children (ROD). Half of all respondents mentioned both organizations as friendly in terms of values they stand for, and a somewhat smaller number also actively cooperates with them. Most anti-gender organizations take the form of NGOs or informal citizen’s initiatives suited for *ad hoc* petitions, campaigns, and short-term reactive goals. While SVA represents the core of the early anti-gender Protestant-based network, ROD represents a more recent attempt to create an all-encompassing non-confessional and non-partisan NGO gathering the ‘family forces’. In 2019, the National Association ‘March for Family’ (NAPS) was formed with several local branches, primarily focused on organizing counter-protest marches against pride parades in Bulgaria. Interestingly, although Christian

churches rarely take up a direct, active role in the movement, the first family march was organized in 2013 by the clergy of a Protestant church in Burgas. Finally, since 2019, online organizing, particularly on Facebook, has become the dominant form of movement mobilization, with ROD sprouting as a registered NGO from a loosely coordinated Facebook ‘National group “Children of Bulgaria”’ with over 200.000 members. The importance of online organizing only increased with the coming of the COVID-19 pandemic. NAPS has so far been the only successful attempt to create a national association of pro-family organizations and initiatives that has branches in the five biggest cities in Bulgaria. However, it has largely remained a network of Protestant association and churches. In general, respondents agree that there is a lack of coordination among the various organizations in the broader network, at least in the sense of routinized meetings or attempts to create overarching structures. As we shall see, these faults in cooperation stem partly from strong denominational and ideological variations.

While various conflicts and tensions within the network make organizational coordination more costly, some also interpret it as an important advantage: “We are still part of the larger ideological movement, but it is not necessarily structurally cohesive... and it does not have to be because this fosters liberty. It is a kind of division of labor.” (Violeta C12). Overall, as Violeta states, there is a sense of collective identification with a broader movement among most of the Protestant interviewees, despite variation in preferred label. From ‘conservatives’, ‘patriots’, or ‘Christians’ to parental or pro-family associations – all oppose ‘gender ideology’. Finally, the emergence of organizational structures, coalitions and campaigns highly depends on how actors interpret the larger political and discursive opportunities of the ever-changing moment. Prevalent distrust in institutions, particularly political parties due to rampant corruption, constricts the choice of organizational forms and allies for anti-gender actors. Furthermore, NGOs are so vilified by the movement itself, given that they have been conspiratorially constructed as synonymical to “Soros’ gender propagandists” (Drenchev, 2019), that founding one can also be perceived as problematic. One ROD member active since the early days of unorganized Facebook mobilization against the IC describes how their choice to register an NGO was itself criticized by anti-gender parent groups:

It was very hard to explain to all those people that there were good NGOs and bad NGOs. Their argument went along the lines of "no to parties, no to NGOs, we are the people, and we need to be heard". (Tatiana, C2)

The road to institutionalization only came from the need to have formal representatives who would present the actors’ demands in meetings with government officials. In fact, it was

prompted by government officials themselves (Tatiana, C2). Finally, the informality of citizen's initiatives allowed them to present small groups of activists who signed various petitions as serious and numerous civil society stakeholders. They are recognizable under generic names such as Civic Initiative for the Family, Civic Initiative of the Parents, or Civil Forum for Child and Family Protection (SVA, 2012), none of which are actual registered organizations. Anti-gender actions thus appear to be supported by a vast network of apolitical associations of concerned parents. This finding corroborates recent research pointing to *astroturfing* – crafting the appearance and impression of grassroots support for an actor or activity where there is none – as a strategy of the anti-gender movement (Datta, 2021; Lovenduski, 2022).

Before diving into the protest activities, we should first reflect on how anti-gender leaders perceive the conducive or restrictive aspects of the context in which they act. Anti-gender leaders agree on the generally negative role that the media play with respect to their goals and efforts. In fact, when asked about the general political context in which they act, and the factors that facilitate or hinder their activities, the media, perhaps surprisingly, comes up more often than the government, parties, or state institutions. Bulgarian national newspapers and TV stations are said to either ignore anti-gender campaigns and display indifference (Krasimir, C5; Svetlana, C7) or are biased and report on their goals in a hostile manner (Tatiana, C2; Violeta, C12). In any case, the mainstream media are largely considered an opponent, an actor supporting 'gender ideology':

What we saw was that the media enthusiastically supported what they [liberals] did but nobody heard the other ...um... the majority of society⁸. That the traditional family is good is something that was taken for granted. So, we saw this disbalance in the media discourse. (Nadezhda, C8).

Anti-gender organizations try to work around the media hostility and blockade via conservative media outlets, social media, and/or by dissociation with radical-right actors and discourses (Krasimir, C5; Violeta, C12). Although the preference of anti-gender actors for human rights framing might thus be explained by addressing the relationship between anti-gender SMOs and the traditional media within the broader discursive opportunity structures, no scholarships known to the author has addressed this issue yet, signifying an important venue for future research on anti-gender movements.

⁸ Unintentionally, this verbal gaffe and pause seemingly uncover the hegemonizing strategy of presenting the movement as legitimized by the majority it allegedly represents, not as one of many sides in a political conflict.

When assessing the broader political opportunities such as national and local governments, legislative rules and citizen's attitudes, most anti-gender leaders identify both opportunities and threats. As a rule, the people of Bulgaria are perceived by anti-gender actors as largely conservative, which allows them to use populist framing of the ruling elites as allies of Western deviants imposing values foreign to the Bulgarian people (Nadezhda, C8; Valentina, C13). From the perspective of three Protestant leaders (Krasimir, C5; Atanas, C10; Violeta, C12), the communist legacy weighs hard on the cultural, institutional, and discursive openness of 'the establishment' for pro-family activism. Firstly, the communist regime enforced state atheism, and pitted Orthodox Christians against Protestants, which is additionally exacerbated the BOC's exclusivity and anti-ecumenism. Secondly, they claim, people are only now learning how to use their own basic constitutional rights, including the right to free speech and assembly (Nadezhda C8; Stoyan, C14). Finally, the communist and post-communist rule has ruined the socioeconomic position of Bulgarian families, leading Violeta (C12) to conclude pessimistically that 'families have already been destroyed'. On the one hand, (post)communists are presented as ideologically driven, almost all-powerful agents of destruction. On the other hand, the ruling GERB is denounced as acting in ways that are 'idiotic' (Atanas, C10), 'ridiculous' (Stoyan, C14), and ignorant of the legislation they support (Valentina, C13). When, however, they do engage with the anti-gender movement, GERB governments are considered unresponsive, patronizing, arrogant and unwilling to listen to petitions, protests, or advice (Krasimir, C5; Aleksandar, C9). Most importantly, GERB's governments are perceived as loyal lapdogs of the European Union, imagined as the fortress of liberal elites directing policy from Brussels:

The government says 'we are ready to help you but if you damage the reputation of the government or institutions at the European level, we will not be so supportive. We will just leave the crowd to decide, leave it to others, the Constitutional Court – as it happened with the IC. They didn't want to enrage the European Union but also not to enrage people, so they left it with the Court.' (Krasimir, C5)

This quote points to the ambivalent role that GERB can play when in power due to the rent-seeking and vote-seeking opportunistic behaviour of the party and its core supporters. Other interviewees agree that governments in Bulgaria are repressive towards their organizations insofar as they conform to supranational laws and regulations to follow the agenda of 'Brussels', given that their financial interests and legitimacy are tied to the EU (Asen, C4; Iva, E8; Valentina, C13). Finally, Violeta (C12) argues that the pro-European stance of 'those who should be Christian democrats' turned them into a kind of 'conduit' for 'gender ideology'. Nevertheless, most anti-gender leaders agree that moments of political instability, including strikes, protests, upcoming elections and the general 'chaos of the political system' in Bulgaria

is favorable for the anti-gender cause, because it forces the mainstream parties, primarily GERB, to listen to the will of the (conservative) people in fear of losing power or legitimacy (Svetlana, C7; Aleksandar, C9; Atanas, C10; Stoyan, C14). Interviewees reflect on the importance of the recent wave of protests against the third Borisov Government from late 2019, and the earlier 2013 protests against the first Borisov Government, as conducive for GERB's responsiveness to anti-gender demands. Atanas (C10) summarized their perception of the political context best: 'We benefit from political chaos in Buglaria. It works in our favor...'. This is particularly true since 'parties don't want to face the anger of the people' (Aleksandar, C9). In addition, the split within GERB concerning 'gender ideology' in the Istanbul Convention helped them promote their cause and amplify their demands from the government (Valentina, C13). In conclusion, political and discursive opportunities change over time in relation to critical junctures, elections, factionalism within existing elites, and long-lasting historical legacies. Most importantly, since the libertarian-authoritarian political cleavage is not as salient, with most parties in Bulgaria holding socially conservative positions, POS are perceived as open to the extent that movement demands do not clash with the ruling parties' pro-EU agenda.

6.1.2. From Parental to Anti-gender Protest Campaigns

The early stages of anti-gender contention and proto-movement building can be traced to the founding of Society and Values Association in 2007. Led by representatives of a small Sophia-based Protestant church, SVA opposed the centre-left government's policy agenda on two issues – legalization of prostitution and extramarital cohabitation. Changes to the Family Code that would support cohabitation, they claimed, would weaken the institution of marriage, opening the doors to polygamy, divorces, and de facto legalization of gay marriages (Todorova, 2014). With a letter of support of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, SVA campaigned mostly alone, writing petitions and public letters against the said law. The 2008 "Yes to the Family" protest of several hundred people was thus the first street action of the newly forming movement (Pravoslavie.bg, 29 September 2008). Interestingly, SVA's opposition to prostitution was coordinated together with the Bulgarian Center for Gender Studies, with joint statements against trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children. Together, they invited a radical abolitionist feminist Donna Hughes as a guest lecturer to Bulgaria, recently infamous for her trans-exclusionary positions (Gagosz, 2021). This awkward collaboration points to a non-polarized, ideologically syncretic character of the parental, human rights movement in the

late 2000s. Early 2010s witnessed the rise of new parental and pro-family organizations cooperating with SVA against the proposed Surrogacy Bill in 2011 during Boyko Borisov's first Cabinet government. Interestingly, SVA was supported by the National Network for Children in action against 'substitute motherhood' (Brunet et al., 2013), a liberal organization that would later become its staunch enemy (Dragana, E7). SVA accused the government of devaluing and exploiting women, using women's rights framing to oppose surrogacy as harming surrogate mothers and breaking the mother-child bond (SVA, 2011). Even more surprisingly from the current political standpoint, the party initiating and supporting the Surrogacy bill was the far-right 'Ataka'. From a nationalist perspective, promoting surrogacy was framed as a welcome boost for natality in a demographically depleting Bulgaria.

The period leading up to 2012 can thus be conceptualized as a period of non-polarized and not quite publicized transactional activism and opposition of various conservative, religious, and liberal organizations of civil society to both center-left and center-right governments around single issues. However, by 2012-2013, SVA had managed to gather a plethora of associations around a Civic Initiative for the Family to oppose a newly proposed Child Act, including Citizen's Initiative "Justice", Home Education Association, Parents' Committee, and Freedom for Everyone, to name the more visible ones. The initiative claimed that the new bill would take away parents' rights to raise and educate their children as they see fit, pitting parents against children and allowing unwarranted state intrusion into the family and parenting (SVA, 2012b). Importantly, this time, the campaign was joined by both Ataka and VMRO, as well as international anti-gender champions, Alliance Defending Freedom, and the World Congress of Families (SVA, 2012). SVA had thus slowly rerouted the anti-statist parental movement forces towards a new ultraconservative agenda, holding its first mass protest with thousands of people protesting the Child Act in a demonstration of power of the newly rising conservative civil society. As social unrest that would lead to 2013 mass anti-government protests grew, anti-gender radicals harnessed the wider discontent and hijacked the parental movement organizations. After 2012, the Bulgarian anti-gender network emerges as a nascent new coalition on a solid basis of prior parental mobilization and seeks to network with like-minded organizations internationally. In 2013, SVA's Mihaela Djorgova, also presented as a PR representative of the Apostolic Reformed Church, attended the European Advocacy Academy – an annual gathering and training ground of European Christian conservatives organized by European Dignity Watch (EDW) and sponsored by the European Christian Political Movement (The Intolerance Network, 2021). The EDW was founded in 2011 by Sophia Kuby, daughter of

one of the anti-gender movement's main intellectual architects, Gabriele Kuby. EDW is thus one of the central Brussels-based transnational SMOs aiming to “defend the three most vital pillars of society: life, the family and fundamental freedoms”; to protect the family based on the complementarity of a man and a woman cultivating stable relationships as the basis of a fulfilled family life” (Notermans et al., 2011). Both SVA and Ivaylo Tinchev's ‘Pro-Life Choice’ are listed as organizational contacts by the transnational anti-gender organization CitizenGO within the broader Agenda Europe project (The Intolerance Network, 2021). The peak of religious-conservative mobilization, and the first use of the ‘gender ideology’ frame came in 2018 (see Figure 3). The political opportunity structure changed significantly for the better for anti-gender actors, as GERB was forced to establish a government with the far-right United Patriots. Following SVA's petition, via links brokered by Alexandar Urumov, the Evangelical advisor of VMRO's far-right Minister of Defence Kreshimir Karakachanov, an alliance of far-right nationalists and Protestant radicals attacked the Istanbul Convention as a dangerous document bringing the foreign concept of gender and ‘third sex’ to Bulgaria. GERB was thus faced with intragovernmental dissent and opposition from all right-wing parties, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, and the Orthodox church, all coming together against ‘gender’. Along with the usual, more conventional action repertoires of the movement, weekly mass protests against the Convention ensued in various cities. The sudden spike in protest activity stems from the powerful newly established movement – party alliance; an anti-gender coalition, helping the sudden flurry of anti-gender action, or as Vassileva (2022) has called it – a perfect storm.

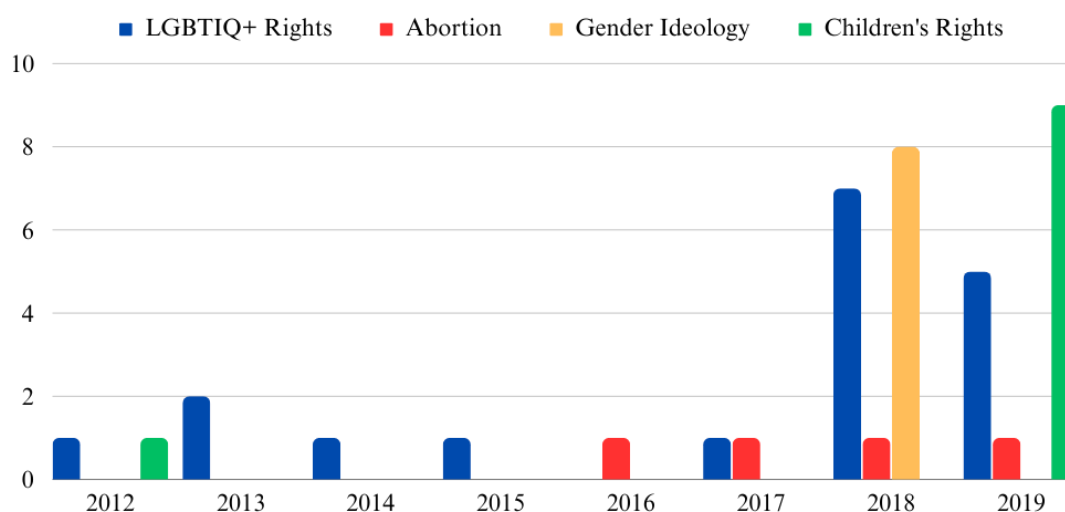


Figure 3 – Dynamics of Protest Activity and Issues over the Years

What the figure also shows us is that anti-gender contention in the strict sense is just a peak in a longer period of conservative mobilization. Riding on the anti-gender wave, a new campaign was in the making among the ranks of another faction of anti-abortion Protestant NGOs that rallied behind Ivaylo Tinchev's 'Pro-Life Choice' to organize the first Hike for the Family in 2018. Initiating petitions, press conferences and public letters to condemn "homosexual propaganda", Hike for the Family emerged as an annual anti-pride march championing traditional marriage and family. Finally, in 2019, mostly through grassroots-led Facebook groups and connective action driven by the spread of moral panic around alleged kidnapping of children, the anti-gender coalition fought once more against a proposed National Strategy for the Child and the Social Services Act. Anti-gender actors claimed that the state, in collusion with 'Sorosoid NGOs' infringed upon the rights of parents and children, organizing mass protests supported by religious actors and oppositional parties.

6.1.3. Violence, Anti-Parades, and Facebook Organizing

Anti-gender mobilization was and is not the only street opposition to GSE in Bulgaria. Anti-pride marches in Bulgaria before the mid-2010s were a thoroughly far-right affair, with different parties and organizations joining in with confrontational and violent extremist action, including the Bulgarian National Union, Ataka, VMRO, National Resistance, the Association of Bulgarian Football Fans, and the Bulgarian National Radical Party. The first Sofia Pride in 2008 was attacked with Molotov cocktails and glass bottles. Violence or threats of violence continued to follow Pride marches, with one group attacking Pride participants and destroying their signs in 2013 (Pink News, 23 June 2013), and 'National resistance' calling on violence with "brooms and shovels with long wooden handles" to "cleanse Sofia and Bulgaria from the garbage" as recently as 2017 (Pink News, 7 June 2017). A more peaceful, affirmative style of demonstration came from Protestant communities. In 2013, the first march of brides dressed in wedding dresses to portray the importance of marriage and family values was held in Burgas, opposing the Sofia pride parade, and calling for its ban (Chernomorie, 22 June 2013). From 2016, other protestant communities, mobilized by the NGO Pro-Life Choice, held similar anti-abortion demonstrations to 'protect life' in Sofia, but without success either in attendance numbers or media coverage. Hence, leading up to the turning point of 2017 and the mobilization against 'gender madness' of the IC, only LGBTIQ+ issues and pride parades brought conservatives and far-right supporters to the streets in protest marches and 'anti-gay' demonstrations. The potent coalition between GERB's governing partner, VMRO, and protestant anti-gender NGOs

initiated a highly publicized campaign against the Istanbul convention in 2017 and 2018, which brought conservative masses to the streets in unprecedented numbers. Facebook groups of unorganized parents, right-wing public figures, politicians, and movement members were the logistical locus of demonstrations held by unnamed civic initiatives and Facebook-organized citizens. This type of reactive protest continued in 2019 against the National Children's Strategy, and finally gave birth to an NGO that would channel the new protest energy – Parents United for Children (ROD).

Protest marches and demonstrations, however, are only a relatively small part of the broader action repertoire of the Bulgarian anti-gender movement. Using the classification by Caiani, della Porta and Wagemann (2012), I categorized action forms reported by anti-gender SMO leaders via interviews when asked about the types of action their organizations undertake and combined them with events noted in organizational documents and PEA data. The action forms, as reported by their organizational leaders and on their websites, follow a standard action repertoire to be expected from middle-class civic participation. The Protestant faction of the coalition – based in small communities with low mobilization capacity – particularly relies on *conventional actions*, namely, writing legal and political opinions in formal legislative consultation procedures, lobbying, and engaging with the media via press releases, conferences, and interviews. Overall, the dominant form of activity are *demonstrative actions* – letters of protest written to public officials, online and offline petitions, campaigns against various policy proposals, and protests marches and demonstrations to a lesser degree. Most significant protest waves – against the IC and the Strategy for the Child – were held by relatively disorganized initiatives of parents, Christians, and conservatives via online connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) spreading fast over social media. This also points to a lack of organizational capacities of the Bulgarian anti-gender coalition – its leaders were able to harness and absorb the protests only with subsequently formed organizational structures, and with significant birthing pains. Finally, *expressive, and service-oriented actions* take up a small part of the repertoire, isolated only to local anti-abortion, faith-based NGOs that engage in community service and volunteering, education, training, and awareness raising campaigns. One hub of pro-family socialization and mobilization of new supporters for the movement is Marriage Week – an annual week of social and cultural events organized since 2011 and coordinated by SVA's Mihaela Djorgova. In addition to cultural events, marriage week offers counselling and education for couples that aims to promote the benefits of matrimony as a “union of man and woman dedicated to one another until the end of their days” (Bulgarian National Radio, 12

February 2019). Finally, anti-gender actors do not engage in *confrontational and violent action* – these are reserved for far-right and extremist parties and their movement offshoots. Moreover, various far-right parties unified around the Patriotic Front and the later United Patriots primarily mobilized against ethnic minorities such as Turks and the Roma, mostly ignoring GSE issues until the IC contention. Smaller extremist parties such as Boyan Rasate’s neo-fascist Bulgarian Nationalist Union were more active in anti-pride counterprotesting and violence.

In conclusion, we can divide the emergence and coalescence of the Bulgarian anti-gender coalition into three phases. In the first phase, from around 2007 to 2013, we can trace the appearance of first organizations and civic initiatives rooted in small Protestant communities, engaging in fronting and astroturfing strategies. This proto-movement consisted of a heterogeneous, loose coalition of parental, anti-statist organizations with various ideological inclinations, even with some feminists collaborating with parental organizations against an Ataka-supported surrogacy law. After 2013, in the second phase, the anti-gender network consolidated itself against a proposed Child Law, channeling parental organizations and groups into an ultraconservative coalition with far-right parties and transnational anti-gender organizations such as ADF and WCF. Finally, in the third phase, after 2017, mass mobilization against the Istanbul convention was facilitated by the appearance of the GI frame bridging Protestant civil society and Orthodox far-right parties forming the ‘United Patriots’ in the coalition government. Importantly, early organizations utilized mass anti-governmental protests around 2013 to enhance mobilization, framing their demands against the corrupt state. Later, their claims were increasingly framed in a populist manner against the center-right, pro-EU ruling party GERB as serving Brussels, attracting opposition parties, including not only the far-right but also the Bulgarian Socialist Party to support their contention. Initially, the two factions of the coalition differed greatly in their action repertoires, with the far-right engaging in violent attacks on Pride parades and Protestants holding peaceful family marches. However, their collective action started converging towards the latter, morphing into the conventional and peaceful demonstrative forms of action which are the staple of anti-gender politics. In the following subchapter, we track to what extent these changes are manifested in the framing of the different SMOs, parties, and factions of the movement.

6.2. Diversity in Contempt – Ideology and Framing

6.2.1. A Family Threatened by Foreign Values

In the following sections, I analyze values, guiding ideas and self-understanding expressed by twelve anti-gender leaders representing fourteen NGOs and initiatives in Bulgaria⁹. Leaders, coordinators, secretaries, and other personnel with decision-making authority from all central anti-gender SMOs identified in previous scholarship (Darakchi, 2019; Krizsan & Roggeband, 2022) were included among the research participants. I asked my interviewees a series of questions about the values driving their work, including the role of religion (see Appendix 1). Figure 4 displays the values the interviewees expressed as central to their organizational efforts, with the N=54 demonstrating coded value utterances¹⁰. We can clearly see an overwhelming importance of human rights and family values, the significance of Christian and traditional values, and a somewhat surprising lack of pro-life and nationalist values.

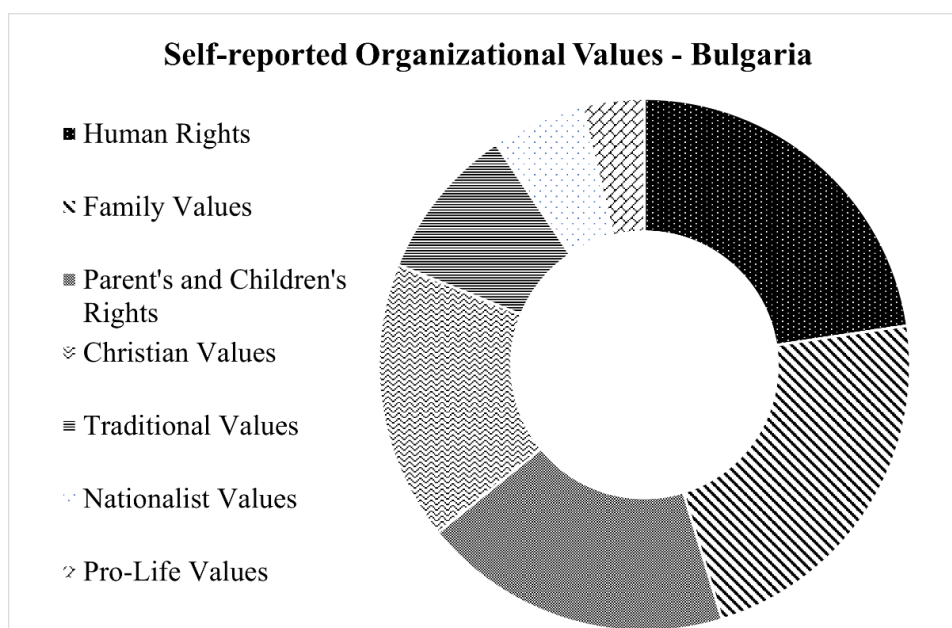


Figure 4 - Anti-gender Organizational Values in Bulgaria [N=54]

The vast majority of values enumerated by interviewees are human rights and freedoms, with parent's and children's rights usually listed as separate and particularly important set of organizational goals and values. Family values are the second most important category, whereby the definition of marriage as a heterosexual union ideal for procreation is highlighted most often by interview participants. Furthermore, Christian, and traditional values are

⁹ See Appendix 2 for a full list, and chapter 3.3 for details on methodology.

¹⁰ See Appendix 4 for a breakdown of the different composite categories.

mentioned by almost all interviewees, albeit taking a somewhat secondary position in the overall list. Finally, only a few organizations explicitly mention pro-life values and one expresses the importance of values related to national identity and culture. The centrality of human rights and freedoms is corroborated by the organizational programs, statutes, and mission-statements. These include human dignity and freedom of the individual (SVA, 2012), freedom of conscience, speech, assembly (ROD Int., 2019), personal liberty, equality before the law and tolerance (HEA, 2011). A particularly important issue is that of parents' and children's rights, always defined as inseparable, as best exemplified in SVA's (2008) elaboration of values:

Parents have the paramount constitutional right and responsibility for the care, upbringing, health, and education of their children; to decide all matters relating to them and to educate them according to their choices and beliefs [...] The interests of children and parents cannot come into conflict.

Individual rights and freedoms of citizens, parents and children form the basis of the second most important category in anti-gender organizational documents – family values. Promoting family values means protecting traditional family virtues embedded within the voluntary, legal union between one man and one woman – a relationship ideal for 'procreation', 'child-rearing' and loving parenthood, as well as a more healthy and happy society in general (SVA, 2012; Vazrazhdane, 2014; NAPS, 2019; ROD Int., 2019). Conversely, religious rights and values are mentioned as secondary, namely, the right to religious freedom and worship in public and private (SVA, 2019); and the importance of 'Christian spiritual and common human values' (ROD Int., 2019).

Most interestingly, pro-life values, in terms of protecting human life from conception, are explicitly mentioned only by SVA (2019), albeit as the most 'fundamental and paramount', and by ROD International in a passing mention (2019). The relative silence on anti-abortion or 'pro-life' topics compared to other anti-gender issues in the Bulgarian case has been neglected by scholarship and would benefit from further inquiry. Furthermore, the second least present set of values, both among interviewees and in organizational documents, are values related to nationalism or patriotism. In fact, only two non-Protestant interviewees from one anti-gender NGO (Asen, C4; Valentina, C13) note the importance of preserving the 'national spirit' and identity. Denominational differences play a role in the salience of nationalism in the movement's discourse, whereby Protestant leaders have a specific interest in avoiding it. As one of my experts states:

Protestant churches are a danger for the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC). They are the fastest growing religion and are very attractive to young people [...]

Protestants can overcome ethnic isolationism and ethnocentric attitudes typical for the BOC [...] Evangelicals are able to successfully integrate marginalized groups like Roma people, so they are very active in those communities. (Slavica E6)

Since anti-Roma racism is an important element of nationalist discourse in Bulgaria (Vassilev, 2004; Avramov, 2015), it makes sense for various Protestant churches to avoid it, among other reasons. Indeed, only one anti-gender SMO puts the “preservation of Bulgarian linguistic, cultural and spiritual traditions, ethnic and historical roots, national interest” as the seventh of ten organizational missions (ROD Int., 2019). Importantly, it is the only national NGO that is not dominated by a Protestant leadership but has a mixed denominational composition. On the other hand, Vazrazhdane and VMRO, the two far-right parties championing the anti-gender cause, readily bridge the GI frame with their usual nationalist framing. Vazrazhdane decries the Istanbul Convention as ‘harmful to Bulgaria and the Bulgarian nation’ and as going against its ‘mores, traditions, and way of life’ (Vazrazhdane, 2018). VMRO takes one conspiratorial step further to bridge anti-gender and anti-immigrant framing, warning that migrants from the Middle East that could use the IC to get asylum by declaring ‘non-traditional sexuality’ (VMRO, 2017). Thus, political parties with an Orthodox, nationalist profile, unsurprisingly, express nationalist values more often. Finally, by the time anti-gender mobilization broke through to national politics after 2017, Ataka had already declined from its former glory as the strongest far-right party in Bulgaria. It should be noted, however, that Ataka’s pro-Russian positions also included a strong anti-LGBT fearmongering against ‘Europederasty’ (ILGA, 2015) and that they were included in secret meetings of European far-right parties organized by an important anti-gender financier, the Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev (The Financial Times, 28 January 2015).

6.2.2. Socioeconomic Positioning – Big or Small State?

The Bulgarian radical right fits the general trend of Eastern European radical-right parties supporting redistribution (Bustikova & Kitschelt, 2009). The ‘new winning formula’ of the radical right includes welfare chauvinism and protectionism (de Lange, 2007). Moreover, scholars have noted that the anti-gender movement emerged as a critical response to neoliberalism in its cultural and economic forms (Kováts, 2017; Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). However, an important role in the Bulgarian anti-gender movement is played by protestant-led and US-inspired organizations with a minimalist understanding of state interventionism. As Lassiter (2008) demonstrated when discussing the invention of family values in the 1970s US,

conservatives interpret the breakdown of the family as a cultural issue to be blamed on the gays, feminists, and the sexual revolution, not as an economic one. Nevertheless, given the particular importance of child-care, social services, and family policies as central issues around which the Bulgarian movement has been mobilizing at least since 2012, socioeconomic positioning has emerged as an issue, and a source of intramovement strife. Whether or not families, parents and children should receive welfare payments and extensive support from the state in terms of their upbringing, education and social benefits is recognized by most interviewees as a contentious issue between different anti-gender organizations (Tatiana, C2, Dimitar, C3, Asen, C4, Krasimir, C5, Atanas, C10, Violeta, C12). One Protestant leader lamented on the lack of truly conservative, right-wing political forces in Bulgaria:

Those nationalists... I wouldn't call them right-wing because they're not right, they are pro-state. You need to be in support of a small state if you're right-wing. So, they are socially right, economically left, and they depend on the state to introduce their political platform – they do not rely on individual people and their freedom. (Violeta, C12).

Conversely, from the point of view of the nationalist camp, relegating social welfare to what they call ‘private’ NGOs is in itself problematic. They are weary of Protestant-based charity organizations that are oftentimes perceived as proselytizing. One leading member of an anti-gender NGO particularly expressed distrust against such actors:

I was confused to see that maybe 90% of the organisations [anti-gender] were some Baptists. OK, I myself, I'm Christian Orthodox and I don't think that such people ... They had different understandings. They have other NGOs promoting children's rights but also providing social services that they charge. But us, we were trying to fight against paid social services, so this was a conflict. (Asen, C4)

This difference in values within the movement thus generally overlaps with the distinction between the more ethnonationalist, Orthodox actors on one hand, and the Protestant ones on the other hand. While family values thus might be interpreted in different ways and put to work towards different goals, opposition to ‘gender ideology’ still firmly binds conservatives together in their socio-political efforts.

6.2.3. Religious Exclusionary Politics

Among interviewed anti-gender leaders, only 4 out of 12 identified as Christian Orthodox, while the rest belong to Protestant Christian denominations. Although they make up only 1% of the total population, Protestants have arguably been the most politically active group of laypersons when it comes to morality issues in Bulgaria. Several movement and NGO leaders emphasize

their personal and organizational work as rooted in Christianity, Christian values and traditions, and their Biblical worldview (Asen, C4; Krasimir, C5, Svetlana, C7, Violeta, C12). According to Violeta (C12), humans are created by God in the image of God – all natural rights stemming from this fact are the true source of human rights in the legal and political sense. Consequently, she interprets the battle around ‘gender ideology’ as ‘a spiritual, moral battle between good and evil’. Conversely, most interviewees subscribe to a more nuanced, secular argumentation noting that Christian ethics and values are also human values proven by science and history (Svetlana, C7). As Krasimir (C5) points out: ‘I never present faith as the basis of what I am arguing’. Atanas (C10) highlights a similar point:

If you talk like a sectarian no one will listen to you or pay attention to what you're saying. You must find a way of speaking and communicating so that others are capable of hearing you. That is the Christian view of communication – you speak the language of others – this is how you can reach them.

Discursive secularization (Rots, 2017) is a common anti-gender strategy that helps explain why human rights are the central group of values communicated by anti-gender leaders. Furthermore, Dimitar (C3) and Valentina (C12) point out that, although they are religious, their respective organizations are not, meaning they do not represent a particular denomination or discriminate members based on religious affiliation. In conclusion, there is general agreement across almost all organizations that religious, Christian values are the basis of their worldview, but that these values should be transformed into civic, secular frames when advocating for their cause in the public sphere. However, when comparing the organizational documents and interviewees of all organizations, two groups emerge with seemingly subtle but important differences. On one hand, Protestant-inspired NGOs and initiatives put an emphasis on human rights and freedoms and Christian values, whereas nationalist, Orthodox-inspired NGOs, initiatives, and political parties include more nationalist and welfarist values. These differences will be shown as crucial in strategic considerations, cooperation, and claim-making in subsequent chapters.

We have so far established that anti-gender SMOs in Bulgaria appropriate liberal, human rights framing to advocate for family values, religious freedom, and democracy. This strategic mirroring of liberal movements (Ayoub & Chetaille, 2017) differentiates them strongly from the traditional Bulgarian far right that scapegoats minorities on an ethnonationalist basis, primarily targeting Turks, Muslims, immigrants, and the Roma (Pirro, 2015). This does not, however, mean that anti-gender SMOs have a mainstream conservative profile. Nativism typical of radical-right politics does not necessarily have to be rooted in ethnonationalist exclusion

(Minkenberg, 2017). Whereas most conservatives might advocate for the traditional family model, only the *illiberal* right advocates for the exclusion of gender and sexual minorities from public life, denying the constitutional protection of their minority rights via hate speech, homophobia, transphobia, and sexism. In 2015, SVA sent a letter to the Bulgarian prime minister and president arguing against the legal recognition of “such sexual orientations” and warning it would “brutally violate family values” and “destroy marriage between men and women as a basic, natural and life-giving cell of society.” (SVA, 2015). According to HEA’s president Petar Porumbachanov, homosexuality is a punishment from straying away from God (2011), and ‘gender ideology’ is a form of totalitarianism:

The sexually deviant perverts who write documents such as the Istanbul Convention [...] Their disgusting hope is that – since they are barren – they will be able to reproduce their wickedness by stealing the children of heterosexuals. Facing this, Christian families must prepare and raise a generation that will govern itself under God for His glory. (Porumbachanov, 2018).

This illustration demonstrates that the more extreme, conspiratorial discourse is not just a fringe position of certain nationalist youth groups as argued by one of my Protestant interviewees (Nadezhda, C8) but is also promulgated by the Christian anti-gender movement leadership. Of course, nationalist political parties such as VMRO have also played an important, if not a crucial role in spreading fear. Furthermore, Vazrazhdane’s secretary and former VMRO member Nikolay Drenchev who also served as a representative of the National Network of Parents used to be a fervent far-right activist, advocating radical solutions to the ‘gypsy question’ such as voluntary civil guards (Drenchev, 2010). These implications of the relationship between the party and movement sectors of the illiberal right in Bulgaria will be analyzed more in depth in subsequent chapters. In conclusion – while there are important differences between the ethnonationalist and extreme-right actors in Bulgaria on one hand, and the anti-gender actors on the other in terms of discourse, cadres, and strategies – they have a common radical-right, illiberal ideology. The Christian, protestant actors are more likely to emphasize parents’ and religious rights when framing against GSE, but this does not necessarily make them any less radical or anti-pluralist. The following chapter on what the GI frame actually means for those who use it will put to rest any potentially remaining doubt about conceptualizing anti-gender actors as far right.

6.2.4. The 'Gender Ideology' Frame

Previous analyses of the 'gender ideology' frame have pointed out its role as an 'empty' or 'bridging signifier' in different national contexts (Mayer & Sauer, 2017; Villa, 2017; Darakchi, 2019). As such, the GI frame is not specifically bounded to a particular issue, policy area or social phenomenon. It functions as a vague glue for various right-wing discourses and threats perceived by its users (Kováts, 2015). However, for the most part, anti-gender leaders in Bulgaria have a clear understanding of what 'gender ideology' means to them. Predominantly, GI is understood as the negation of the sex binary according to which humans are born as biologically male or female. A common reference appearing among interviewees as an example of GI is the Istanbul Convention's Article 3c defining gender as socially constructed roles and behaviours. More specifically, GI is portrayed as an attempt to introduce a new, third gender or sex. While gender is primarily rejected as being a concept foreign to the Bulgarian language, which recognizes only sex, some interviewees do recognize the existence of gender identity but reject its social constructivist understanding. According to my interviewees, 'men are men, and women are women' (Asen, C4; Krasimir, C5; Nadezhda, C8). GI thus represents an attempt of humanity to negate its own biological and anthropological limitations. It is sometimes reflexively interpreted by interviewees with respect to the imagined intentions of 'the other side':

"They hate the patriarchy. [...] Patriarchy in their minds is created by God. And if you look at all these gender ideologies you will see that behind their agenda to introduce a new gender, a new sex, a new reality – what is in fact at stake here is the hatred towards Christianity – for religion in general – but primarily for Christianity." (Violeta, C12)

While a minority of interviewees like Violeta explicitly defend patriarchal values and 'God's truth', most are secular and strategic in their approach to the issue. Some anti-gender leaders have a more sophisticated understanding of GI as an ideology propagating the acceptance and affirmation of transgender identities, advocating 'changing sex through hormonal therapy' (Dimitar, C3), or 'the idea that your gender can be different from what you have been assigned at birth – your biological sex/gender' (Svetlana, C7). In contrast to the often-conspiratorial tone adorning the GI frame that is expressed both by anti-gender actors and acknowledged by scholars, several respondents readily admit that all of us have a 'particular ideology and worldview' that influences how we approach issues relating to social roles of women and men (Krasimir, C5; Atanas, C10; Violeta, C12). The nuanced and complex ways of understanding 'gender' among interviewees are important insofar as they challenge the assumption that anti-gender actors merely criticize an invented strawman barely related to 'reality'.

The second most common understanding of ‘gender ideology’ directly or indirectly links it to LGBT rights, particularly same-sex marriage, and adoption. According to some respondents (Krasimir, C5; Nadezhda, C8), GI is a useful ploy for homosexuals which allows them to get married and adopt children via legal or surgical sex/gender change. In these cases, GI is denounced as linked to ‘homosexual ideology’ with the usual homophobic tropes:

When a child has two fathers, this limits its right to have a mother which is a natural right of children. The child is just ruined. [...] these guys are living in a way that is against the natural order. Even the organs that they have in their body are not supposed to be used in a way that they are used. They have more cancer and all other diseases, sexually transmitted diseases, psychological problems, smoking, and drinking (Krasimir, C5).

Gay men are thus blamed for the spread of HIV, sexually transmitted diseases, and their lives are framed within a set of criminal and moral vices such as prostitution, drug abuse and paedophilia (Krasimir, C5; Nadezhda, C8; Violeta, C12). Prior to the contention around the Istanbul Convention, Society and Values Association circulated a petition addressed to the Bulgarian government regarding an ECHR ruling in support of same-sex unions, calling them to reject such an ‘extreme agenda that seeks to destroy marriage between one man and one woman as the basic, natural and life-giving unit of society’ (CivilActionBg.com, 21 August 2015). The GI frame is thus contextualized within an ongoing liberal onslaught aiming to destroy the traditional family. The president of ROD International, Vladimir Sheytanov, openly denounced the Istanbul Convention as a tool for ‘legitimising people with atypical sexual orientation’. Moreover, he misleadingly cited the IC’s alleged incompatibility with outdated Criminal Code provisions punishing homosexuality as a perversion by ‘imprisonment or correctional labour’ (Sheytanov, 2018). Politicized homophobia figures as an integral part of the movement’s framing of ‘gender ideology’, and the acceptance of the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons is rejected as hostile to the Bulgarian legal system and morality. The more extreme versions of anti-gender discourse are also explicitly presented by nationalist political parties. VMRO fearmongers by equating ‘non-stereotypical gender roles’ with ‘homosexuality and transvestitism’, and Vazrazhdane denounces gender as a quirk of ‘any mentally impaired individual who believes that society is normatively obligated to tolerate his medical and social deviations’ (Vazrazhdane, 7 January 2018).

All respondents agree that GI came to Bulgaria as an import from the West, primarily from Western Europe and the US via the European Union and the United Nations. However, there is no uniform understanding of when and how exactly this process happened. Three general sets of actors are identified as the culprits – liberals or progressives, EU institutions, and Western

NGOs. Some interviewees identify the 1990s and the post-communist opening to international influences and globalization flows as the early days of GI in Bulgaria (Dimitar, C3; Asen, C4; Violeta, C12). Transition to capitalist democracy brought about the decriminalization of homosexuality, among other offences to public morals. The largest number of respondents notes that GI came to Bulgaria after the countries' accession to the European union, with the first gay prides and legislation on gender equality (Krasimir, C5; Svetlana, C7, Nadezhda, C8; Valentina, C13). Here, the Istanbul convention and its Article 3 are mentioned as a definite and explicit proof of GI in Bulgaria. In addition, GI has allegedly been brought to Bulgaria and imposed without democratic consent. According to Dimitar (C3), Asen (C4), and Nadezhda (C8), GI is 'forced' through the education system from kindergarten to university as an 'infiltration' of the school curricula. A common trope appearing in anti-gender and conservative discourse claims that informing pupils about the existence of homosexuality and contraception amounts to promoting them as a choice or an ideology and reveals an alleged goal of indoctrination. Anti-gender actors thus work under a strong siege mentality whereby 'gender ideology' is constantly force-fed to the Bulgarian people through various institutions and culture. According to several interviewees, it is an illegal authoritarian or totalitarian imposition forced by non-democratic means into Bulgaria (Asen, C4; Nadezhda, C8; Violeta, C12). The top-down nature and spread of GI from the European union into Bulgaria is thus painted as reminiscent of communist dictatorship. Eurosceptic populism is an important tool of distinguishing the naturally conservative people from the deviant cosmopolitan elites (Tranfić, 2022). In a more radical interpretation, GI is 'madness' which goes against morality, law, and God, reflecting a hatred of Christianity from the side of those promoting decadence, hedonism, and sex without consequences (Krasimir, C5; Atanas, C10; Valentina, C13). The core of anti-gender mobilizational efforts is instilling a sense of fear among parents about their children's wellbeing. Furthermore, other respondents highlighted that 'gender ideology' is a fantasy, a 'quasireligion' which is not backed in biology or science more generally (Nadezhda, C8; Violeta, C12; Stoyan, C14). The socially constructed nature of gender and gendered violence is thus rejected as a kind of magical thinking, even among individuals and activists who do not hold strongly homophobic or transphobic attitudes. In conclusion, the narrative proposed by anti-gender leaders in Bulgaria is the following: foreign elites led by liberal international and non-governmental institutions, organizations, and embassies such as the UN, EU, Open Society Foundations, and the Norwegian Embassy are forcing 'gender ideology' through culture, media, laws and the educational system. Their goal is to confuse and indoctrinate children about their sexual identity, with lasting catastrophic long-term effects such as the destruction of marriage

and society. Having analysed the organizational framing, values and meanings ascribed to the GI frame, we return to protest event data in the following section to see how these issues are presented during collective action.

6.2.5. Marching against ‘Adam and Ivan’ – Issues and Strategies

The most common issue around which protests have been organized in Bulgaria are LGBTIQ+ rights (Figure 5). More specifically, anti-pride demonstrations and marches have been organized both by anti-gender and far-right organizations in direct opposition to Sofia Pride Parades from at least 2012. The second issue are children’s rights, mainly protests legislative changes reforming the education system in Bulgaria framed in anti-statist terms. The most recent demonstrations and marches during the height of anti-gender mobilization concern women’s rights, namely protests against the Istanbul Convention and anti-abortion demonstrations in Sofia.

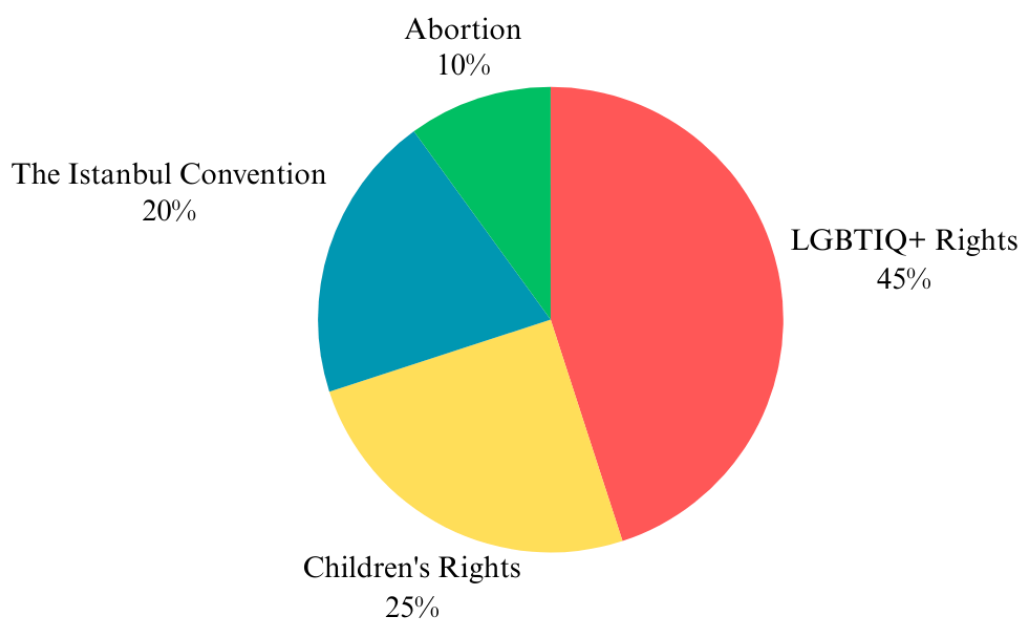


Figure 5 – Protest Issue Prevalence in Bulgaria

Looking into the early anti-pride marches, we can distinguish between two types of protest. On one hand, nationalist parties self-identifying as ‘patriots’ demonstrate against ‘gay aggression’ and propaganda, in favour of “tradition, morality and values” (BTVNovinite, 30 June 2012; Chernomorie, 12 August 2013). On the other hand, Protestant-based activists argue for traditional family against the destructiveness of homosexuality, sodomy, and pederasty (Vesti,

21 September 2013). Adapting the popular Christian right phrase from 1970s US to the Bulgarian context, one Evangelical pastor exclaimed: ‘it is Adam and Eve, not Adam and Ivan’ (Gyuzelov, 2015). Again, the radicalism does not differ much between the two groups, with both calling for a ban on pride parades. Nevertheless, the Protestant-based groups sought to distinguish themselves from the nationalists, focusing primarily on the affirmation of family and Christian values, stating in 2018 that their event “is not a protest, but a celebration of the Bulgarian family” (Marica, 9 June 2018). Importantly, the framing of nationalist parties started mirroring the pro-family rhetoric after the critical protests in 2018 which brought collaboration between the two camps against the ‘gender ideology’ of the Istanbul convention. That year, the radical-right party Vazrazhdane organized a concert for ‘the revival of family values’ (Tsvetanova, 2018).

The second most protested issue concerns children’s and parent’s rights. In fact, the first protest event registered in 2012 was a demonstration against the draft Child Protection Act, with parental organizations resisting a perceived attempt of the lawmaker to ‘effectively take away parental rights in favour of the state’ (SVA, 2012). Pro-family organizations framed the new legislation as ‘unacceptable state interference in family relations’, comparing it to communist attempts to ‘nationalise children’ (SVA, 2012). Almost 7 years later, the same movement actors resisted the National Strategy for the Child which attempted to bolster prevention of child abuse within the family claiming that social services would kidnap children under false pretences and give them up for adoption abroad. The activists successfully bridged anti-statist and pro-family arguments with the new ‘gender ideology’ frame in 2019. In addition to their defence of corporal punishment and parental authority, they spread conspiracies about dangers of homosexual adoption of fostered children, mandatory sex education (BTA, 5 February 2019); protested ‘gender education’ and the ‘genocide of the family’ (Trud, 7 September 2019).

Third, protests against the Istanbul Convention erupted in the beginning of 2018 with demonstrations and marches held every weekend in several biggest cities until mid-March. They are presented here as an issue in its own right due to the multifaced and complex framing presented by anti-gender actors. Indeed, the contentious Convention was the first widespread public use of the ‘gender ideology’ frame, allowing bridging between issues ranging from anti-LGBT rhetoric, children’s rights, and the issue of defining sexual/gendered differences. Backed by far-right parties, anti-gender actors organized on Facebook to rally against the perceived dangers of the introduction of a ‘third sex’ and ‘social engineering’ (Dnevnik, 5 February 2018; News.bg, 24 February 2018). The actual issue at stake – violence against women – was

sidelined by protesters who claimed that the IC was a plot by the gay lobby, a propaganda tool of homosexuals targeting children (Mediapool.bg, 3 February 2018; Videv, 2018). Finally, women's reproductive rights are the least protested issue in Bulgaria, with only one yearly anti-abortion demonstration organized since 2016 in Sofia by dozens of mostly Protestant attendees. Protesters decried the practices of abortion with the usual pseudoscientific and fearmongering tactics, including the so-called post-abortion stress syndrome and the treatment of 'unborn children' as 'biological waste' (Pro-Life Choice, 2018).

The different nuances between 'patriotic', nationalist protest framing on the one hand, and a more Christian (Protestant), pro-family framing on the other hand reflected the diversity of SMOs and conservative traditions of anti-gender actors. Changes in protest framing are corroborated by organizational documents as well. With the widespread opposition to 'gender ideology' emerging as the main oppositional diagnostic frame after 2017, far-right parties fully embraced the discourse of pro-family values and human rights of parents and children (VMRO.bg, 29 December 2017; Vazrazhdane.bg, 14 February 2019). Family values were fully incorporated into the parties' nationalist discourses, presenting 'gender ideology' as 'anti-Bulgarian': a threat to Bulgarian traditions and national self-esteem (VMRO.bg, 2 June 2019; Vazrazhdane.bg, 27 December 2019). The GI frame's function, noted in previous scholarship as a 'symbolic glue', is thus one of frame alignment (Snow et al., 1986), bridging disparate frames of understanding and mobilizing different political and social groups around a common cause. Attacking 'gender ideology' comes along with a somewhat more moderate and secular discourse, allowing anti-gender actors to present their grievance as one rejecting 'anti-human' ideologies – not persons – as was previously the case with attacks on 'homosexuals'. Whereas older protest signs displayed crossed-out images of stickmen engaging in anal sex, newer ones tend to portray a happy heterosexual Bulgarian family. Importantly, unlike the traditional Bulgarian far right, the new anti-gender coalition comprised of various Christian groups and nationalists combines the politics of fear with an emphasis on the affirmative collective identification with family values, a kind of familial identity politics that goes beyond a narrow Christian identification.

This does not mean that various Christian churches and lay activists were not crucial in building anti-gender networks and mobilizing for protests, but rather reflects their need to reach non-believers and transcend their Christian (mostly Evangelical) niches, as one interviewee stated (Tatiana, C2). Focusing on the traditional family and parents as a central political subject and moving away from a strictly religious rhetoric in movement claims and frames is the central

movement strategy, as expressed by leaders of different SMOs (Tatiana, C2; Krasimir, C5; Nadezhda, C8; Atanas, C10). For some, pursuing a more moderate rhetoric with broader goals also allows them to avoid infighting, and pursue the desired long-term strategy of influencing society while rejecting short term risks stemming from political collaboration with parties (publicly branded as fascists) (Atanas, C10; Violeta, C12; Valentina, C13). Finally, moderating the rhetoric facilitates lobbying and legal action that attacks the allegedly destabilizing, confusing and illegal nature of the concept of gender – a preferred and possibly most successful strategy in Bulgaria (Dimitar, C3; Violeta, C12; Valentina, C13; Stoyan, C14).

In conclusion, Bulgarian anti-gender actors primarily frame their claims around family values, human rights, and particularly parents' and children's rights, with Christian and nationalist values increasingly taking a back seat over time. Regardless of faction or denominations, all actors express a highly illiberal, radical right ideology focusing on the exclusion of gendered and moral 'others', with most protest pointed against LGBTIQ+ rights. Interviewed organizations' representatives have nuanced and complex ways of understanding 'gender ideology', reaffirming the sexual binary and the heteronormative values, including their right to reproduce these values and pass them on to their children without 'confusing' them by exposure to dangerous ideologies. Two peculiarities of the local anti-gender network, a strong focus on parents' rights and an underemphasis of the issue of abortion will be investigated more thoroughly from a comparative perspective in subsequent chapters. Finally, both the analysis of claims, protests and values expressed in interviews point to two distinct factions. One is the traditional, Orthodox far-right espousing religious nationalism, radicalism, and violence against sexual and gender minorities. The other is an ultraconservative Protestant faction championing 'family values' and human rights. The gender ideology frame helped bridge the two groups into a coalition, whereby the nationalist radicals co-opted the familial identity politics and discursive secularization while keeping a strong nativist core ideology. The role of religious and radical-right groups in anti-gender politics in Bulgaria becomes most apparent when analysing the relations of cooperation and conflict between the various actors.

6.3. Putting Old Enmities Aside – Relations and Networks

6.3.1. The Orthodox and the Protestant Approach

Lagging several months behind the first anti-gender petition – a delay somewhat typical for a political reaction of Christian churches – the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church came out strongly against the Istanbul convention in January 2018 (Bulgarian Patriarchate, 2018). The BOC published a statement, with a strong opinion against the ratification of the convention and threatened MPs that would vote for it with excommunication. Although clergy leadership in the BOC usually stays out of politics, not least due to its co-optation and control from the state, it has a long tradition of denouncing sexually and morally ‘deviant’ tendencies in society, particularly pride parades (Merdjanova, 2022). However, even though the majority of Bulgarians are Orthodox, the anti-gender movement in Bulgaria blossomed from different branches of the Christian tree. As we have seen, the earliest non-governmental organizations, Freedom for Everyone and Society and Values Association, that would later become anti-gender SMOs, were formed in 2004 and 2007, respectively. They provided the basis of a new network of protestant, faith-based organizations with a civic, political agenda that gathered various Baptist, Evangelical, Presbyterian, and other Protestant churches around the pro-family cause. Unlike the somewhat passive, cultural Christianity of Orthodox Bulgarians, Protestants are perceived to take their religion more seriously (Slavica, E6). The tensions and rivalries between the BOC and the threat of growing Protestant communities is one of the important factors for understanding anti-gender movement dynamics and emergence of new actors in the Bulgarian case but has been neglected by scholars so far.

Despite their differences, it is precisely the brewing hazard of ‘gender ideology’ that fostered cooperation across denominational lines. From a resource mobilization perspective, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) is weakly equipped to sponsor social movement mobilization. Irreligion is particularly high in Bulgaria which negatively affects anti-gender efforts (Slavica, E6; Dragana, E7; Svetlana, C7; Iva, E8). In addition to the scarcity of churchgoers and the absence of Orthodox religious education in schools, the BOC does not have special ecclesial bodies that would focus on the family or laity or elaborated social doctrines (Asen, C4; Stoyan, C14). In rare cases, there are inactive Orthodox offices or centres dealing with family issues, or specific monastic communities and temples organizing events against abortion, for example (Slavica, E6). In turn, BOC’s engagement around gender and sexuality issues predominantly takes place via public pressure and indirect influence on the government through statements and speeches addressing the general public (Tatiana, C2; Iva, E8; Valentina, C13). Even this type of sociopolitical intervention is a relatively new phenomenon, possibly resulting from increasing activism and social-doctrinal development in the Russian

Orthodox Church, or the post-schismal strengthening of a unified Orthodox voice (Kalkandjieva, 2019). In the 2012 ‘Strategy for Spiritual Education, Catechesis, and Culture’, the Bulgarian Holy Synod introduced several important areas of spiritual and moral outreach of the Church, including family and social issues:

Modern "democratic" social reforms, being devoid of a Christian basis, have in fact led to a system that legitimizes extramarital and same-sex relationships, social inequality, and irresponsible exploitation of nature-(Bulgarian Patriarchate, 2012)

Furthermore, the Synod called for an increasing activation of clergy and laity in educating the faithful and the broader society on the aforementioned issues, and to spread the word of God. This potentially establishes a basis for stronger future anti-gender engagement. Nevertheless, the Orthodox clergy, especially the higher echelons, avoid supporting political events and protests:

The BOC is very careful in keeping away from direct participation in meetings and such activities. However, [laughs] we have found other ways to work with Orthodox priests and we are very well regarded and respected by them. They participate only as individuals, but indirectly this means that we are getting support from the local Church as a whole. (Tatiana, C2)

This quote demonstrates a common practice of individual and local-level Orthodox support for anti-gender activities. As we shall see in later chapters, anti-gender leaders are particularly careful in combatting the perceived image created in the ‘liberal media’ of them as ‘Protestant sects’. Having an Orthodox priest join a protest is thus strategically opportune for demonstrating the support of the predominant denomination, despite a general predilection for discursive secularization and a civic identity. Nevertheless, Orthodox priests are bound by a kind of anti-ecumenical ‘protocol’ that prevents them from publicly associating with any Protestant ‘sect’: ‘they are not allowed to do things together with other faiths – neither with Catholics nor Protestants’ (Nadezhda, C8). Another Protestant leader reverses the accusation of sectarianism and points it towards the BOC:

The Orthodox Church doesn't regard very well any other denomination. Neither Catholic nor Protestant. They are pretty closed and rather sectarian even. Of course, I know Orthodox priests who have relations with others but in general the Orthodox churches is very conservative. (Atanas C10)

Furthermore, unlike the BOC, Catholic and Protestant clergy of various denominations are significantly more open to providing concrete support to anti-gender protests and actions in general. This includes co-organizing meetings with pastors, clergymen marching and holding public speeches in rallies, providing their spaces for logistics and organization, and even

signature gathering for the European Citizen Initiative ‘Mom, Dad, and Kids’ (Krasimir, C5; Svetlana, C7; Nadezhda, C8; Violeta, C12). In conclusion, competition in the religious market between the BOC and Protestant churches creates tensions within the broader movement given that most of the anti-gender leaders are active laypersons, if not pastors of non-Orthodox Christian churches. Finally, like other Orthodox churches, the BOC is not equipped or particularly interested to deal with worldly issues in a systematically defined way. Not even the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople elaborated on social doctrine until very recently with its 2020 document “For the Life of the World. Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church”.

Despite the interdenominational tensions and differences, the ideological closeness among anti-gender organizations fosters cooperation of the various associations and informal initiatives, but there is a strong sense of organizational differentiation and loose cooperation: ‘There is a separation of work, with everyone doing something [...] there is one idea and many organizations – we make bridges where we can’ (Krasimir, C5). In addition, Violeta (C12) advocates ‘unity through disunity’, noting that true cooperation can only be achieved through a common conception of the Truth. Although various forms of disagreements exist within the coalition, it is precisely family values and resistance to ‘gender ideology’ that unite them around a common cause (Tatiana, C2, Valentina, C13). Nevertheless, organizations will rarely meet to discuss or organize common activities; this happens ‘vary rarely, not very often, and only for very specific issues’ (Nadezhda, C8). The most common type of cooperation consists of the more passive and symbolic forms of solidarity such as expressing support and collecting online signatures for the various initiatives promulgated by their allies. Thus, the bulk of internal cooperation is in joint public advocacy – letters, petitions, statements, and press releases are coordinated, shared, and prepared in advance for particular campaigns and issues at hand (Svetlana, C7; Atanas, C10, Stoyan, C14). Less frequently, associations will share more material and substantial resources, providing free legal defense, sharing volunteers, and know-how required for dealing with authorities and the media (Krasimir, C5; Nadezhda, C8). Occasionally, organizations might also stage protests together, organize common meetings and network among each other to connect with other allies (Tatiana, C2; Violeta, C12). However, in addition to a preference for maintaining organizational identity and, uniqueness, cooperation is oftentimes also hampered by distrust, factionalism, and disagreements over strategy (Tatiana, C2; Krasimir, C5).

6.3.2. A Curiously Western Influence

All organizations outside of Bulgaria mentioned as movement allies by my interviewees are either from the US, the European Union, or one of its member states. Expectedly, bigger organizations such as SVA, NAPS and ROD have more international contacts, while the smaller and regional ones have less or none. Alliance Defending Freedom and Ordo Iuris, two influential and transnationally (in)famous anti-gender organizations, are most often mentioned by my interviewees. They act both as allies in an ideological sense and as organizations whom they have cooperated with substantially. Other transnational anti-gender initiatives include the Family Watch International and the One of Us pro-life campaign which was also held locally in Bulgaria. Some allies are regional (Orthodox) organizations and initiatives, like an unnamed Macedonian organization and the Serbian Alliance for Life. Finally, interviewees list some single-issue pro-family organizations as important allies, such as the Save the Children Fund and the Home School Legal Defense Association. Interestingly, none of the organizations mention any Russian organizations as allies or contact. This is surprising given the fact that my expert interviewees point to Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church as a key source of support for the Bulgarian radical right and the anti-gender movement (Slavica, E6; Dragana, E7; Iva, E8), even though they have no concrete evidence to back this claim. On the other hand, my anti-gender interviewees deny such allegations, reminding that the central cleavage in Bulgarian politics is between pro-Western, and pro-Russian political forces, which, from their viewpoint, explains the liberal preoccupation with fictional Russian support (Aleksandar C9; Stoyan C14).

Finally, the WikiLeaks documents provide a more detailed insights into the inner workings of anti-gender movement organizations in Europe. They also point to Bulgarian ties with Western Europe. The Bulgarian parental movement which formed around Protestant communities in the late 2000s and later served as a basis for anti-gender campaigning seems to have formed transnational ties already in its early days. The ‘oppressive education system’ in Bulgaria, among other countries, is mentioned by ADF’s Roger Kiska already in 2011, in addition to a 2012 Bulgarian initiative against sexual education, and Viktor Kostov’s (ROD) collaboration with ADF on a case concerning homeschooling in the same year (The Intolerance Files 2021). Finally, as already mentioned, the central anti-gender movement figure in Bulgaria, Mihaela Djorgova of the Society and Values Association (SVA) attended the European Advocacy Academy as early as 2013. While one movement leader rejects collaboration and cooperation with any international organizations, stating that they do not receive any support from abroad and only rely on Bulgarians and maybe some individuals from abroad (Krasimir, C5), others

emphasize their increasing international contacts. Violeta (C12) suggest that they are cooperating with practically ‘all the transnational organizations’, boasting about anti-gender victories in Bulgaria as an example for other countries. Similarly, Valentina (C13) expresses ‘ambitions to gain more ground internationally’ and put their organization ‘on the map’. In fact, after the failure of the first ROD, its second iteration was named ROD International, precisely to demonstrate their collaboration with international organizations. This dualism in how international cooperation is framed reflects two different strategies. The first one aims to present the anti-gender movement as a national, grassroots actor supported by and embedded in the Bulgarian people, unlike the ‘Soros-funded elites’ and ‘deviants’. The second strategy aims to present the local movement as influential and successful, ready to export its national successes abroad. It seems like this difference in strategy might fit the central anti-gender cleavage (see Table 6). On the one hand, Protestant minorities are eager to reject any international contacts due to their already precarious reputation as ‘foreign sects’. On the other hand, Orthodox groups want to dispel their reputation as backward nationalists via international legitimation. However, more research should be done to test these initial findings. Finally, founders and presidents of four important SMOs in Bulgaria all list how inspiration from abroad was crucial to motivate them to start their own organizations. Aleksandar (C9) noted that watching how people were ‘fighting for those values in Western Europe where these processes were more advanced [...] gave us a lot of courage’. Another interviewee mentioned how one visit and a lecture from a US-based Protestant pastor inspired them to get involved with community work and to found what would grow to become one of the most important anti-gender organizations in Bulgaria (Svetlana, C7). Thus, there are various relational and non-relational mechanisms of diffusion and emulation of activist mobilization (della Porta & Tarrow, 2005) that played an important role in the emergence of anti-gender SMOs and actions in Bulgaria, all of which are of religious character.

6.3.3. Intramovement Conflict and Rivalry

With respect to a richness of internal conflicts, disagreements, and rivalry, the anti-gender movement is not particularly different compared to other social movements. However, the field of scholarship analyzing right-wing movements has privileged movement-counter-movement theory, with blind spots resulting from this binary view. In Table 6, I display the central cleavage

of the anti-gender movement in Bulgaria crucial in driving movement dynamics in terms of issues, action forms, and strategies.

Orthodox	Protestant
Nationalist	Universalist ¹¹
Welfarist	<i>Laissez-faire</i>
Partisan ¹²	Anti-partisan

Table 6 – The Central Cleavage in the Bulgarian Anti-gender Movement

The various disagreements within the Bulgarian anti-gender coalition mostly fit within the divide sketched above, as expressed by a vast majority of all interviewees, regardless of their own religious or political affiliation (Slavica, E6; Dimitar, C3; Asen, C4; Krasimir, C5; Nadezhda, C8; Iva, E8; Violeta, C12). The strongest apprehension is expressed by some Orthodox anti-gender leaders towards Protestant activists:

They have an ecumenist ideology, they want to attract Orthodox Christians, but they don't accept you as different – they want to make you like them. To evangelize. I find this very strange. They have hidden intentions and are not to be trusted. (Asen C4).

Such discourse, unsurprisingly, directly mirrors the BOC's rejection of non-Orthodox religions and ecumenism. On the other side, Protestant leaders denounce the nationalism of the traditional Orthodox far-right in Bulgaria as non-Christian because of their statism: "I don't think we have a right-wing conservative party based on Christian values in Bulgaria. Right-wing parties are too much leftist economically and more liberal in social topics – this is not close to Christian values" (Violeta, C12). Furthermore, some Protestant leaders reject nationalist anti-pride protests:

One year we did not do the March for Family here because other organizations were aggressive towards the LGBT minority. We cannot associate with an aggressive spirit; it is not okay. The LGBT people are also the creation of the same Creator and in many senses, they are sensitive, delicate, creative and have suffered [...] So probably there are two types of organizations. Some are more nationalistic and faux Christian and others are more Christian than nationalistic. (Nadezhda, C8)

The distinction between Christian (Protestant) and nationalist actors is therefore partly recognized within the movement itself and has important consequences for choosing action

¹¹ The term 'universalist' is used here to denote a preference of protestant anti-gender actors to use universal pro-family and pro-life framing instead of nationalist framing highlighting demographics and ethnic-specific national reproduction. The latter is more favoured by Orthodox nationalists.

¹² The terms 'partisan' and 'non-partisan' refer to the (non)preference of actors to cooperate with political parties.

forms, frames and forming alliances. Nevertheless, the extremeness of discourse against ‘sodomy’ is not in the slightest reserved for nationalist, Orthodox actors only. In addition, the rivalry between Orthodox and Protestant clergy and laity manifests itself in movement campaigns and activities. One local leader tells the story of how, after years of Protestant agitation within the Alphabet Day¹³ procession, Orthodox priests tried to take over the procession by marching in the front rows (Nadezhda, C8). Similarly, ROD international started organizing the March for the Christian Family in 2019, rivalling the Protestant-based March for Life due to disagreements on strategy and framing (Tatiana, C2). Finally, in a recently published book by a Bulgarian Orthodox theologian titled ‘Gender Stereotypes. An Orthodox Perspective’, Biser Bozhkov (2022) expresses a strong anti-ecumenical position, denouncing the Catholic and Protestant churches as guilty for the humanist revolution. Bozhkov continues to argue that humanism gave birth to all godless ideologies that put the individual at the center, falsely claiming that mankind can control and change its own nature. This anti-modernist position represents the discourse of a conservative branch of Bulgarian Orthodoxy and shows that the GI frame can be used not only to denounce the deviant homosexual/feminist other, but also rival Christian denominations – even when they would agree on their rejection of ‘gender ideology’.

Another source of strife within the Bulgarian anti-gender movement concerns conflicts over authority and control within newly forming and established NGOs. In early 2019, the largest anti-gender Facebook group against the National Strategy for the Child was formed which would eventually reach more than 200.000 members. Organized by several mothers without previous activist experience (Tatiana, C2, Valentina, C13), the group followed the logic of connective action, with disorganized actions, a lack of structure and fluctuating leadership (Tatiana, C2). A tension rose between Facebook administrators in charge of the group and leaders emerging from the first in-person meetings. This caused a rift within the movement, giving birth to two rival groups ROD (Parents United for Children) and BROD (Bulgarian Parents United for Children):

‘A fight began to decide which of the two groups is bigger, who is stronger. We were not collaborating anymore. But in the end, if you look at the results, we [ROD] have thousands of people coming to our protests and they [BROD] have maybe 20 or 30 people.’ (Tatiana, C2)

¹³ The Day of Bulgarian Alphabet, Bulgarian Enlightenment and Culture is a Bulgarian national holiday.

In addition, Facebook group members disagreed on how coordination and organizational issues would be resolved, with one group privileging *in situ* protest groups as leaders of the movement, and the other emphasizing the leading role of experts and lawyers capable of crafting smartly framed demands (Tatiana, C2). Finally, a particularly contentious case involved one leading member of the National Network for Parents – an ideologically diverse NGO from the early 2010s. He hijacked and misused the organization’s name to support the anti-gender cause in public statements and petitions, despite disagreement and rejection from the organization’s majority (Stoyan, C14). This episode also supports my previous findings on how the ideologically diverse parental movement was in part hijacked by anti-gender radicals. As the movement continued to grow in the post-2017 period, various far-right parties sought to infiltrate and co-opt the emerging grassroots parents-activists by offering them positions on their electoral lists. Whether NGOs and initiatives should cooperate with political parties, what form this cooperation should take, and which parties represent the movement’s goals best will become the central source of disagreement.

6.3.4. Protestant Associations and Orthodox Parties

Anti-gender actors in Bulgaria are weary of cooperation and open collaboration with political parties, due to a general anti-political sentiment, and a more particular distrust of parties in the broader society as corrupt. Two radical-right parties that have stood out as somewhat more consistent in advocating the anti-gender cause when compared to others are the previously mentioned VMRO and Vazrazhdane. Within a week of SVA’s public statement against the Istanbul Convention in December 2017, VMRO took up the issue. The United Patriots thereby came into direct conflict with GERB as its major partner in the coalition government and initiated an escalation of events that would end in the Constitutional Court’s rejection of the IC (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021). Nevertheless, other parties such as Volya and the Bulgarian Socialist Party, as well as some GERB members also took a conservative stance in opposing ‘gender ideology’. In general, most anti-gender organizations recognize, although reluctantly, that changing society requires at least some ‘access to the levers of influence’, and that their demands are, in fact, political (Krasimir, C5; Aleksandar, C9; Violeta, C12). What should the exact nature and intensity of politicization be? When should one act politically and when not? Which parties and institutions should one collaborate with? These questions are all highly contested within the movement.

There is a common agreement among the main anti-gender organizations from the two predominant factions – namely, ROD, SVA and NAPS – that staying open to conversation and some form of cooperation with political parties is a necessary and potentially beneficial strategy (Tatiana, C2; Krasimir, C5; Svetlana, C7; Nadezhda, C8; Aleksandar, C9; Violeta, C12, Valentina, C13). Most commonly, NGOs will present the broader public with their mission and vision statements and call for any party willing to support that goal to do so. This orientation towards loose goal-based support was predominant in the first period of movement emergence (2012 – 2017). On the other hand, ROD has more recently actively sought to promote its members as potential candidates on the electoral lists of right-of-center parties (Tatiana, C2). Despite different levels of engagement, the common strategy seems to be one of throwing a wide net:

We do not affiliate ourselves with any particular party and our goal is to see which party would be willing to listen to our concerns and possibly advance them in the places where they operate – the legislature, the government, and the courts... of course are independent. (Valentina C, 13)

I don't want our organization to be associated with any one or another political party in particular. (Svetlana, C7)

In a broader context of high electoral volatility and instable governments, not aligning their anti-gender efforts to a particular party is an understandable strategy. Nevertheless, ideology still seems to play a role in the choice of potential partners: ‘We had a lot of propositions from political parties. We were talking to parties like Ataka, Vazrazhdane, and VMRO. We did not put any effort into contacting the Socialist Party, but they would have probably been interested as well.’ (Tatiana, C2). However, despite a principled openness to collaboration, most anti-gender SMOs expressed distrust and doubt towards parties and carefully weigh the costs and benefits of entering any kind of relationship or interaction with them. In fact, one of the conflicts within ‘the old ROD’ which caused the founding of a new NGO, a bitter legal battle, and a loss of grassroots support was in part about the disagreement on whether the organization should cooperate with political parties (Asen, C4). Several leaders in the broader anti-gender movement insisted on shutting parties out since any identification with their brand might dissuade potential supporters (Tatiana, C2; Svetlana, C7). Moreover, Protestant groups are weary to collaborate with far-right parties because the latter’s core ideology is nationalism. Far-right parties in Bulgaria have attacked Protestants as ‘dangerous sects’ or are perceived to have ties to the secret services which have historically oppressed Protestant (and other) churches (Krasimir, C5; Dimitar, C3). As a result, one of the anti-gender leaders from ROD called Ataka

‘fanatical nationalists’ (Kostov, 2007). In addition, regardless of denomination, anti-gender SMOs are suspicious towards parties because of a perception of, and experience with, the exploitative nature of politics. Political parties will often co-opt the anti-gender agenda, take credit for the work of civil society, but will not follow up with substantial cooperation or policy proposals (Asen, C4; Svetlana, C7; Nadezhda, C8; Valentina, C13). Aleksandar (C9) expresses the dilemma most succinctly:

When engaging with political parties, an NGO is, on one hand, risking losing members or supporters, and, on the other hand, there is a risk that the political party will use them by not doing what they have promised – it's a question of trust. This happened to many organizations that were affiliated with GERB or VMRO.

As mentioned in the quote, trust is a crucial factor in movement – party relations and seems to be very hard to establish among various conservative actors. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Vazrazhdane was founded in 2014 after a splinter of the historically more successful VMRO by disgruntled high-ranking ex-members of the party. From an NGO perspective, choosing one of the two might mean closing the door for cooperation with the other. Finally, radical-right parties in Bulgaria are branded as (neo)fascist by Bulgarian media outlets and ‘liberals’, which means anti-gender organizations perceive a risk of getting branded as radical or fascist by association, or even as mere fascist party satellites (Krasimir, C5; Nadezhda, C8; Violeta, C12). Additionally, that such parties are rejected as not properly right-wing (Violeta C12) might also help explain what drove ROD’s Viktor Kostov to found a (defunct and unsuccessful) Christian Reformist Party to represent a (Protestant) vision of Christian politics. Kostov’s vision of conservative values and a ‘small state’ resist ‘the so-called “welfare state”, in which everyone is one family, and the providers of happiness are the rulers, elected by the people’ (Kostov, 2013). In conclusion, while familism is a common movement characteristic, there is disagreement on whether families should be supported primarily by the state or by the free associational life of charities and self-funded civil society. Organizations dominated by Orthodox nationalists or religiously diverse members seem to be more open to collaborating with (Orthodox nationalist) radical-right parties, while those rooted in Protestant communities are more reluctant to do so.

Finally, interviewees often reflect on their perception of the two traditionally mainstream parties in Bulgaria – the center-left Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and the center-right Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB). As previously mentioned, the leading faction of the Bulgarian Socialist Party under Kornelia Ninova had reneged on BSP’s support for the

Istanbul Convention and started consistently arguing against ‘gender ideology’ from early 2018. On one hand, this radical reversal of the BSP’s stance on the IC can be interpreted as a reflection of the ideological rift in the party between the pro-Russian, anti-gender faction, and the pro-Western, liberal faction (Dragana, E7; Cvetan C11). On the other hand, it is also an opportunistic strategy of bandwagoning on the widespread wave of protests and opposition to GERB that led to BSP’s initiation of an (unsuccessful) vote of no confidence for GERB’s government. Although no concrete cooperation has been established between the anti-gender movement and BSP beyond statements of mutual support for an anti-gender position, anti-gender leaders express an openness to cooperate and will gladly use BSP’s positions as proof that the Bulgarian people, as a whole, reject ‘gender ideology’ (Tatiana C2; Aleksandar C9; Valentina C13). On the other side of the spectrum, both anti-gender leaders and expert interviewees agree on GERB as an opportunistic, corrupt, and syncretic, populist party which either does not have an ideology, or is considered mildly conservative (Slavica, E6; Aleksandar, C9; Iva, E8). More importantly, GERB is seen as primarily loyal to ‘Brussels’, the European Union, and Western Christian Democrats – it responds to popular pressure on ‘gender ideology’ only if it endangers their domestic legitimacy and electoral prospects (Asen, C4; Dragana, E7).

In conclusion, whereas the BOC lacks a strong doctrinal and structural footing in civil society to actively aid anti-gender collective action beyond public pleas and letters, minor Protestant churches wholeheartedly support anti-gender actors in terms of resource mobilization. Religious competition and strife between the two denominations thus influences movement dynamics significantly. Additionally, Protestant-based groups have been receiving support and have cooperated with (Western) transnational anti-gender organizations from the early days of the movement, and some were even inspired to mobilize by examples from other countries. Despite a common enemy in ‘gender ideology’, various organizations disagree on a variety of issues, including ideology and socioeconomic policy, strategy, and authority. These divisions go beyond the denominational discord previously mentioned, and result in loose, *ad hoc* cooperation and a strong division of labor. However, it is the denominational difference that prevents a strong common collective identity, making anti-gender politics in Bulgaria take a coalitional, rather than a social movement form. Finally, civil society groups cooperate mostly with far-right parties but are weary of identifying themselves with any particular actor. Since far-right parties in Bulgaria are influential and numerous, their attempts to co-opt anti-gender organizations for their goals are both a risk and an opportunity for the movement. Anti-gender

actors also utilize the political crises and electoral volatility to oppose GERB as the central opponent of the movement, perceived as a corrupt party in service of EU interests.

7. CROATIA – A CATHOLIC MOVEMENT

The second case under analysis is the predominantly Catholic EU member – Croatia. As we have seen in Chapter 4, the moderating pressures of EU and the resulting liberalizing tendencies of mainstream parties clashed with a strong conservative faction of the Catholic church and a growing lay civil society ready to wield political influence to stop ‘gender’. I start by looking at how this civil society was built, which networks and groups of actors were central, and what their preferred modes of collective action were. Then, in the second subchapter, I analyze the ideology and framing of the Croatian anti-gender movement, particularly as it pertains to my main research questions, namely, the role of right-wing radicalism and religion. Finally, I address the issue of relations, including both cooperation and conflict within the movement, relations with the Catholic church, and with political parties.

7.1. The Power of Prayer – Organizational Structures and Actions

7.1.1. Organized Laity and Clerical Infrastructure

The Croatian anti-gender movement is built on three pillars in terms of organizational structures. First, a dense network of more or less formal Catholic associations, prayer groups and movement communities. Second, the outward-facing citizen’s initiatives and non-governmental organizations tasked with collective action and movement building. Third are movement-parties attempting to overcome the rigid political opportunities hostile towards civil society influence via electoral participation. The second group is crucial in movement mobilization, making up the central social movement organizations. As literature has shown (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Lavizzari, 2020), this includes both previously existing conservative and pro-life associations, as well as new ones. One of the stated goals of the Croatian movement, in fact, has been to recreate a kind of Catholic, conservative civil society that was “destroyed during communism” (Markić, 2023). According to my interviewees, the local Catholic parishes and the diaconates play an important organizational role in anti-gender

contention. Since Catholic deacons live among the proverbial flock, they are more attuned to the needs and everyday lives of the lay faithful and families making up the local parishes.

“Cooperation is good with individual priests from organizationally lower levels, where a kind of network of networks is created. So, we have some people with whom we cooperate like pastors, priests, nuns, chaplains, et cetera, but as soon as we reach higher levels, nothing – chiuso – we can’t do much there.” (Josip A10)

Furthermore, the single most agreed upon claim among interview participants is the central role that the organized lay faithful play in the broader movement. Existing networks of religious and prayer communities, parents, family, youth, and students – together making up the formal and informal associational universe of the Catholic church – are crucial structures for rallying the activists of the anti-gender movement. While anti-gender SMOs from which most of my interviewees come from, such as In the Name of Family, Voice of Parents for Children, or the March for Life, self-identify as secular, they rely on a nexus of activist and politically mobilized clergymen and lay faithful who act as brokers between them and the higher echelons of the Catholic church in Croatia. As could be expected, representatives of those organizations that openly self-identify as religiously inspired, foster stronger relations with the clergy. This is particularly true for the anti-abortion actors such as 40 Days for Life and Students for Life. In some cases, charismatic and well-respected spiritual directors¹⁴ can wield significant influence over Catholic organizations. One such example is the politicization of the Student Catholic Center 'Palma' (SKAC Palma) in Zagreb, steered by a particularly activist friar, Ike Mandurić – an outspoken conservative figurehead famous in the broader Church and public. Under his spiritual guidance, SKAC Palma put its student volunteers at the disposal of various initiatives and referendums with a clear political character. In any case – covertly or publicly – both clergy and laymen have tried to create umbrella organizations or entities within the Church to coordinate and control movement activities. Matej (A6) personally initiated one such attempt:

“At the Council for Laity of the Croatian Episcopal Conference, we strongly held that a broad network of laypeople from all parishes should be created for activities such as the marriage referendum – although we were not planning the referendum then. However, Željka and Ladislav who were creating HRAST on the side initiated a referendum and thus prompted the creation of an ad-hoc network of laypersons. But

¹⁴ Spiritual direction is a particular form of clergy support, usually as an interpersonal relationship with laypersons which facilitates their closeness to God and the Divine.

the network was not under the control of the [Church] hierarchy, and I held that it should have been.”

Struggles over leadership positions in the movement and disagreements on strategy between clergy and laypersons, as well as within both groups, abounded from the very beginning of the movement around 2008. On one hand, some actors would prefer a more structured, hierarchical model of movement coordination organized under clergy leadership. On the other hand, others prefer civil society based, loosely structured *ad hoc* cooperation around specific issues and actions. As stronger movement SMOs and parties formed over time, the latter model seems to have prevailed. Finally, movement parties like HRAST and In the Name of Family have been created as structures for advancing the anti-gender goal in institutional and electoral politics. Interestingly, similarly to other recent studies (see Caiani & Císař, 2019), my PEA data contradicts previous research findings showing how the representation of radical-right parties in parliament substitutes or eliminates protest mobilization, unlike the synergic rise of both in case of the left (Giugni et al., 2005; Hutter, 2014). As we can see in Figure 6, protest mobilization rose after movement-party formation and parliamentary successes of the radical right from 2015 onward.

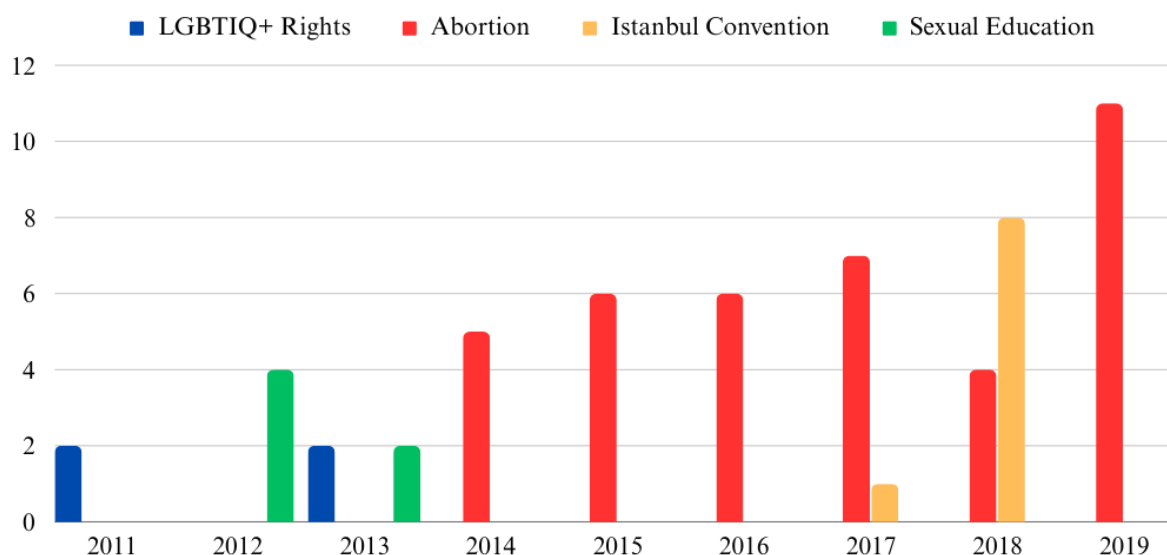


Figure 6 – Dynamics of Protest Activity in Croatia and Issues over the Years

This finding might point towards a specificity of the anti-abortion faction choosing a long-term strategy of cultural change as opposed to the electoral competition undertaken by anti-gender entrepreneurs, or to a broader specificity of the anti-gender radical right when compared to the anti-immigrant one on which the radical-right movement party literature was developed. These

issues will be addressed in more detail in the section on relations between movements and parties.

In addition, we should not overemphasize the role of organizational structures or logics in the Croatian anti-gender movement, even if the latter has the most developed social movement industry compared to my other cases. Given the *ad hoc* tactics and diversity of actors within the anti-gender network, organizations and initiatives are often downplayed by movement leaders (Matej, A6; Josip, A10) as legal formalities. Besides INF or anti-abortion NGOs like Betlehem, we can hardly talk about rich organizational histories, identities or internal logics that would bear on movement trajectories, although this might change in the future. Finally, organizational structures themselves are often mere strategic tools, a kind of offline astroturfing tactic of portraying a highly diversified and grassroots movement as we shall see in subsequent sections.

7.1.2. Perceptions of Political and Discursive Opportunities

The overwhelmingly agreed upon obstacle or constraint posed on their activities mentioned by my interviewees was one relating to the media's treatment of the movement. At the least, the mainstream media, including newspapers, TV channels and radios ignored and failed to report on anti-gender activities. At most, they are perceived to have actively manipulated and twisted the actors' words through decontextualization and malicious interpretation, humiliated and insulted movement members using terms like 'clerofascists' or 'Catholibans'¹⁵. This prompted movement leaders to adopt various mitigating strategies: moderating their discourse, continuously changing the persons and organizations presenting the movement, and establishing alternative media such as the news website Narod.hr.

With their new alternative media running at full steam together with a diversified social media presence, anti-gender leaders started framing themselves as the real anti-establishment actors representing the will of the people against the two biggest left and right-wing parties throughout the years – HDZ and SDP. Although the first collective action was undertaken during HDZ's conservative government (2008-2011), SDP was in power during the public emergence of the anti-gender contention (2011-2015), causing backlash against its socially liberal positions and policies. Thus, in the early days of the movement, the political opportunities in terms of powerful party allies were quite open for the movement. As a conservative opposition party,

¹⁵ A portmanteau of 'Catholic' and 'Taliban', indicating an ultraconservative ideology of the movement.

HDZ, whether explicitly or tacitly, supported, agitated, and helped the anti-gender movement's campaigns for a heteronormative definition of marriage and against the health and sexual education (Matej, A6, Katarina, A9, Gabrijel, A5). However, once HDZ got back to power after 2016 under the leadership of the moderate pro-EU Andrej Plenković, the party again became the central movement opponent. This was no surprise for anti-gender leaders, who had already been met with resistance from older pre-2010 HDZ governments, one example being minister Primorac's rejection of their abstinence-based sexual education as 'old-fashioned' (Luka, A12). Furthermore, as the movement developed towards movement-party formation, its relationship with the Church entered a phase of strategic risk. Since anti-gender parties threaten HDZs electoral score, church-state relations, politically embodied in a tacit alliance between the clergy and HDZ (Bellamy, 2002; Čepo, 2022), are an important barrier in the movement's POS, affecting its continued collaboration with Catholic clergy.

Thus, although SDP remains the central ideological enemy, the movement actors' perceptions of political opportunities have been primarily conditioned by their assessments of HDZ as the ruling center-right party. HDZ is perceived as an interest-driven opportunistic party in service of Brussels that does not care about family values and, like SDP, is a structure representing the corrupt establishment (Antun, A11; Luka, A12; Borna, A14). Interestingly, although SDP supports the feminist and LGBTIQ+ movement in Croatia and has even legislated civil unions for same-sex partners in 2015, they do not appear as a main opponent in my interviews. HDZ is the main competitor of anti-gender movement (parties) trying to bring new issues to the political agenda. One early movement leader notes that this was a central part of their strategy from the very beginning:

We from GROZD [the Voice of Parents for Children] realized that HDZ absolutely covered the whole so-called Christian Democratic scene... That is the reason why we decided to start our own party. We concluded that in the future, elections will be won on issues such as gender ideology and abortion. (Marko, A18)

The anti-gender movement in Croatia is thus also a political movement created to cover some of previously unaddressed issues in society, or issues that the mainstream right has abandoned. The mainstream right, embodied in HDZ, recognized them as a threat aiming to win over a more radical part of their voting base, and started forming a political *cordon sanitaire* against the movement, especially after 2016. My interviewees list a series of actions they perceive as repressive, including attacks through the media, denying legal validity to some of their referendum signatures, delegitimizing them as political and public actors, denying them public

funding, and even downright threats of repression and summons to police stations for informative talks (Marija, A3). Finally, it is important to note that institutional and governmental hostility is predominantly mentioned by actors who campaigned within the political arena proper, with referenda aiming to change laws and electoral participation. The anti-gender, and mostly pro-life SMOs focusing on community organizing deny administrative or political barriers to their actions, including those engaging in anti-abortion prayers in front of hospitals. As we shall see in the following sections, perceptions of POS and DOS affected movement choices and trajectories in complex and contradictory ways, as well as their repertoire of action.

7.1.3. Anti-gender Campaigns

We can define social movement campaigns as strategic, coordinated series of actions undertaken by movement actors with the aim of achieving specific objectives related to a particular sociopolitical issue. Unlike individual actions or *ad hoc* interventions, campaigns usually involve sustained mobilization of resources over a relatively extended period of time. A single online petition drafted by an actor would thereby not qualify as a campaign, even if prefaced as one, but as an individual action. Relying on data triangulation, I hereby cover the central anti-gender campaigns undertaken in Croatia. What are the specificities and innovative moves of anti-gender actors when compared to traditional radical-right repertoires and frames on the one hand, and religious ones on the other? In what ways do transnational alliances and clerical support contribute to anti-gender campaigns?

The 60th anniversary of the UN's Declaration on Human Rights in 2008 provided the Croatian Catholic activists with an opportunity for their first proper debut in the national spotlight. They announced a state-wide campaign called 'I am Signing the Declaration' (*Potpisujem deklaraciju*), calling for the defense of family values, heterosexual marriage, and protection of life from conception by invoking the corresponding articles of the Declaration. The campaign was spearheaded by Ladislav Ilčić from GROZD, an influential Catholic lay activist with international ties. Together with other NGOs from the Catholic associational sphere, he organized the signing of a petition reaffirming a Catholic perspective of the Declaration with extensive help of Catholic parishes, and support from the Croatian Episcopal Conference. The declaration was a successful demonstration of the political potential of organized laity – over two-hundred thousand signatures were collected. The campaign itself was a brainchild of a new

transnational forum of European Christian conservatives that Ilčić was a member of – the European Forum for Human rights and the Family. It was formed by representatives of over 15 countries to create a kind of shadow celebration of the UN's Declaration 'from a Christian inspiration' (Crespo, 2008). This campaign set the stage for an anti-gender wave of mobilization in the years to come, revealing a new strategy of politics that relies on discursive secularization, human rights, and demonstrative, non-violent social movement action. It is also particularly important since it demonstrates that movement mobilization started not in opposition to a left-wing government, but during right-wing accommodation of EU accession criteria. In fact, HDZ's PM Jadranka Kosor was considered as one of the main culprits for the introduction of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression as grounds for discrimination in 2008 (Marija, A3; Marko, A18).

Unlike *Potpisujem deklaraciju*, the "I Was an Embryo, too" (*I ja sam bio embrij*) campaign in 2012 was politically reactive. It targeted the left-wing government's proposed Medically Assisted Reproduction Act by arguing against embryo freezing for artificial insemination as a violation of the right to life from conception. Spearheaded by Krešimir Miletić and the ultraconservative NGO Vigilare, the campaign used a vast variety of action forms, including public letters, petitions, press conferences, legal and legislative opinions, emailing MPs, organizing public forums and lectures, and media production. The campaign was supported not only by Catholic bishops, but also by the oppositional HDZ, particularly its conservative faction that invited the initiative to present the issue to the Croatian parliament. The somewhat technical nature of the issue, the broad popular support and compassion for couples unable to conceive without artificial insemination helped defeat the campaign and the law was successfully passed, marking an important defeat for the anti-gender movement. The same year, continuing into 2013, several initiatives, including: "Stay Away from their Childhood", "The Unreconciled", and "Defend the Constitution – don't Give them Our Kids" mobilized in an overarching campaign against the 4th module of the announced health education curriculum for schools concerning sexual education. This time, a larger network of NGOs collaborated in various activities, including GROZD, Center for the Renewal of Culture, and Vigilare. For the first time, anti-gender actors brought contention to the streets. Public demonstrations and performances of protesting plush toys signified attacks on children's innocence, warning against the sexualization of children, pornography, pedophilia, and homosexuality. The campaign was supported by the HDZ and the Episcopal Conference, with Catholic schools mobilizing to boycott the implementation of the curriculum (Glas Slavonije, 15 December

2012), and parents threatening to withdraw their children from mandatory classes. An internationally infamous conservative pseudoscientist Judith Reisman was invited to speak at universities and even the Croatian Parliament against the dangers of sexual education. The Constitutional Court suspended the implementation of the education program due to procedural mistakes, giving the anti-gender movement its first significant victory.

The movement's biggest victory up to date came in 2013, with anticipatory countermobilization (Dorf & Tarrow, 2018) against the left-wing government's intention to legalize same-sex unions. A newly formed citizen's initiative 'In the Name of Family' was formed by key lay Catholic, anti-gender leaders and organizers. The initiative's stated goal was to protect marriage as a union of a man and a woman, to promote family values against the backdrop of increasing devaluation of the traditional family. Exploiting the political opportunity opened by the ruling elites eager to eliminate the referendum participation threshold to ensure popular support for EU accession (Petričušić, Čehulić & Čepo, 2017), INF announced a referendum to constitutionally define marriage as a heterosexual union. Sixty-five percent of referendum participants supported this definition, even though they made up only twenty-five percent of the electorate. The campaign was directly and operationally backed by transnational actors such as CitizenGO and even state actors such as the Hungarian government sent messages of support. Several months prior to the campaign, movement leaders attended the European Advocacy Academy, organized by the conservative advocacy NGO European Dignity Watch (WikiLeaks Intolerance Network, 2021). INF received over seventeen thousand euros for 'campaign management' from CitizenGO in 2013 (Ćimić, 2021). Additionally, all political parties right-of-center backed the campaign, including HDZ, and the Croatian Episcopal Conference, with churches providing their spaces as grounds for signature collecting and movement logistics.

In parallel to these campaigns, the anti-abortion faction of the movement was experiencing its own revival. A local chapter of the US-based 40 Days for Life organization was initiated in 2014 with the help of lay Catholics and clergymen previously active in the 'apostolate for life'. Their bi-yearly prayer and vigil campaigns against abortion in front of hospitals brought new action forms to anti-gender contestation, including a focus on local awareness raising, cultural events, community service, religious processions, media production and even sports events. Both clergy-members and right-wing parties expressed support, despite the organization's strong rejection of partisan affiliation. Although anti-abortion campaigning intensified after the marriage referendum victory as a kind of issue refocus of the movement, attacks on women's reproductive rights were already brewing for a couple of years. Fake abortion clinics dissuading

women from terminating their pregnancy started appearing around 2012 (Benačić, 2014). The year 2013 brought the “One of Us” European Citizen’s Initiative (ECI) against embryo freezing to Croatia, as well as the founding of ‘Choose Life’, a local SaveOne Europe chapter headed by a Protestant anti-abortionist Anita Jovanović. In 2016, a group of NGOs, prayer communities and faith-based initiatives led by In the Name of Family organized the first March for Life in Zagreb. Campaigning focused mostly around march organizing, press releases and conferences, and musical performances. The visual and political identity of the March mirrored elements of both the Pride Parade and religious processions such as the annual Marian Processions for Life. The March focused on an affirmative message of promoting the “dignity of unborn children” and the protection of life from conception. Importantly, the March opposes abortion but does not demand a legal ban. Clerical support for the campaign was and remains widespread, including bishops attending the march, and Catholic media promoting it. The event became an important place for (radical) right-wing members of parliament and politicians to demonstrate their support for the anti-abortion cause.

Although the March was central in revitalizing anti-gender movement action after the post-referendum stagnation from 2013, it was another reactive campaign that brought tens of thousands of conservatives and radicals to the streets. While most of the previous campaigns have rallied against ‘gender ideology’ to some extent, the first one explicitly mobilizing against the notion of ‘gender’ itself was the campaign against the ratification of the Istanbul convention in 2017, organized by the citizen’s initiatives ‘The Truth about the Istanbul Convention’ and ‘Croatia against the Istanbul Convention’. The campaign was run by established movement leaders and relied on the existing infrastructure of supporters created by GROZD, Vigilare, and other less known ‘patriotic’ and lay-Catholic associations. They boasted support from the European Christian Political Movement, self-described as “the only European political party explicitly promoting Christian values in politics” (ECPM, n.d.). Some of the largest anti-gender protests with tens of thousands of people rallied in Zagreb and Split against the alleged dangers of ‘gender’ as defined in the Convention, with strong support from all right-wing parties, the Croatian Episcopal Conference, and even the conservative faction within the ruling HDZ that was pushing for ratification. The campaign was a bitter defeat for the anti-gender movement as the IC was ratified by a HDZ-majority parliament, albeit with an interpretive statement added to the text of the IC stating that the document does not entail introducing gender ideology into Croatia. Even worse for the movement, their subsequent signature collection campaign for a referendum on the issue was rejected by the government since they fell short of collecting the

required number of signatures by a few thousand. Having faced a strict closure of POS after the fall of the movement-friendly nationalist leader of HDZ Tomislav Karamarko in 2016, the political wing of the movement decided to increase its own chances of assuming power instead of relying on coalitions. Organized by NGO leaders and supporters of INF together with a new generation of lay Catholics not as publicly exposed in previous actions, the movement attempted two referendum campaigns to reform the Croatian electoral law – “Let’s Choose Parliamentarians by Name and Surname” in 2014 and “The People Decide” in 2018. Since they are not related to anti-gender issues, they will not be analyzed here in detail. However, the campaigns demonstrate a more political, electoral appetite of the movement, aiming to overcome the constricting elements of POS, namely, the electoral threshold and closed party lists.

In sum, three important conclusions can be made from the analysis of anti-gender campaigns in Croatia. First, whether from the top of the hierarchy or local priests engaged in contention, the Catholic church lends the support for anti-gender campaigning in the form of cadres, infrastructure, media coverage and political pressure on both the government and the general public. Second, transnational anti-gender organizations and coalitions of Christian right actors have been a factor in local contention since the very beginning, and local SMOs frequently link their collective action with European anti-gender efforts. Third, during its very brief time in opposition, the HDZ helped support the rise of anti-gender mobilization in the early 2010s as a means of weakening the government of their main competitor, the LGBT-friendly Social Democratic Party. However, HDZ is internally split, with its moderate pro-EU leadership reacting in a hostile manner towards the movement, especially its more partisan projects. Having unpacked the anatomy of the anti-gender cycle of protest campaigns in Croatia, I continue by turning to the anti-gender repertoire of contention, i.e. the specific action forms used in and beyond the particular campaigns. Action repertoires demonstrate both the centrality of religion in movement mobilization and the transformation of explicit homo/transphobia into more covert forms of family politics.

7.1.4. Action Forms and Protest Events

The history of right-wing protesting in Croatia mostly concerns various forms of demonstrations performed by war veteran groups, nationalists and football hooligans supported by radical-right parties, on occasion accompanied by violence or threats of violence. Prior to

the emergence of anti-gender mobilization, both Zagreb and Split Pride parades were attacked by counter-protesters on various occasions, but homophobic hate crimes such as these subsided over the years. The last important instance, and the only one registered in my protest event analysis, was the first Split Pride in 2011, when around ten thousand counter-protesters confronted around 150 Pride participants, throwing stones, ashtrays, tomatoes, bottles, and firecrackers at them (Pavičić, 2011). In this sense, the anti-gender movement marks a paradigmatic shift in voicing opposition to LGBT rights. None of the protest events organized by anti-gender groups contain violent actions – a finding which is somewhat surprising from the viewpoint of existing works on radical-right repertoires (Caiani et al., 2012), but consistent with findings on religious, Cristian and anti-gender campaigning (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Anti-gender collective action in the streets and public spaces mostly consists of public prayers and vigils, marches, and demonstrations, as illustrated in Figure 7.

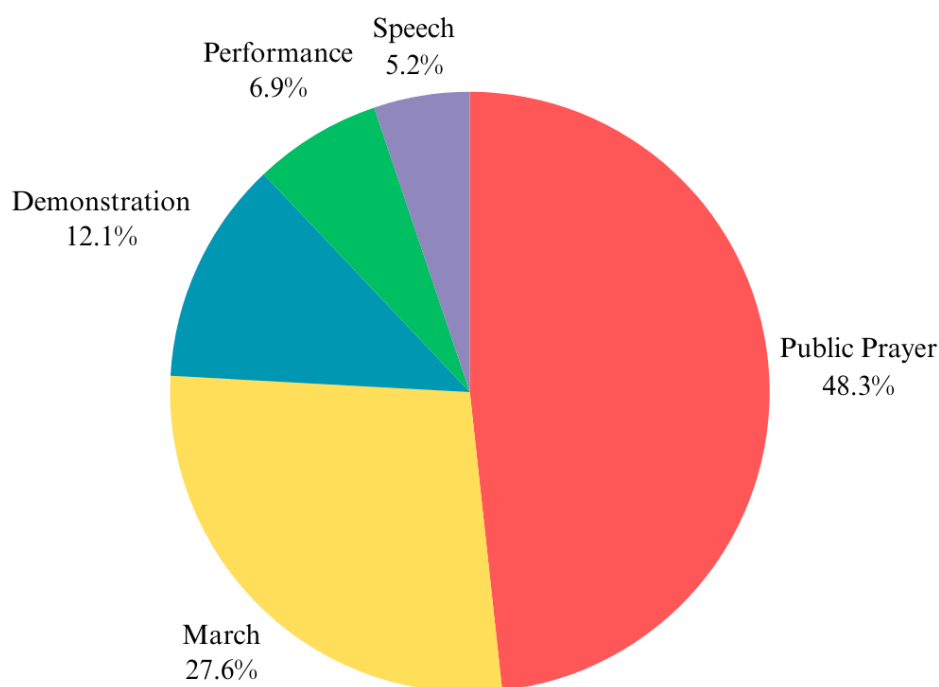


Figure 7 – Anti-gender Protest Forms in Croatia

Almost half of all forms of action were religious in nature. Specifically, 40 Days for Life widely uses public prayer to contest abortion by holding vigils in front of hospitals. Granted, a silent prayer by a dozen participants does not resemble a typical political protest that is usually associated with loud claims-making of masses confronting the seats of power. Nevertheless, it is an important part of the anti-gender repertoire, and fits my definitional criteria of a protest event, given that it is performed in the public and the initiative leaders themselves define

abortion as a collective social problem to be resolved through collective public action. In addition, the initial overview of the repertoires used by the anti-gender movement requires further exploration since ‘secular’ forms of action such as demonstrations and marches are highly imbued with religious meaning, symbols, and practices. For example, the March for Life resembles Christian processions, with participants singing religious songs and praying, carrying religious flags, symbols, and statues (Gergorić & Tranfić, forthcoming). The growth of two initiatives – the March for Life and 40 Days for Life – since the mid-2010 is the clearest rising trend in Croatian anti-gender politics (see Figure 8).

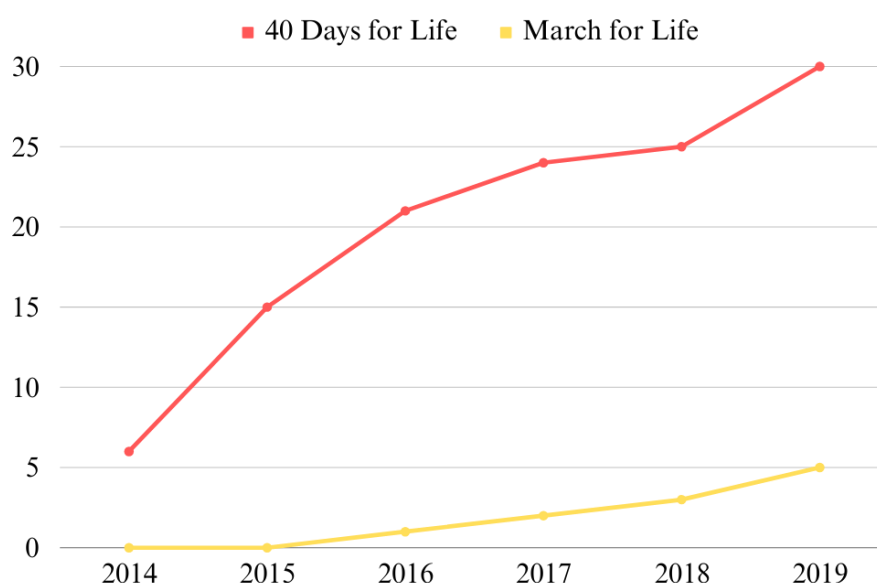


Figure 8 – Number of Cities in Croatia with Anti-abortion Activities

Only these two organizations, both of which are of religious and partially religious character, have organized two thirds of all anti-gender protest events in Croatia. This might be the most important finding from PEA, since it hints, when triangulated with interview data, at a higher capacity of mobilization of faith-based and Church-related actors, when compared to other actors. In fact, the Marches for Life in the biggest cities attract several thousand people – a solid number – given that Croatia’s largest city, Zagreb, has around eight-hundred thousand inhabitants. Arguably, it is precisely these least political, affirmative, and primarily cultural strategies aimed at changing the value system (Alimi, 2015) that have sustained the movement. It is also the movement sector which is most prone to using religious repertoires and self-identifies openly as Catholic.

When it comes to non-religious protest forms, marches and demonstrations make up the second largest group of anti-gender actions. In the early days of the movement, protests were scarcely

attended. The first PEA-registered anti-gender protest in Croatia attracted around one hundred participants only, mostly lay Catholics, protesting against ‘Christianophobia’ in 2011 in support of a school catechist indicted for discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Barukčić, 2011). However, mobilization of movement supporters in public spaces took other forms, as volunteers collected signatures for various referendums, particularly after the successful 2013 marriage referendum. In fact, the movement established a tradition of marching with boxes of collected signatures during pre-referendum campaigns to submit them to the authorities for counting, projecting their preferred collective identity of a moderately conservative civil society fighting for popular democracy. However, mass protests with more than five thousand participants were only seen during the contention against the Istanbul Convention and the allegedly authoritarian imposition of a harmful, unnatural ‘gender ideology’. The magnitude of the protests also reflects its broader anti-government character, with radical-right factions of HDZ joining in to challenge Plenković’s leadership, ‘betrayal’ of Christian democracy and support for the Convention.

Demonstrations, marches and other forms of protest make up only a part of the repertoire of actions undertaken by anti-gender SMOs. Like with other social movements – and particularly the more professionalized civil society organizations – most of activist time is spent on day-to-day activities ranging from social media management and writing emails to organizing events and workshops. When analyzing the different action forms as aggregated from interview accounts, the first important finding is a confirmation of a lack of any *confrontational* or *violent* actions, distinguishing the anti-gender movement from other radical-right movements. Secondly, *demonstrative* actions, including not only protests elaborated in the previous section but also petitions, public letters, strategic litigation and referenda organizing are as equally important as *conventional* action forms. The latter consists mostly of press releases and conferences, submitting legal and political opinions in public consultation processes, but also lobbying, and emailing MPs. Importantly, organizing popular referendums entails massive, complex campaigns that themselves contain various action forms. Signature collecting builds movement solidarity, experience, and collective identity; media is produced to effectively communicate the frames and claims; submitting collected signatures is transformed into demonstrative marches.

However, and somewhat surprisingly, *expressive* events focusing on activists, sympathizers and local lay persons organized to increase group cohesion, and share information are exceedingly important compared to other action forms. These are primarily public forums with an

educational, awareness raising function, performed in parishes, and local public spaces. In addition, non-political (in the strict sense of the term) actions are as important as political ones. This includes community services, mostly provided by anti-abortion volunteers for pregnant women, knowledge production and dissemination such as video-making, book presentations and public film screenings. Creating and sharing alternative sources of information, translating Western Christian right multimedia to agitate on gender issues, reproductive health, and abortion make up the important prep-work for recruiting militants and sustaining collective identity. Expressive activities complement the more political ones, with awareness raising being one of the prerequisites for mobilizing sympathizers and recruiting supporters to collect petition and referendum signatures – a particularly time-consuming activity. Activists also engage in community work, collecting cribs and diapers for young mothers, organize courses on parenting, hold educational seminars on how to increase chances for conception. Such activities and spaces become social networks ripe for politicization on ‘pro-family’ issues. They also show that advocating ‘family values’ is not just a cunning smokescreen for whitewashing politicized homo/transphobia. Rather, it stems from a dense community of networks of parents, families, and lay Catholics with a specific understanding of community and social life. These community-oriented activities correspond to the movement strategy of long-term, ‘silent’ cultural change. Moreover, this finding points to the importance of internalist analyses of radical-right movements, since community-based, expressive activities mostly remain outside of newspapers but are important as locations of movement-building.

Finally, different factions of the movement prefer different forms of action. Specifically, anti-abortion actors are focused less on immediate political change due to perceived lack of available political opportunities, and thus prefer long-term, community-oriented work. Conversely, what we could call *anti-gender proper* NGOs, engage more often in conventional and demonstrative politics. Since their aims mostly consist in resisting progressive legislation on gender and sexual equality, choosing legal and political action to prevent such changes is more appropriate. Finally, an important movement action form – the public prayers or vigils against abortion in front of hospitals – resists an easy, unambivalent classification. On the one hand, vigils are public, demonstrative meetings where participants hold anti-abortion posters, clearly making a political statement. On the other hand, these vigils also have deep spiritual meaning for their participants. They are a continuation of prayer rituals ‘for life’ performed by the same teams of activists in private spaces and churches (Gabrijel, A5; Ante, A22). As such, these forms of action have a strong expressive aspect fostering in-group cohesion and collective identification.

This ambivalence of a religious-political act might help explain why it is one the most important action forms of the Croatian anti-gender movement, and the only one that has been mushrooming in recent years.

In conclusion, Catholic lay networks have served as the backbone of anti-gender movement mobilization. Over time, SMOs and movement parties became increasingly independent from the Church, entering the political battlefield. Importantly, the traditional mainstream media proved to be the central barrier to the movement's emergence within the national sphere. Its relationship with the ruling HDZ has been much more complex and is crucial for defining movement emergence and trajectory. While HDZ initially helped the birth of the movement when in opposition, the new pro-EU leadership after 2016 grew increasingly hostile towards the movement's political ambitions. According to most interviewees, the movement largely grew as a reaction to the moderation and perceived betrayal of HDZ of its conservative voters and has been supported by radical-right factions of HDZ. Faced with an increasingly hostile HDZ, the anti-abortion faction of the movement turned to less political and more cultural, affirmative, and explicitly religious forms of action. In addition to demonstrative and conventional political action, expressive events focusing on awareness raising and collective identity building have proven to be crucial in movement mobilization. The latter are rooted in dense lay Catholic communities forming a new type of parental, familial identity politics. The anti-gender rejuvenation of the radical right visible in structures and actions through a transformation from far-right parties, war veteran groups and (threats of) violence towards middle-class familial identity politics is even more evident in the movement's ideology and framing.

7.2. A 'Festival of Democracy' – Ideology and Framing

7.2.1. Universal Values and Common Sense

To analyze the ideology and framing used in anti-gender contention in the Croatian case, I interpret the results of twenty-two interviews conducted in Croatia. Specifically, I investigate anti-gender leaders' ideas, values, and self-understanding of their social activism. Figure 9 displays the values the interviewees expressed as central to their organizational efforts, with the N=39 demonstrating the total number of values listed by respondents when asked¹⁶. The proportions presented in Figure 10 should be understood only as a visual indication of the

¹⁶ See Appendix 4 for a breakdown of the different composite categories.

occurrence of the different values across interviews, given the limits of quantifying interpretive interview data. Despite this limitation, there is a clear pattern: the vast majority of responses are secular values expressed within a human rights master frame, including family and ‘universal human values’, justice, and human rights.

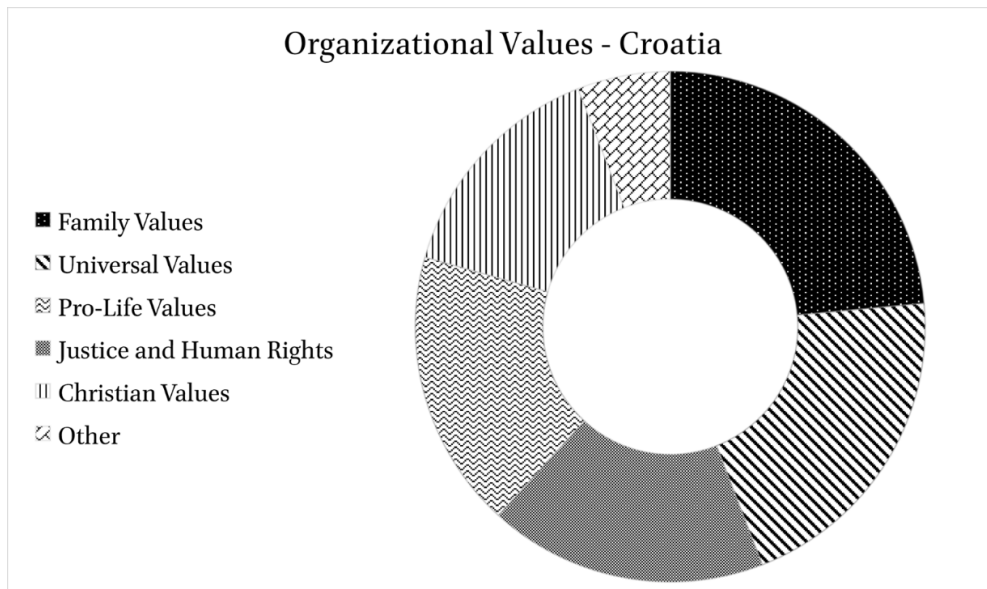


Figure 9 - Anti-gender SMO Values in Croatia [N=39]

The thematic analysis of organizational documents corroborates the central importance of family, pro-life, and ‘universal’ values for the SMOs under analysis. The movement platform HRAST and its member, the Family Party, identify the family as a ‘fundamental form of human community’ [...] ‘The family precedes any other form of organizing of societies. Natural human sociability is found in the family.’ (Hrast, 2011; Family Party, 2010). Several organizations accentuate the protection of family values and the improvement of the quality of marital and familial life as central goals (GROZD, 2015; Hrast, 2011; Udruga BAS, 2022). More explicitly, INF calls for ‘empowering families to take on the role of a social subject and [...] the responsible participation of families in the cultural, social and public life’ (INF, 2020). Family values are part of a broader goal of preserving ‘universal’, ‘general’, and ‘human’ values (Family Party, 2010). Stemming from the importance of human dignity and family, the protection of ‘life from conception until natural death’ is another common movement goal, particularly for anti-abortion SMOs. In addition, HRAST identifies ‘human life’ as the ‘highest value’ from which all other values concerning family policies should be derived (Hrast, 2011). Interestingly, in contrast to religious nationalism, almost no references are made to natality or demography as issues. Among different organizations, only HRAST recognizes the importance

of ‘raising awareness for demographic problems [...] and increasing natality in Croatia’ in a passing note (Hrast 2011, para. 16).

While all respondents stated that religion and faith play a vital role for them personally, most respondents downplay its role in activism. Ivan (A1) notes that religion is only one among many viewpoints that reach the same conclusion about the importance of protecting life, others being anthropology, philosophy, science, and biology. The primary way respondents frame their values as part of a broader set of principles is by insisting on the universality of Christian values as binding for everyone (not just Christians). As Ana-Marija (A16) puts it, ‘it is a simple question of life, a matter concerning all religions, nations, and humanity as a whole’. Similarly, Marija (A3) stated: ‘I think Christian values are actually good for society, for humans, both individuals and the collective’. Finally, Gabrijel’s (A5) understanding demonstrates a more explicitly anti-pluralist, illiberal understanding:

When someone says ‘conservative values’ it’s as if there are different worlds of values, but I don’t think there are. There is only one spectrum of colors, you can’t invent another. One can try to mix colors, but [like colors] there is a hierarchy of values – one can easily destroy it by mixing them.

According to Luka (A12), ‘all monotheistic religions, at least from a Catholic viewpoint, support the same values that, in their core, are *always valid*’. As Kulenović (2013) argued, some Catholics are not inclined to accept a pluralism of values in society since they view those disagreeing with them as holding invalid beliefs. Christianity and religion are significantly less present in organizational documents compared to ‘universal family values’ and appear in three different forms. First, Christianity predominantly figures as a broad source of morality. This is best illustrated by GROZD’s definition of family values as ‘backed by the moral-ethical norms of monotheistic religions rooted in our lands’ (GROZD, 2015, p. 2). Second, in a rare instance of political Catholicism, HRAST calls for an explicit ‘fundamental political stance that Croatia should be rooted in Christian social teaching’ (Hrast, 2011, para. 27) – a stance curiously dropped from subsequent versions of the program. Finally, religion appears as a human right. This is best exemplified by Vigilare’s appeal to the protection of ‘the rights of parents to raise their children in accordance with their own philosophical and religious beliefs and values’ (Vigilare, 2015, p. 4). Interview data further confirms the importance of religious actors’ secularization of discourse and human rights framing when acting in the sociopolitical arena

(Casanova, 1994; Kuhar, 2017; Vaggione, 2005; Juroš et al., 2020). Paula (A7) describes the challenges their organization faced in approaching supporters:

We saw that religion is perceived as something very negative in the public [...] If you approach them with a spiritual rhetoric, they are repelled. We realized we could go with a neutral, affirmative approach, while remaining motivated by Catholic values [...] that are indisputable.

The secular approach is perceived as more successful not only in addressing a pool of potential supporters, but also the media and the broader public. ‘Universal’ (*općeljudske*) is thus a synonym for ‘Christian’ values, as expressed by Ladislav Ilčić, one of the founders of HRAST (Ilčić, 2010). Perhaps the most interesting finding is that which is not being said – namely – the absence of references to some form of patriotism or nationalism. Nevertheless, parts of the Croatian anti-gender movement were actively involved in campaigns against Serbian minority rights (Kursar & Matan, 2022). Importantly, my argument is not that Croatian anti-gender actors are *not* nationalist but are not *primarily* nationalist. Furthermore, broader parties and platforms like HRAST are rooted in coalitions with traditional nationalist and war veteran groups. Their appeal to a broader electorate does, understandably, contain nationalist values. For example, HRAST problematizes Serbian minority rights, affirms the importance of the Croatian diaspora, and invokes the dignity of the Croatian Homeland war (Hrast, 2016). Similarly, the INF’s electoral program refers to ‘homeland values’ and ‘national pride’ in their electoral program (INF, 2015). Nonetheless, these values are explicitly elaborated by the party’s leadership as inclusive: ‘The Homeland is not a strictly Croatian national project [...] It calls for any type of affirmative communitarianism in *Our Beautiful*¹⁷. Here, we are building our lives and futures for our children, no matter the nation or religion.’ (INF, n.d.). In addition, one anti-abortion leader critically reflects on one of the movement’s slogans:

“I am very sensitive when I see written ‘March for Life, Family and Homeland’ [...] Maybe I do not want to march for the homeland... I think that the position of someone marching for life is not necessarily a position of marching for ‘family and homeland’ (Eva, A2)

Although Christianity is admittedly an important motivating factor of movement leaders in Croatia, organizations strategically use secular framing for a broader social appeal. References to demography and national identity are mostly avoided, and explicit attempts are made by

¹⁷ The title of the Croatian national anthem.

some movement leaders and figures to avoid ethnonationalism. This, however, does not imply that the Croatian anti-gender movement could be classified as having a mainstream conservative profile. On the contrary, its illiberalism and anti-pluralism are visible in its exclusionary politics.

7.2.2. The Movement's Radical Illiberalism

I have focused on the affirmative values of the movement, since the illiberal politics of fear employed by anti-gender movement actors have been well-researched and are radical-right positions are more openly expressed in 'back-stage' discourse anyway (Fleck & Müller, 1998). Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that the Croatian anti-gender organizations tend to use radical and exclusive language, particularly homo/transphobia. For example, movement actors have argued against the alleged subjugation of children to 'homosexual torture' via sexual education (TeenSTAR, 2006), spread disinformation about 'curing' homosexuality (Ilčić, as cited in Jutarnji List, 2008), and used transphobia to stoke anger around 'gender' (Obajdin & Golušin, 2021). An organization of Krešimir Miletić (Romić & Sarnavka, 2014), one of the central leaders of the movement, and a former head of Zagreb's Caritas, helped initiate a webpage publishing articles against health and sexual education, equating homosexuality to pedophilia, arguing against masturbation, pornography, and contraception. A particularly extremist organization, *Vigilare* – a local chapter of the ultraconservative Catholic organization Tradition, Family, and Property – has recently been convicted by a Croatian court for inciting discrimination and harassment of LGBT persons (N1 Info, 26 April 2023). The movement's discourse can turn particularly extreme in collective action. During the protests against the IC, the Initiative 'The Truth About the Istanbul Convention', often used the threat of a man (transgender women are not recognized as an identity) becoming able to urinate in women's toilets together with 'little girls' and 'our daughters' (Batarelo, 2017). Such conspiratorial discourse heavily rests upon traditional homophobic and transphobic prejudice linking non-heterosexual individuals to pedophilia, perversion, and mental illness. Finally, compared to its explicit LGBT-phobia, the movement's rhetoric is rarely as explicitly misogynistic or sexist, but it has a clear, Catholic-inspired view of womanhood. As one particularly conservative movement leader stated, since women are highly educated today, it would be valuable for them to stay at home and teach children: "if we directed women to do what is truly much more natural for them – raising children in the family [...] society would be a better place" (Marko, A18). Traditional roles for women are thus advocated by most movement members as a choice that

should be socially promoted more. In conclusion, while analyzing hateful speech is important, not least because it is harder to capture by researchers due to the duplicity of far-right self-representation, we should not ignore the complexities of their affirmative values, their motivation and worldview (Blee, 2020). I have tried to focus on the latter precisely because it is arguably the affirmative dimension of family values that draws long-term support and vitality to a movement, rather than the initially explosive politics of fear and conspiracy.

7.2.3. The 'Gender Ideology' Frame

Although affirmative values are important drivers of mobilization, it is the fight against 'gender ideology' that defines the movement and points us towards its innovations. Since the vast majority of research thus far has analyzed the movement's framing from an externalist point of view by focusing on secondary data, I wanted to comprehend how anti-gender leaders understand the term in their own words. Several of my interviewees expressed their bewilderment and incomprehension of the concept of 'gender' or 'gender ideology' (Marija, A3; Izidora, A4; Gabrijel, A5; Katarina, A9; Marko, A18). Interestingly, it is those interviewees who had lower, coordinating roles in SMOs that struggle more in defining what gender ideology is, or they define it in quite vague terms. This is how a floating signifier works – different actors can attach different meanings to it. The interviewees that occupied higher leadership roles in anti-gender SMOs have more elaborate – but also more coherent – understandings of what the concept means. The most common way of understanding GI relates to the understanding of the sex/gender binary. My interviewees argue against the perceived attempts to replace the biological category of the sexes as male and female with the vague notion of 'gender.' In their narrative, GI promotes a fluid understanding of identity which allows people to change their genders on a whim, beyond the two sexes (Eva, A2; Katarina, A9; Sebastijan, A21; Ante, A22). Matej (A6) directly links the phenomenon to social constructivists and their attempts to 'destroy the natural order', while Eva (A2) and Ante (A22) explain GI as a kind of absolutist understanding of liberty, as freedom taken too far.

The second issue most identified by respondents as the crux of GI is homosexuality, or LGBT issues more broadly. When asked the question, several of them immediately associated GI to issues related to sexuality, namely homosexuality, LGBT rights and same-sex marriage (Ivan, A1; Eva, A2; Josip, A10; Domagoj, A17). In these instances, gender is considered an ideology which aims at equating heterosexual marriage with 'other unions', even though nothing about

the concept of gender itself inherently denotes issues such as marriage or sexuality. In this sense, floating signification of various liberal, progressive stances is contained within the term, similarly to criticism of 'wokeness' or 'PC culture' (Cammaerts, 2022). Inspired by the Christian teachings on separating the sinner from the sin, two of my interviewees point out the importance of separating the 'homosexual' from what they frame as the „increasing propaganda and promotion of the LGBT agenda” (Josip, A10; Luka, A12). Since they consider homosexuality to be unnatural, 'propaganda' is considered threatening as it can lead to indoctrination and, subsequently, an increase of homosexuality in society, particularly among children and the youth.

The third most present association links gender ideology to transgender and transsexual identities. Two common anti-gender tropes appear here in a narrative-like form. The first is the image of a confused child that wishes to change their sex under the influence of gender ideology (Lovro, A13, Ana-Marija, A16). The second is the transgender woman, to whom they refer as a man, that enters women's toilets pretending to be a woman in order to sexually abuse 'real' women (Josip, A10, Adam, A15). Accepting trans identities as valid and 'promoting' them in the public is thus seen as leading to potential harm to children, to normalizing pathological disorders, and/or to facilitate the abuse of ciswomen. Trans persons are thus 'folk devils' playing a central role in an attempt to create moral panic around a threatened vulnerable victim – (cis)women and children. (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). Finally, several interviewees equate gender ideology to gender equality more broadly, mentioning the 'artificial' equalizing of career choices among women and men in the labor market or the sudden overrepresentation of women in culture and fiction (Gabrijel, A5). One respondent links gender ideology to abortion, providing insight into how this generally self-standing movement issue can be bridged with the GI frame:

I think the gender ideology brings with it also the pro-life and pro-choice topics [...] The March for Freedom¹⁸ puts different people under the same umbrella. They are marching not only for abortion but also something much broader, some alleged freedoms to which gender ideology also supposedly belongs.

This example shows how the anti-gender movement defines itself *ex negativo* as inherently illiberal – it is in part a backlash against liberalizing tendencies in society which are considered

¹⁸ The March for Freedom is a counter-protest organized in Rijeka, Croatia's third biggest city known as a left-liberal fortress, as a response to the March for Life.

to be problematic insofar as they demand an excess of freedom. In theological terms, attempts to increase the freedom of choice or expression in areas of gender, sexuality and reproduction are voluntaristic and sinful attempts of humankind to free itself from its own nature and anthropological reality (Tranfić, 2022). Finally, the issue of reproduction is closely linked to the opposition to same-sex marriage as a non-reproductive union: „A man and a woman have always been a union which can create new human life. Therefore, they have always been treated in a special way – such a family has always been recognized as the fundamental cell of society“ (Josip, A10). In contrast to the traditional complaint by the Christian right that ‘homosexuals’ are asking for special rights; the argument is thus flipped on its head to demand special treatment for the heterosexual family unit due to its reproductive capacity.

When asked about when and how, according to their perception, gender ideology came to Croatia, almost all the interviewees pinpointed the early 2000s as a crucial period. After Croatia's war for independence ended in 1995 and Tuđman's nationalist authoritarian regime was ousted after his death in the 2000 elections, the socially liberal SDP came to power. According to my interviewees, left-liberal NGOs lobbied for a liberal sexual education which would introduce 'gender ideology'. A smaller group of interviewees recognizes the second SDP government (2012 – 2015) as a crucial period. Only one interviewee mentions the Istanbul Convention period (2017) and then-ruling HDZ as responsible (David, A8). Interestingly, most interviewees identify specific political parties as crucial actors in bringing GI to Croatia, with NGO's framed as a kind of extended arm of foreign NGOs, 'the West' or the left-wing SDP. Given the strong anti-partisan, anti-political sentiment in broader society, linking the progressive cause with political elites is more likely to resonate with the broader society. It is typical of right-wing populist discourse that rests on vertical and horizontal exclusion, whereas elites work in collusion with the deviant other (Brubaker, 2020). The agency of the local LGBTIQ+ and feminist movement(s) is thus largely erased or minimized. The single most agreed-upon claim among almost all of the interviewed SMO leaders is that gender ideology has been “imported” to Croatia from ‘the West’, primarily the US (Marija, A3; Matej, A6; Lovro, A13), Canada (Josip, A10; Adam, A15) and Western Europe (Antun, A11). The common narrative points to the predicament of Croatia only ‘following’ or ‘copying’ trends from other countries, in some cases including conspiracist undertones about the 'perfidious' introduction of GI through the backdoor (David, A8). To understand what GI means in practice, however, requires looking at the particular issues and political debates around which contention arises.

In the following section, we turn from interviews to movement issues and framing as they appear in the protest event data.

7.2.4. Collective Action Issues and Strategies

The issue around which most collective action in the streets is performed in Croatia is clearly the issue of abortion (Figure 10)¹⁹. The centrality of abortion reflects the movement's focus on 'pro-life' and 'pro-family' values, as well as the importance of the somewhat distinct anti-abortion wing of the anti-gender movement. Furthermore, protest activity in general, and especially around LGBTIQ+ rights and sexuality issues, briefly declined after the successful referendum against same-sex marriage in 2013. From 2016, Marches for Life have been mushrooming in Croatia, becoming the most important and largest protest march of the anti-gender movement. The March organizers carefully crafted a broad-tent appeal to the event, downplaying religious arguments and background of anti-abortion activism and amplifying the appeal to a (quasi)scientific framing of the need to protect life from conception, invoking the authority of institutions such as domestic courts and medical faculties favoring such an interpretation. The issue of abortion is contested through an affirmative, protective pro-life framing that does not (explicitly) aim to legally ban abortion, but rather protect the “value, uniqueness, and dignity of every human being” (The March for Life, n.d.). Mirroring the liberal, feminist and LGBTIQ+ movement's human rights framing, the March for Life slogans reason that “all human rights begin with conception” and that „unborn children are the most discriminated minority“ that should be given a voice (Hodzazivot.hr, 23 July 2018; Vecernji.hr, 25 May 2019). Aiming to appeal to the widest possible audience (Tronina, 2020), the March's frames extend both to nationalist and liberal audiences. On one hand, the March is framed as a “promotion of the demographic development of Croatia”, which is „the most important question for the future of Croatia“ (Jutarnji.hr, 20 May 2017; Hodzazivot.hr, 23 May 2016). On the other hand, the March also claims to speak in favor of protecting women's rights, citing that women are discriminated in the labor market if they decide to have children and claiming to fight for a better work-life balance for women (mothers) (Hodzazivot.hr, 25 June 2016; Vecernji.hr, 29 May 2016).

¹⁹ Additional 29 protest events against abortion are not included in this figure. Although they fit my definitional criteria for a ‘protest event’, the anti-abortion vigils in front of hospitals are a particular type of action occurring regularly across several days, twice a year, with only a dozen or less participants. As such, displaying it here with other more conventional one-time mass protests might give a false impression of the protest culture in more traditional terms.

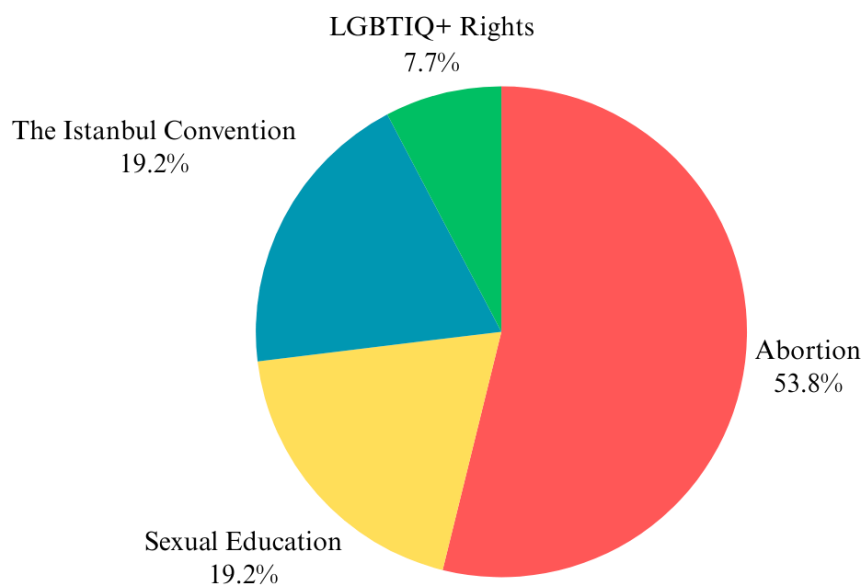


Figure 10 – Central Protest Issues of the Croatian Anti-gender Movement

Compared to abortion, early anti-gender mobilization issues such as LGBTIQ+ rights and sexual education were not as skillfully or moderately framed. Stopping the infamous 4th module of the announced Health Education Bill in 2013 dealing with gender and sexual equality, rights and tolerance towards sexual diversity required a properly *anti* campaign – „Do Not Touch their Childhood!“. Invoking the rights of children to a healthy development and the parent's rights to decide on their children's education, small protests were held in various cities against the “perverse, violent, disturbing” gender ideology (Nepomireni, n.d.) and “homosexual propaganda” (Laudato, 2 November 2012). A fear-mongering campaign warned parents against the alleged dangers of mandatory exposure of their children to pornography, contraception, and masturbation in schools. However, a marriage referendum held the same year demonstrated the full power of anti-gender contention centered around affirmative messages for family values, traditional marriage, and the rights of children to both a mother and a father, avoiding explicit rhetorical attacks on LGBTIQ+ rights. Unlike older war veteran and football hooligan groups' violent and homophobic attacks on pride parades, the new wave of politicized homophobia was a resounding success. Defining marriage as a union of a man and a woman as “immanent to the values, culture and identity of the Croatian people“ (U ime obitelji, n.d.), allowed anti-gender leaders to bridge the issue with patriotic, nationalist constituencies while avoiding a Catholic-exclusivist identity by gathering support from major religious communities in Croatia.

The third most protested issue was the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, drawing tens of thousands of people on the streets of Zagreb and Split. Sidelining the actual issue of violence against women, the IC's social constructivist definitions of gender became the focus of contention, making the IC the only issue where anti-gender organizations directly and primarily rose against 'gender ideology' itself, i.e. „the idea of gender as a social construct separate from sex“ (Dnevnik.hr, 24 March 2018). Repeating the arguments used against sexual education, the IC's provisions defining gender were attacked as an “unscientific”, and non-sensical ideology (Istinaoistanbulskoj.info, 20 June 2018). Having created a robust social and political movement centered around Christian right civil society, with the help of newly rising radical-right parties and figures within HDZ challenging the ruling moderate faction, anti-gender actors extended the issues of protest to question the very legitimacy of Andrej Plenković's government. Given the IC's transnational origin, the issue thus also became one of sovereignty, with 'gender ideology' presented as a foreign threat penetrating and disturbing the „fundamental traditional, cultural, legal and identity determinants of Croatian society“ (Dnevnik.hr, 24 March 2018). Again, a useful fuel to the fire amplifying the discontent came in the figure of children as potential victims, symbolized by „a girl that was told in school she could decide whether she is a man or a woman“ (Istinaoistanbulskoj.info, 20 June 2018).

Finally, the anti-gender movement attempted to repeat their marriage referendum success by collecting signatures for a referendum on two different occasions in 2014 and 2018 to push for electoral law reform that would increase the chances of their favored candidates to get elected. Their demands included reducing the electoral threshold, introducing preferential and electronic voting, and the reduction of mandates guaranteed in parliament for ethnic minority representatives. While both campaigns failed to achieve its goal, they boosted the vitality and continuity of movement mobilization. A movement tradition was created, whereby activists and leaders march together towards the Croatian *Sabor* with boxes of collected signatures that are required by law to initiate a popular referendum. A majoritarian, populist message in favor of direct democracy, sovereignty and popular will was framed in juxtaposition to the self-interested elites working in favor of the liberal agenda of Brussels.

7.2.5. (Un)secular Grassroots Action – Movement Strategies

Movement values and issue framing also reflect movement strategies. How does one present oneself and one's grievances to the broader public? Does one frame one's demands as religious

or secular? Does one engage in confrontational or compromise-seeking action? Each movement issue and its framing can require different strategic approaches depending on audiences, resources, goals, and the organization's ideological and cultural background. Several interviewees reflected on the need to aim at long-term, well-paced social and political change. This is particularly salient for the issue of women's reproductive rights where the movement's anti-abortion positions clearly clash with the majority of the Croatian population (Klarić, 2020), and a change towards the 'culture of life' is painstaking. Various movement leaders (Ivan, A1; Paula, A7; David, A8; Antun, A11; Marko, A18) prefer a long-term approach, with Gabrijel (A5) expressing it most succinctly:

If we want long-term effects, we need affirmative, positive, not just always reactive actions. This is why I maybe feel closer to the 40 Days of Life initiative because they keep coming up with new things that aim at slower social change. I mean, we're always going against the grain, but you cannot constantly react to everything, one gets lost in it all.

Establishing affirmative, *pro* campaigns and movement traditions such as an annual March for Life and the growing presence of anti-abortion vigils in front of hospitals each year thus helps sustain mobilization, recruit new volunteers, and keep away from tiring and resource-intensive day-to-day reactivity to the political agenda. On the contrary, issues concerning the expansion of LGBTIQ+ rights, gender and sexual equality and education required more explosive, confrontational short-term actions, ones that are reactive in nature. This often entails more provocation, sensationalism and radicalism in framing and action forms in order to pressure the media and the government's agenda: „We have obviously found a good way to insert these topics into the media [...] organizing a few provocations that cause a reaction and give you visibility for the movement“ (Josip, A10). Such provocative 'radical' framing of issues including, but not limited to, the invocation of endangered children's innocence, pedophilia, totalitarian state repression, and homo/transphobia is thus more present in reactive strategies aiming to block a certain policy, whether it is sexual education or the Istanbul convention. In short, movement strategies depend both on the issues, goals, and the specific political opportunities available and paint a picture much more complex than the one present by the backlash narrative.

As already revealed in the analysis of documents, perhaps the central strategic choice that anti-gender leaders face is between a religious and secular framing. A more secular framing is particularly favored by anti-abortion activists. It emphasizes scientific facts as an appropriate

way of reasoning in public, civic advocacy, hopefully allowing them to avoid being 'stigmatized by the media', the opposition and the general public as advocates of clerical interference in politics (Ivan, A1; David, A8; Ana-Marija, A16; Paula, A7; Suzana, A19). In addition, anti-gender leaders particularly use an 'unsecular' framing of issues – not secular but not traditionally religious either (Kalyvas, 2003; Hurka, 2017). By invoking support from non-Catholic Christians, Jewish and Muslim communities, their religious, moral framing of traditional values is overcome as 'universal' or 'general human' (*općeljudske*) values. Alternatively, anti-abortion activism relying on strictly religious framing, vigils, public prayer, religious processions have the advantage of 'authenticity' (Ivan A1) that helps in movement-building and attracting sympathizers from lay-Catholic networks. To a large degree, interviewees tend to present their preferred *modus operandi* as 'peaceful' and apolitical action. On one hand, such a characterization is part of an important self-portrayal of anti-gender leaders and activists as moderate conservatives representing the will of a silent majority. On the other hand, it also might reflect the more general disdain of right-wing movements for demonstrations (Hutter & Kriesi, 2013), especially when juxtaposed to a clear affirmation of disruptive, rebellious protest by those on the left. Moreover, the understanding of 'political' strictly refers to partisan politics. Hence, when speaking about the 'apolitical' nature of their work, interviewees distance themselves from political parties, not political activism itself, reflecting a disdain for politics present in the broader SEE region (Milan, 2017). Finally, the choice of organizational structures and vehicles of action can itself demonstrate strategic intent. One of my correspondents identifies Ivica Relković, a conservative journalist, activist, politician, and one of the founders of both the Family Party and HRAST (the Croatian Growth) as playing a key role in developing the “neoconservative’s” new strategy:

I wasn't aware what was going on yet, but sometime in the 90's, as the war was ending, he said in one conversation: 'We must create as many associations as possible; it doesn't matter how many people are in them... Only then can we act towards society, the Government or anyone else because that gives credibility to our demands.' It was then that the creation of a kind of network started, one that grew and became stronger. It only became apparent to the public after 2008. At that point it started gaining strong influence within the Catholic church. (Vlasta E1)

In sum, the goal of movement entrepreneurs was in the very beginning was to present their action – an effort of about a dozen radical lay Catholics – as mass, grassroots civic activism of dissatisfied citizen's organized through apolitical initiatives, demanding commonsensical

policies to prevent a senseless ‘gender ideology’. Given the movement’s growth over the years, the strategy seems to have worked.

In conclusion, Croatian anti-gender SMOs are deliberately trying to move beyond ethnonationalist framing by appealing to the universality of Christian morals as a strategy of whitewashing illiberal politics and rebranding themselves as moderate Christian democrats. The ‘family values’ discourse centers ‘the family’ as the primary, and ‘the nation’ only as a secondary political subject. Furthermore, Christianity and Catholic values are downplayed due to the strategy of discursive secularization. We have seen that this process is particularly visible over time, as calls to ban abortion and legislate Catholic social teaching in 2011 were later dropped from HRAST’s program. Nevertheless, interview data clearly shows that Catholic values are considered the primary source of the movement’s morality and appeal to universal values, as well as its radical exclusionary politics. Croatian anti-gender SMOs are driven by values rooted in conservative ideology and framed primarily in terms of protecting the family, human life, and a set of vaguely defined universal human values. These values are endangered by the unsettling concept of ‘gender’ that questions the sex binary, heteronormativity and naturalizes the cisgender experience as the only possible and valid one.

Finally, although the GI frame does not directly address the issue of abortion, women’s reproductive rights are the central issue around which collective action is organized. The movement skillfully alternates between radical, provocative, and panic-inducing framing aimed to galvanize the lay faithful to prevent progressive legislation and an affirmative, moderate familial identity politics. The latter allows the movement to bypass the closing DOS and hostile media to reach more moderate audiences and to maintain collective identity of the movement via positive affective processes. These apparently contradictory adaptive strategies of religious and secular, radical and moderate framing point towards an explanation that complicates the simplistic backlash narrative.

7.3. A Division of Labor – Relations and Networks

7.3.1. Coming Out of the Sacristies – A Catholic Affair

The simplest, but perhaps one of the most fascinating findings from interviews conducted in Croatia is that all my interviewees – politician or not, higher, or lower in leadership positions,

regardless of city or region – are active Catholic laypersons²⁰. This fact highlights the decisive role Catholicism plays in the local movement. When discussing the varying support of Catholic clergy for the movement, several interview participants distinguished between the 'higher' and 'lower' levels of the hierarchy, noting the crucial role played by local-level priests, pastors, and clergymen, unlike the silence and lack of support from the top. When it comes to clergy support, an important caveat mentioned by almost all interviewees is that support is primarily given by individual bishops or pastors, not the Church as a whole; the more traditional and older clergy members reject an active or 'loud' activist approach to evangelization. Two anti-abortion activists note that some priests fear and reject public prayer as having a "Protestant spirit" (Paula, A7; Lovro, A13). The fears of protestantization and theological disagreements over ways in which religion is practiced hint that the emergence of anti-gender movements is not simply a countermovement backlash, but an intracatholic innovation partly emerging in reaction to the Catholic status quo, as recently argued by Massimo Prearo's (2023) work on the Italian case. Furthermore, a *partisan bias* among the clergy is noted by several interviewees. The perception is that the Church had no problem supporting the anti-left-wing government marriage referendum as opposed to more limited or covert support in the case of the Istanbul convention which was championed by the Church's traditional ally – the ruling HDZ. Commenting broadly on the relationship between the Croatian Catholic church and political parties, one anti-gender MP and movement leader shared the following estimation:

"The general attitude in the Church is that it formally refrains from declaring its political positions. However, at the end of the day, bishops primarily support HDZ. They might have sympathy towards me as a pro-life activist, but their main fear is the 'red threat', or that a left-liberal option comes to power. HDZ is perceived as a stronger bulwark against such a scenario". (Matej, A6).

Such a perception was corroborated by two theologians whom I interviewed as experts, who claimed that HDZ is the Church's strongest ally insofar as it guarantees the stability and implementation of the Vatican agreements (Vlasta, E1; Branka, E3). The Catholic church's historically notorious interest in maintaining a stable relationship with the state – and the regime in power – might help explain why the top of the hierarchy is much wearier of supporting movement activism when compared to the lower echelons of the clergy. Nevertheless,

²⁰ The one exception was a member of the clergy. The mentioned pattern could hardly be a result of any methodological biases given the stratified sampling strategy aimed at maximizing diversity of respondents and organizations.

decentralized lay-activist networks are central as the recruitment pool of not only sympathizers and supporters, but, more importantly, of new activists and cadres carrying out the mobilizing, educational and organizational tasks within movement organizations. Second, while the weary clergymen have their hands tied in most of the more “political” matters, laity is free to act. Laity is, in fact, called upon by Church doctrine to carry out the work of social engagement and activism (CEC, 2012) – a stark difference from a significantly more passive Orthodox church. Two interviewees dubbed lay action as the 'coming out of the sacristies' (Ivan, A1; Luka, A12). This phenomenon is deemed crucial for changing the Church from within and taking over the temporal, social engagement of the Catholic church from the burdened, under-capacitated clergy. Moreover, with regards to the previously unexplored issue of intra-church dynamics, interviewees protest the common public perception of the anti-gender movement as an extended arm of the Church. In fact, the Catholic church in Croatia is itself the site of contention and action regarding the issues of activism, political engagement, and the salience of morality issues. The movement leaders spend time and resources to mobilize the lay faithful and clergyman within the Church as well. As Katarina (A9) from INF notes when describing the organization of the marriage referendum:

“We sent letters to the bishops to inform them, we held lectures in parishes. We organized those who volunteered to help us to visit diaconates and those parishes in which pastors allowed us to come present our work to their lay communities”.

Movement leaders are critical of (some) clergymen as passive, inert, and/or sympathetic to the trauma of communism. According to a common narrative, communism stunned the clergy into a kind of sociopolitical auto-censorship and avoidance of social engagement. As stated by several interviewees (Ivan, A1; Gabrijel, A5; Matej, A6; David, A8), movement organizers primarily work on informing and educating the clergy itself regarding the nature and importance of activities. This is often a painstakingly slow process in which clergymen must be convinced and lobbied, in a sense, to support movement activities, often with little success. Some bishops are mentioned as openly resisting and denying support for any type of activity which is not strictly in the domain of the spiritual and the divine. As Josip (A10) notes: “Bishop Škvorčević from Požega had a firm position in the lines of ‘I do not want to see anything going on which is not strictly related to the church or prayer’”. However, this dynamic is not necessarily played out along a strict clergy-laity cleavage. As Ante (A22) notes, individual, often younger, activist priests themselves support the laity against the “calcified structures” of the Church and their

“don't-rock-the-boat” mentality. In conclusion, anti-gender politics are not a clerical crusade undertaken by the Catholic church on secular society – the Church itself is a battlefield.

The most common non-symbolic²¹ type of support provided by the Catholic clergy to anti-gender movement SMOs is *infrastructural and logistical support* in campaigning and events. It is by far the most frequently mentioned type of clerical support among interviewees, regardless of the organization or position. This primarily entails providing Church-owned spaces for meetings, signature collection, educational and other similar activities. As one anti-gender MP and CEC's Laity Councilmember described it compellingly, albeit with some exaggeration:

“Most importantly, the Catholic church stood behind us. This is crucial. The Church has the best infrastructure in Croatia, unrivaled even by HDZ or SDP. Not even the army or police have the type of infrastructure the Church still has.” (Matej, A6)

In addition, as reported by interviewed leaders, the Church and clergy serve the logistical function of *coordination* among various groups and individuals of the “anti-gender galaxy” (Lavizzari, 2020). Together with lay movement leaders, individual priests and pastors are involved in creating a network of activists and sympathizers for future activities. This is more obviously apparent with those organizations which explicitly belong to the Catholic associational sphere or whose organizational identity is admittedly Catholic. However, in line with the fronting strategy previously described, even the outwardly secular organizations rely on this type of support. In some instances, members of the clergy play an active role in *advising* by providing information or supporting educational activities with their expertise. This is done either in internal spaces targeting the faithful or in public forums on contentious topics and media appearances. When it comes to *financial support*, it is either rarely mentioned or negated. In some instances, mostly regarding anti-abortion activities, individual clergy members give donations to movement organizations:

“The Church will always have open doors and give us spaces, maybe even some money, and then in some instances additional resources as well, but they will never get too actively involved in organizing, which is logical.” (Antun, A11)

²¹ Expectedly, symbolic, declarative endorsement of movement activity from clergy members is the most common type of support mentioned.

The reason why these specific types of anti-abortion activities may receive assistance in the form of donations from (mostly individual) clergymen is because they primarily fall into the category of charity (e.g., material support and supplies for mothers and infants). In most cases, interview participants note the importance of local clergy members' help in *advertising events and recruiting* new lay activists and cadres. The Church provides space for movement leaders and activists to advertise their work through Church-related media like the Croatian Catholic Network, radio shows and Church-run websites. Offline informational activities usually occur before, after or during mass and other religious services or religious community meetings, where anti-gender activists are given space to advertise their planned activities and events. Matej (A6) describes it from personal experience as a laymen and member of the movement:

“If a pastor uses his authority and influence over parishioners in such a way to call them to action or something, this is definitely a wind in one's sails [...] Friar Matthew invited me and my wife to go to some diocesan spousal gathering with the goal of creating a network of families within the diocese.” (Matej, A6)

In some cases, even higher-level instances such as the Council for the Laity of the Episcopal Conference will organize networking events where engaged laypersons share best practices and introduce each other to their organization's work. Finally, individual priests and pastors provide *spiritual and moral support* to movement members, and activists. One anti-abortion activist notes the important role of priests in confessional support provided both to anti-abortion activists and women who had abortions (Ivan, A1). While the idea of spiritual support might sound somewhat nebulous, it is perceived as crucial for highly religious activists who at times describe the importance of a parallel spiritual realm in which a struggle with the forces of evil is occurring (Lovro, A13; Ante, A22).

7.3.2. A Family in Faith – Intramovement Cooperation

The most influential anti-gender SMOs are run by individuals intertwined by dense informal ties, oftentimes with family connections, as reported in detail by investigative journalists (Index.hr, 25 November 2013). A high overlap in membership between different NGOs implies easier coordination and cooperation. For example, one of the leading movement figures, Kristina Pavlović, was a coordinator of the citizen's initiative In the Name of Family, the coordinator of the Truth about the Istanbul Convention initiative and serves as the current president of GROZD. One of the anti-abortion activists used a familial analogy to describe the

anti-gender movement in Croatia: “We are all a family in faith, but some differences exist, of course” (Domagoj, A17). Naturally, they do not refer to themselves as an ‘anti-gender movement’ but use different adjectives, including: ‘pro-life’, ‘Catholic’, ‘conservative’ or ‘right-wing’ movement. When asked about groups or organizations they found ideologically proximate or with whom they cooperated, two organizations stood out as a preferred partner: Vigilare and 40 Days for Life. These two SMOs seem to have benefitted greatly regarding their position in the anti-gender network by staying out of the conflict and not pursuing the electoral route to party politics. Vigilare is the most ideologically extreme SMO by far, with frequent explicitly homophobic campaigns. As one of my theologian expert interviewees noted (Vlasta, E1), Vigilare’s radicalism might help explain why its leader John Vice Batarelo lost his position as Head of Office for the Pastoral Care of the Family of the Zagreb Archdiocese. However, this has apparently not prevented Vigilare from being considered a desirable partner within the movement. It is also the only SMO with whose members I was not able to conduct any interviews since I was perceived by its leadership to be a ‘sympathizer of LGBT ideology’.

Regarding the type of cooperation among movement organizations, groups, and initiatives, most of my interviewees highlight the *ad hoc* nature of cooperation – it is usually informal cooperation on specific issues or threats facing the movement. Furthermore, different SMOs provide each other with declarative and symbolic support, advertising each other’s events and participating in them, but also advising and sharing know-how. In some instances, especially among anti-abortion groups, close cooperation includes sharing resources and spaces. In addition, lists of supporters and volunteers are shared to increase and pool resources during campaigning. Finally, SMO members and activists often take part in other SMO’s training and educational activities. However, SMOs that are more oriented towards community work are weary of how their support for the more political SMOs would be perceived. A member of Family Enrichment, an SMO promoting single-sex schools noted timidly their sympathies for other NGOs: “In the Name of Family is one such NGO which is right-wing, but we never wanted such publicity for the schools” (Adam, A15). 40 Days for Life is particularly worried about being associated with ‘political’ initiatives and organizations: “We have to make a distinction [in relation to the March for Life] because, as an initiative, we are apolitical and do not want to meddle in politics not to be distracted from prayer, fasting and outreach – our main activities” (Ana-Marija, A16). A division of labor between different anti-abortion groups also stems from the fact that they wish to diversify their recruitment pools:

“We all have different visions and practices for the same goals. The goal is to recruit and include people, and their involvement will depend on what they prefer – to march or stand in front of a hospital or donate to a woman’s shelter” (Ana-Marija, A16)

Therefore, in conditions of scarce resources, SMOs must innovate while competing for the “time, effort, loyalty, and money which citizens can give or withhold” (Zald & McCarthy, 1979, p. 5). Although there is high awareness of a collective movement identity and close links between SMO personnel, there is a division of labor that stems from different organizational cultures, Catholic milieus as well as goals and strategies. Finally, to demonstrate their broader appeal beyond Catholic communities, anti-gender leaders like to boast with support from other religious communities. Most notably, the 2013 marriage referendum was supported not only by the Catholic church but also smaller Protestant churches, the Islamic community in Croatia and the Orthodox church. However, such support did not amount to any substantial cooperation, only declarative support. Interestingly, one anti-abortion interviewee mentions the Orthodox Church’s reluctance to cooperate because of their disagreement with public prayers (Lovro, A13).

Moving beyond the national context, the Croatian anti-gender movement is closely integrated into transnational movement networks, particularly since its 2013 marriage referendum success. My interviewees were most reluctant to talk about their international connections, which might be due to two factors. Firstly, most SMOs seem to have one person responsible for maintaining contacts with organizations abroad, which means I was only able to gather data on the topic in cases where I managed to interview the person(s) responsible for such connections. Secondly, the anti-gender movement frequently accuses its opponents as being a foreign ‘franchise’ or ‘mercenaries’ who are financially supported from abroad (N1 Info, 11 May 2021), which might discourage them from admitting their own transnational connections. In any case, according to my interviewees’ responses, the anti-abortion branch of the movement has the strongest ties to international organizations. This is not surprising given that the most prominent initiative – 40 Days for Life Croatia – is itself a chapter of the eponymous global initiative. Furthermore, Students for Life and Dalmatia for Life also list several international organizations as partners or contacts. Types of international cooperation range from rudimental contacts via email to close cooperation and participation in events. Most foreign organizations are US-based, including: 40 Days for Life, Alliance Defending Freedom, And Then There Were None, Atheists for Life, Human Life International, Life Site News, Live Action, and Priests for Life. European or EU level-based organizations named as contacts are less focused on anti-abortion and are mostly lobbyist organizations or think-tanks, including the European Center for Law

and Justice, European Christian Political Movement, Sallux (formerly European Christian Political Foundation), World Youth Alliance and The Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe. The identity of almost all the mentioned organizations is explicitly Christian or Catholic. The closest types of cooperation are established between the anti-abortion branches of the local and transnational anti-gender movement. Interestingly, Alliance Defending Freedom, designated as an anti-LGBT hate group by the US-based Southern Poverty Law Center, provided legal support to several Croatian SMOs, including GROZD and Vigilare (Josip, A10; Luka, A12). Finally, closer contact is reported with culturally more proximate organizations in the region, including Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia. In fact, the Croatian 40 Days for Life initiative helped start new branches and chapters in northern Serbia and even in Munich and Frankfurt, Germany. The Croatian diaspora seems to be playing an important role in movement diffusion:

We have spread 40 Days for Life to Subotica [Serbia] through the Croatian diaspora [...] We helped instigate the local initiatives also in Frankfurt and Munich, now spreading to Berlin and Vienna. It all started somehow within our Croatian diaspora communities and if God is willing it will keep spreading (Ivan, A1).

The ties of parts of the Croatian diaspora to Catholic parishes and the Church in general seems to facilitate cooperation and spreading of anti-abortion initiatives. Conversely, some of the leading figures in the Croatian anti-gender movement are returnees from the Croatian diaspora communities in Canada, the US and Australia, including the head of Vigilare, John Vice Batarelo, Opus Dei member Stephen ‘Stjepo’ Bartulica, and student chaplain don Damir Stojić, to name but a few examples. The important role of ethnic ties and conservative diaspora communities in transnational movement diffusion is a crucial finding here. It has been neglected not only in anti-gender movement scholarship, but social movement studies more broadly. Diaspora ties are arguably even more relevant for the transnationalization of (radical) right-wing movements due to the latter’s core nativist values.

7.3.3. Between the Parish and the Levers of Power – SMOs and Political Parties

When talking about anti-gender politics, interviewed movement leaders do not differentiate much between non-partisan organizations and political parties within the anti-gender movement in terms of collective identification. MPs stemming from the movement are considered internal to it, as comrades fighting for the same cause in a different arena. However, the decision of

several different actors with overlapping memberships in anti-gender SMOs to participate in elections has created fierce competition and rivalry among several far-right parties espousing ‘family values’. An important, but classical tension in party politics is that between the policy-seeking and the office/vote-seeking entrepreneurs, with various members decrying ‘egoism’, ‘personal interests’, ‘ambitions’, and ‘political calculations’ which betray the broader movement goals envisioned as sweeping conservative policy changes (Izidora, A4; Antun, A11; Sebastijan, A21). From the movement’s point of view, we can sum up the main missteps enumerated by the anti-gender movement-party leaders into two categories: 1) premature party building, and 2) overestimating the ability to transform movement/referendum support into electoral votes. Overall, the dominant perception among interviewees recognizes a decline of mobilization momentum due to political mistakes, splits, or betrayals. As a result, a part of movement organizations decided to adapt their repertoires of contention to what they frame as ‘playing the long game’ and to abandon party politics. This seems to be the case with INF, the central movement NGO which experienced crushing electoral defeat under the ‘Project Homeland’ brand. As one board member put it:

“When it comes to the efforts of Catholics and Christians in society, – it is better to be the ‘salt of the earth’²² and have far-reaching influence over time. Because governmental action can fail within a few months”. (David A8)

The idea is that long-term influence in society to change the culture (of death) is a more fruitful and rewarding approach to achieving goals, particularly with the hindsight of electoral failures of anti-gender parties. Finally, when looking at anti-gender protest activity since the 2013 marriage referendum, it has been rising only regarding the issue of abortion. Specifically, ‘long-termist’ initiatives such as the March for Life and the 40 Days for Life initiative have been spreading to new cities each year.

Why start a political party in the first place, if the costs and risks are so high? Movement actors’ perceptions of political opportunities have been primarily conditioned by their assessment of the HDZ as the mainstream right-wing party. The SMO leaders explicitly identify the perceived moderation and liberalization of HDZ as a motive for movement-party formation. HDZ’s move towards the center opened space for a challenger from the (far) right. Although early movement parties such as HRAST and the Family Party were created simultaneously, if not prior to anti-gender NGOs, their electoral failures prompted direct engagement in civil society through

²² A Biblical reference (Matthew 5:13), indicating a positive and transformative influence of Christians on the world, just as salt has the ability to enhance the flavor and preserve food.

public awareness campaigns, referenda, protest marches and petitions. Building on the victory of the 2013 marriage referendum, a part of the anti-gender entrepreneurs used this political capital to form new movement parties. This was further motivated by a perceived HDZ-led state repression of their activities, which prompted conclusions that, as one movement leader stated, ‘acting within civil society is not enough when you don’t control the levers of power’ (Sebastijan, A21). Finally, most of the anti-gender movement’s collective action has been undertaken during the 4-year center-left government led by SDP, including: opposition to sexual and health education, civic education, artificial insemination, and embryo freezing, and the marriage referendum. SDP is recognized as an ideological, socially liberal opponent perceived as responsible for creating a system of funding for left-liberal NGOs and ‘gender ideologists’. However, the populist framing of mainstream parties should also be noted since it rejects all mainstream parties as Brussels-serving elites. As one board member of INF pointed out: “It’s not HDZ or SDP, UDBA or leftists [...], the problem are interest groups that wish to live off of our backs” (David A8). Such discourse is also not surprising given the anti-establishment positioning of anti-gender actors in the political system.

With very few exceptions, my interview participants had no prior experience with party politics or electoral candidacy. While some of them clearly expressed political ambition (Antun, A11; Sebastijan, A21), most note that creating or joining a party was a kind of necessity or the logical next step (Luka, A12), as quoted previously. The anti-gender movement parties championing family values such as the Family Party, HRAST and the later formed Croatian Sovereignists were built on an existing network of lay Catholic associations and networks, as well as the associated ‘secular’ NGO’s appealing not only to a Catholic audience. As one of the regional coordinators of the INF’s marriage referendum, Gabrijel (A5), explained:

I mean, it is all intertwined. We all know each other from student days. We were part of the same prayer group and community at the Holy Spirit [neighborhood]. So, we all met each other through our ties with the Church. Later, one grows up and people take different paths, but the bond remains. If you look at this new generation of right-wing politicians, they all came from these lay communities. This is common, first, Catholic formation or some kind of conversion in their youth, and later they become part of the conservative forces.

As elaborated in previous sections, various prayer communities, religious orders and movements, engagement courses, and other parish-level modes of socialization have become an important site of political socialization and activism for the anti-gender movement and the Christian right more broadly. These Catholic networks become the backbone of the political movement. All signature lists, telephone numbers and contacts of active laypersons,

sympathizers and visitors of various public forums, conferences and other movement activities were instrumentalized for mobilization and agitation purposes. Prior to the rise of the anti-gender movement, Croatia had not seen a radical-right party make it into parliament since the post-2003 decline of the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP). The story about anti-gender movement relations with radical right parties in Croatia is thus primarily one about the creation of movement parties and pushing their issues and cadres into the political mainstream. Thus, the creation of movement parties is one of the potential strategic choices made by Christian right actors, with movement mobilization following a ‘long-term’ cultural strategy appearing as another, parallel strategy.

The largest number of interview participants argued that there is only so much change one can achieve by working in civil society, whether it is through the Church, informal citizen’s initiatives or NGO’s which act as social movement organizations to mobilize for protest and lobby the government. There is a clear sense of collective identity among movement members, self-labelled differently as ‘us Catholics’, ‘traditionalists’, ‘the right-wing’, which implies that electoral competition is seen as only one of the many action repertoires use to achieve a unified set of policy and cultural changes desired by the movement. Interestingly, almost none of the interview participants consider their work within civil society to be political – a term they reserve only for the domain of electoral, party politics. Luka (A12) elaborated on the limitations of civil society: “you are definitely much weaker if you only have an organization and no supporters in politics”, while one of the leaders of a movement-party addressed this very issue in detail, noting a lack of financial resources as another motivation (Matej, A16). One common complaint expressed by my interviewees when commenting on movement activities in general is the lack of financial, material, and human resources for sustaining movement mobilization and effective claim-making. Since political parties are funded from the state budget proportional to the party’s electoral success, competing in elections offered a prospect of funding for future movement activities. Moreover, it seems that most of the interview participants, especially when commenting on the failed referendum petitions regarding the Istanbul Convention and the reform of the electoral law, consider the government (whichever mainstream party is in power) as repressive, undemocratic, and unresponsive to organized movements and civil society initiatives. One of the regional coordinators for the marriage referendum who became an INF party candidate commented on the successes of the referendum and the upcoming elections in which Project Homeland – In the Name of Family was formed:

It was maybe even logical that one would try to capitalize on the situation and try to obtain some position in the executive power. Well, first in parliament and then in the executive, because it was quite clear that the right-wing would win in a broad coalition and that this way, we could fight for the values important to us. (Antun, A11)

Thus, capitalizing on movement success via electoral politics was a strategic choice appealing to many movement actors willing to further the cause. Finally, in line with scholarship on movement-parties, a leading member of one of the three anti-gender parties (Marko, A18) explains their rationale for creating a party as a way to cover some previously unaddressed issues in society, or issues that the mainstream right has abandoned. While anti-immigrant sentiment has not been exploited successfully by the Croatian radical right (Lancaster, 2021), the call to defend the ‘natural family’ against the onslaught of ‘gender ideology’ served as issue worthy of politicizing within the broader party system.

7.3.4. Egos and Interests – Intramovement Discord

When it comes to conflicts between initiatives and SMOs within the Croatian anti-gender movement can be divided into three broad types: conflicts over authority, ideology, and interests. The anti-gender movement party HRAST had two widely publicized splits, first in 2011 and the second in 2014, both of which were struggles over *leadership and authority* within the party, in addition to the dilemma of whether to form a coalition with HDZ for the 2015 elections or not. In the case of the March of Life, tensions appeared between the Zagreb and Rijeka organizational branches. MfL’s organization was undertaken each year on an *ad hoc* basis, with various SMOs joining organizationally to pool volunteers and resources. After a disagreement between the leadership of Rijeka’s MfL and Zagreb’s team, a serious publicized conflict over authority and the brand name ensued between a self-proclaimed national MfL team and the Rijeka chapter. The disagreements concerned *ideology and strategy* – the second most common source of strife within the movement. Barbara Brezac Benigar, the coordinator of Rijeka’s MfL stated in an interview that women who perform abortions were murderers (Nacional.hr, 27 June 2020), which prompted the *ad hoc* national team of MfL to distance themselves from Rijeka’s local branch. As a controversial topic in the general public, the degree of radicalism in opposing abortion seems to be a common source of intramovement strife. Particularly, some movement actors insist on banning abortion, while others are more moderate, or at least tactical about their claim-making (Antun, A16). Finally, battles are fought over the perceived betrayal by those pursuing *personal interests*, which is particularly held against

HRAST's members due to their collaboration with HDZ. Josip (A10) predicts that future referendum and other campaigns will again be used for political, partisan purposes to utilize the motivation and interest of supporters in order for them to become voters of the political option which is organizing the campaigns. He expressed strong dissatisfaction and cynicism about how the electoral turn affected movement mobilization.

Intramovement conflicts have serious negative effects for movement mobilization, as they alienate supporters and allies, even the Church. While INF members blame HRAST for selling out to HDZ, INF is blamed for splintering the movement: "After INF was transformed into a political party, this network [of activists] started crumbling [...] we completely lost this *ad hoc* infrastructure which never recovered (Matej, A16)". Other interviewees have repeatedly confirmed this perception, stating that intramovement conflict, particularly poor leadership, and decision-making, corrode trust and motivation of grassroots-level supporters (Paula, A7; Adam, A15; Sebastijan, A21). The only private foundation founded by a couple of devout Catholic entrepreneurs, Rhema, which financially supported the anti-gender cause explicitly, also withdrew support due to intramovement fighting: "Rhema gave some money to GROZD and INF but after the referendums and our publicized conflicts [...] they stopped financing all of the NGOs except for the prayer communities which are unrelated to activism" (Matej, A16).

A series of publicized instances of conflicts, party splits and break-ups have shaken and undermined the legitimacy of (radical) right-wing parties in Croatia. In 2015, the central anti-gender movement party, HRAST, saw an opening in the political opportunity structure in the general elections when the mainstream right-wing HDZ ran on a populist radical right platform established around its Patriotic Coalition. While HRAST joined the coalition, In the Name of Family, the central movement SMO run by Željka Markić, decided to participate in the elections independently, with a new party: In the Name of Family – Project Homeland. Željka Markić was herself a member of HRAST but left the party after internal struggles for leadership. The split between HRAST and INF caused a rupture that reverberated through all SMOs and initiatives in the anti-gender movement. The most infamous example was the parallel, rival organization of signature collections and campaigns for two distinct referendums in the same time slots, namely, The People Decide and The Truth about the Istanbul Convention. Conflict within the movement is often prompted by disagreements on the relationship with HDZ, with some factions having supported the umbrella conservative coalition, aiming to steer HDZ more towards the right end of the political spectrum, and others rejecting any possibility of cooperation with HDZ.

In conclusion, the anti-gender movement in Croatia receives extensive support in terms of logistics, infrastructure, advertising, and networking, especially by lower clergy levels. However, the Church itself is a battlefield where anti-gender actors spend much time informing the clergy and lay-faithful about their cause. Furthermore, higher echelons of the clergy are weary of the movement's partisan wing insofar as it can threaten the separation of church and state and its tacit alliance with the dominant HDZ. All movement actors express a high sense of collective identity, a belonging to the same movement, but cooperation is primarily *ad hoc*, and SMOs practice a kind of division of labor, without centralized leadership or umbrella organizations. Moreover, the local movement is extensively connected to the transnational anti-gender organizations and actors more broadly, both as a receiver and a diffuser of anti-gender contention, with diaspora links proving to be a promising further venue of research of anti-gender diffusion. Finally, while anti-abortion activists prefer long-term cultural change, another faction of the movement took the electoral turn towards partisan politics. Interviewees describe this choice as a combination of a desire to capitalize on movement success, to overcome the limits of influence within civil society and as a reaction to closing POS. Although all actors were inspired by bringing a new issue – family values – to the political agenda, they failed to coalesce around a single party. Intramovement divisions thus had important and serious consequences in terms of diverging strategies, resource divestment, protest actions and actions repertoires in general. Whereas the Serbian case will prove to be more harmonious, this intramovement harmony results more from the lack of dense and heterogeneous networks of actors than from good conflict resolution and management.

8. SERBIA – A PARTY CLAIMING TO BE A FAMILY

Following the lack of literature on anti-gender contention in Serbia, reports only on sporadic and recent opposition to 'gender ideology' (Zaharijević, 2018), and my own knowledge of the case, my comparative project initially conceptualized Serbia as a "least likely" case (Weisskircher, 2019) without an anti-gender movement. As a non-EU state with right-wing governments not committed to progressive policy changes and an Orthodox church closed away from civil society, I expected to find disregardable collective action against GSE. My expectations have been met partially since I have gathered very few protest events and campaigns in the Serbian case when compared to the two other cases. However, Serbian radical-right opposition to GSE has, in fact, led me to reconsider the very definition of anti-gender

movements. Although the GI frame was used for the first time in 2017, the political party Dveri published a book raging against the “ideology of homosexuality” in 2012, only a year after their first Family March took place in Belgrade. Just like the Bulgarian case, focusing primarily on the ‘gender ideology’ frame would have prevented us from capturing the emergence of anti-gender mobilization in Serbia.

8.1. Marching for Family – Organizational Structures and Actions

Anti-gender networks in Serbia are not particularly dense, with only a few NGOs present, and without the decentralized network of regional citizen’s initiatives present in Croatia and, to some extent, Bulgaria. This is in large part due to the reported disinterest and reluctance of the Serbian Orthodox Church to engage with civil society (see chapter 7.3.). Throughout the last 20 years, the radical-right party Dveri played a crucial role as the central node in the network, attempting to build new SMOs or umbrella organizations and initiatives such as the ‘Movement for life’, the ‘Serbian Network’, and ‘Familial Serbia’. Founded in 1999 as a far-right youth association and magazine ‘Dveri Srpske’ (*Serbian Gate*), the association championed a Serbian, “Saint Sava” brand of religious nationalism (*svetosavlje*) which aims at the establishment of Orthodoxy in a quasi-theocratic form. The group registered as a non-governmental organization in 2003, slowly moving away from purely philosophical, religious, and historical writing towards social and political organizing.

Although some interviewees were reluctant to name Dveri as a partner when asked about who they find ideologically close or cooperate with, the importance of Dveri is easily recognized in organizational documents and secondary sources. This aversion might be due to Dveri’s attempts to portray itself as a moderate right-wing political party – a relatively recent process that was particularly salient during my fieldwork. Alternatively, the intellectuals tend to hide their association with political parties (see 7.1.2.). The organization that was named as an ally and partner most often among my interviewees was the non-political NGO Center for Life. Founded in 2018 by the conservative anti-abortion doctor Bojan Nakić, with the support of the Serbian Patriarch, the organization resembles anti-gender SMOs recognizable in the transnational anti-gender movement that focus on family values and pro-life activities with a (quasi)scientific framing. The NGO aims to “gather practitioners and experts from all areas of social life to ensure conditions conducive to childbirth, creating the culture of life [...] respecting life from conception, rooted in several centuries of positive experiences with Christian marriage and family.” (Center for Life, n.d.). Anti-abortion associations in Serbia

seems to be the most independently developed field of actors in relation to Dveri's movement 'coagulation' (Funke 2014) attempts. One of Dveri's leaders explains what he calls the "three levels of organizing the Serbian patriotic sector: the first one was created around the Church, the second around universities, and the third one is this classical nongovernmental sector in civil society which was created independently" (Boris, B2). The anti-abortion organizations belong to the third group, since most of them envisage their activities as belonging to the sphere of the nonpolitical, medical or expert care for natality in Serbia. There have been several attempts to build a network of pro-life associations, but seemingly without success, despite support from the Orthodox church and the World Congress of Families.

In addition to the Center for Life, several other umbrella initiatives attempted to gather various anti-abortion individuals and organizations, including the Alliance for Life and the Alliance for the Family and Childbirth, the latter gathering Center for Life, Survival, Center for Babies, Orthodox Parent, Center for Family Protection, Community of St. Nektaria Eginski, Movement for Life and Help to the Family. In 2019, the new Alliance for Life brought WCF's Brian Brown to Serbia to premier the anti-abortion movie 'Unplanned', co-organized by an Orthodox priest, Dveri's members and collaborators, and the Serbian editors of IFAM news. However, it seems that the various interdenominational differences, lack of resources and heterogeneity of views on how to act have seemingly been thwarting the success of pro-life attempts so far, which I will explore more in the chapter on movement relations. In conclusion, the anti-gender network in Serbia is small, centred around conservative academia (see 7.1.2.), small lay Orthodox associations and websites, Dveri, and groups of anti-abortion initiatives. In addition to poor resources, another part of the explanation of low anti-gender mobilization in Serbia results from the particular political and discursive opportunity structures of the wider national context.

8.1.1. Breaking Through the Fascist Stigma – Perceptions of Context

The largest challenge identified by my interviewees within the broader political and discursive opportunities is the treatment of anti-gender activities in the media. On the one hand, mainstream media are perceived as treating topics related to demography, and family values as non-issues. This is interpreted by some as political censorship, given the governmental grip over media (Evgenija, B1; Boris, B2), and does not differ depending on which party is in power. On the other hand, when media outlets do engage with anti-gender actors, their conduct is

perceived as a hostile attack, slander, or manipulative reporting, aiming to present the actors, especially Dveri, as neo-fascists (Boris, B2; Teodora, B3; Pavle, B8). As Pavle (B8) noted:

We were insulted, but we pushed through it stoically. Our job was to show we were not like that [fascists] and have people recognize that. When the gay parade appeared as a topic, many actors had no answer, ignored it, or when they reacted it was violent. Our approach was to always emphasize nonviolence but to have our own civic argumentation against it [the parade]. This was interesting to the media, so they started calling us, despite initial hostilities.

Thus, a hostile discursive opportunity structure prompted anti-gender leaders to moderate their rhetoric. It is in light of these perceptions of context that we should understand Dveri's shift from attacking homosexuals to attacking a 'homosexual ideology' (Dveri, 2012). Moreover, they could hardly find allies in the party system or institutions, other than the increasingly marginal Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS). According to Cvetan (B5), the post-2008 pro-EU government of the Democratic Party (DS) marginalized radical-right intellectuals, clergymen and civil society actors, pushing them to seek refuge in the autonomy of universities, and especially the Faculty of Engineering, where they built the bulk of their forces. Whereas the more liberal parties such as the DS or the LDP were natural enemies for anti-gender actors, there was little sympathies for the still marginal Dveri among right-wing populist parties. Dveri's anti-establishment identity of a 'genuinely new' conservative political force threatened the far-right elites of the corrupt post-Milošević party system, including the SRS with whom they were not able to establish cooperation. Furthermore, Dveri became one of the challengers of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the pro-EU splinter of the far-right SRS that took control of the country after 2012 and became the new incarnation of authoritarianism and political corruption (Bieber, 2019; Castaldo, 2020). It seems that Aleksandar Vučić's strategy towards the Christian far-right, including its anti-gender faction, was one of marginalization and hostility – with Vučić calling Dveri's president a fascist in 2019 (Večernji.hr, 12 January 2021) – but also partial issue-co-optation, particularly around the problem of demography and natality. That SNS's regime could successfully co-opt the anti-gender threat was best demonstrated in 2020 when Dveri's former expert on family policies Radoš Pejović left the party to join Vučić's SNS.

8.1.2. 'Patriots' and Intellectuals Campaigning for 'Family Values'

Campaigning for 'family values' has mostly taken place in conferences and academic halls, newspaper offices and party headquarters in Serbia. Anti-gender actors and moral entrepreneurs mobilizing around pro-family and pro-life issues against GSE in Serbia have not engaged in

mass street mobilization or collective action, with the Family March as an exception. There are multiple explanations for this, most of which will be examined in the subsequent comparative chapter. From a resource mobilization perspective, Dveri notwithstanding, there is a weak right-wing civil society and a practically non-existent Christian-Orthodox network of lay activists that would carry the difficult task of mobilization and campaigning. In addition, conventional lobbying and action forms pressuring the different coalition governments and public officials to take a step back and reconsider their more progressive legislative proposals has often worked, thus making street mobilization somewhat unnecessary. As argued by Pető (2017) in the case of Hungarian anti-gender discourses, there is no need for movement if the government is gender-conservative. For example, the Serbian Orthodox Church, together with other religious communities and churches, opposed the Anti-discrimination Bill in 2009, forcing the centrist/liberal government to withdraw the draft law for further consideration. In the end, the specific articles on 'gender identity' were removed from the law, although the right to express one's sexual orientation freely remained, despite SOC's objections that such a right would endanger public morals (Politika, 10 March, 2009).

The first two Family Marches were held in 2009 and 2010. Whereas the first demonstration was an anti-abortion march co-organized with Serbian Orthodox clergymen calling on Serbian families to have more children and to stop abortion and the 'white plague' (RTV.rs, 12 September 2009), the 2010 was an anti-LGBT event calling for a ban on the Belgrade Pride Parade. Subsequent Family Marches were primarily focused on getting the Pride Parade cancelled, inviting international guests such as World Congress of Families representatives to support their cause. The March jump-started anti-gender mobilization in Serbia as well as its transnationalization efforts from 2013 when WCF's Aleksei Komov boasted how, together with Dveri, they managed to get Pride banned in Belgrade. Anti-pride activities of different kinds were supported by statements of top-level clergy officials of the Serbian Orthodox Church denouncing Pride parades and equating homosexual '(dis)orientation' with pedophilia (Sremac & Ganzevoort, 2015).

The culmination of Dveri's attempts to bring their nascent 'pro-family' movement to the Serbian political agenda came in 2015 and 2016 with two distinct regional conferences of the World Congress of Families organized in Belgrade and Leskovac. Between the two events, Dveri had finally succeeded in entering the Serbian Parliament with 7 mandates, as part of a larger coalition with DSS. The conferences should thus be interpreted as the movement-party's claim to political legitimation and moderation through transnationalization (della Porta & Tarrow,

2005). The hastily formed front-NGO „Center for the Protection of Family“ was tactically registered by Dveri's International Secretary Nemanja Zarić to present the events as organized by a familial civil society organization. In collaboration with DSS's deputy-mayor of Belgrade, the 2015 event was hosted in the City Hall around a pro-family agenda of defending the traditional family – a floating signifier used to catch issues ranging from euthanasia and surrogacy to abortion and LGBT rights. Among the speakers were WCF leaders from the US and Russia, Don Feder and Aleksej Komov, as well as Dmitry Smirnov, president of the Patriarchal Commission for the Family of the Russian Orthodox Church. Inspired by the World Congress of Families and the Russian Orthodox church, the association Orthodox Parents pleaded the SOC to form a Department for the Orthodox Family that would combat 'sodomy', 'totalitarian ideologies', and the 'infestation of gay lobbyists' (Pravoslavni roditelj, 18 October, 2015) – so far to no avail. Bolstered by their new status of a parliamentary party, Dveri organized another WCF event in the fall of 2016, holding a march to bring the conclusions of the conference to the buildings of Parliament and Government of Serbia „because the government does not care enough for the family – it is more concerned with the promotion of anti-family and gay-friendly values“ (RTV, 17 September 2016). The cooperation between Dveri and IOF continued, with WCF representatives helping premier the anti-abortion documentary 'Unplanned' in 2019 with the help of the Orthodox priest Dušan Nišević, representative of 'Familial Serbia', a defunct umbrella organization of anti-abortion initiatives in Serbia.

In parallel to Dveri's ascension to the public and political stage, anti-gender intellectuals and academics from the University of Belgrade agitated against GSE-related policy proposals. One successful attempt to block the 2011 Child Act was organized by Serbian nationalist intellectuals, more or less tightly linked to Dveri – itself originally a student organization. However, Dveri's role was once again downplayed, even downright removed in the account of one of the spearheading intellectuals of the campaign, Miša Đurković of The Institute for European Studies. In his book „A War for the Family in Serbia“, he claims victory in stopping the children's rights legislation as damaging to parental rights, harmful for allowing minors abortion without parental consent and protecting queer youth. The petition and campaign are attributed to „an organized rebellion of people“, „experts“, „general public“ and „broader layers of society“, without any mention of Dveri (Đurković, 2019). However, it was Dveri that called for „all important national institutions, political parties, the Serbian Orthodox Church and other traditional religious communities in Serbia to stop this attack on our families“ (Dverisrpske.com, 16 December 2011). They claimed that the Act's expansion of 'alleged'

children's rights was potentially conflicting with parents' rights, especially the recognition in the draft text that children can belong to sexual minorities (Dverisrpske.com, 16 December 2011). Radical nationalist framing was used to dramatize the point and bridge the issue to NATO's bombing of Serbia by one of the speakers of Dveri's press conference:

This law was not written by man but by Satan. This law is a new bombardment of Serbia – but this bomb drops in every house, on every family. There shall be no life after this (Dveri, 2011)

Despite a meager number of around 70 public intellectuals, mostly social scientists, writers and journalists who signed Dveri's petition against the law, the Government backed down, blaming the law on the Ombudsman (Đurković, 2019). Another victory of anti-gender entrepreneurs came in 2017 when conservative academics and Dveri attacked the education packages aiming to prevent sexual and gendered violence prepared by the Government and the NGO Incest Trauma Center. As Zaharijević (2018) notes, this was the first instance of a contentious public use of the 'gender ideology' frame in Serbia. Although Zaharijević rightly identifies newspaper articles and interviews by nationalist intellectuals such as Slobodan Antonić and Miša Đurković as the main sources of anti-gender contention, an important role in bringing the matter to the national agenda was played by Dveri – by then a parliamentary party.²³ Dveri asked for the Minister of Education to resign, lambasting the education package's mentions of (homo)sexuality as a promotion of „radical individualism, extreme feminism, and totalitarian LGBT and gender ideology“ (Dveri, 2017). Given the catch-all, populist character of SNS's government (Vranić, 2019), anti-gender actors seem to have developed a strategy of criticism that would allow SNS to disavow 'problematic' policy initiatives as pushed by 'Brussels' and liberal elites. As one opponent of GI put it for the Russian website Sputnik: „I think the Ministry was somehow manipulated – there is a group of people and some NGOs that function as a tight interest group“ (Milivojević, 2017). Consequently, the education packages were withdrawn, and the Minister himself stated that „every teacher who incites homosexuality and teaches children to be genderless beings will be punished“ (Šarčević, 2017). One member of the post-2021 Coalition for the Natural Family confirmed that there is a conscious strategic effort to frame claims towards the Government in such a way (for example, through legal, procedural criticism) that allows them to backtrack on progressive legislation (Ada, B10). However,

²³ In fact, both Antonić and Đurković have collaborated in public statements and campaigns with the party and written for its publications.

sophisticated legal argumentation is a more recent development in movement repertoires of far-right actors, as we shall see in the following section on action forms.

8.1.3. From Street Violence to Baby Carriages – Action Forms

Nine years after the first violently attacked Belgrade Pride in 2001, extremist groups clashed again with police in an attempt at gay-bashing on October 10, 2010. One of the organizers of the riot, a far-right organization close to Dveri, the Fatherland Front „Obraz“ was subsequently declared illegal and disbanded as an extremist organization by the Constitutional Court of Serbia, while its leader was sentenced to two years in prison for calls for lynching of Serbia's LGBTIQ+ population. This aftermath was a lesson to be learned by other far-right organizations opposing Pride parades and was a motivating factor in pushing Dveri to revamp its anti-gay protests as a respectable, middle class demonstration of patriotic parents and children marching for 'family values'. Prior to that, the Serbian state reactions to anti-LGBT attacks were „heistant, ambiguous and inconclusive“ (Nielsen, 2013), thus leaving the opportunities for violent action open. The birth of anti-gender contention in Serbia viewed from this perspective is thus a moderation of action repertoires and framing to adapt to changing political and discursive opportunities. Pride parades became a litmus test for Serbia's readiness to accede to the European union – a prized goal of Western-looking elites in Serbia (Lazić & Vuletić, 2009). Organized physical attacks on pride marches were no longer to be accepted, as is visible in the absence of rioting as a form of protest in Figure 11. Dveri organized two thirds of all anti-gender protest events, demonstrating the centrality of the movement-party for anti-gender politics.

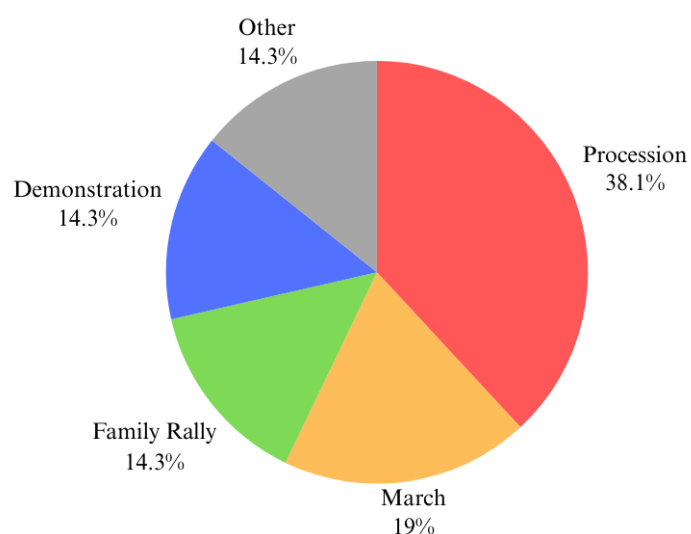


Figure 11 – Types of Anti-gender Protest Forms in Serbia

Whether ‘purging’ Belgrade from the sin of homosexuality in anti-gay processions or organizing rallies against abortion, religious repertoires, namely processions, have been the central action form of anti-gender protests in Serbia. According to Igrutinović et al. (2015), politicized ritual prayer is combined by the far right with secular aims and discourse, which represents an important innovation in religio-sexual nationalist (Sremac & Ganzevoort, 2015) strategies. Rallying both in the name of Christian morals and the family thus gave a more respectable veneer to nationalist street action. Whereas the Initiative to Ban Abortion and Movement 1389 held onto religious symbolism and repertoires, Dveri increasingly sought secular, familialist framing and identity deployment with their Family March, especially after becoming a parliamentary party in 2016.

Alongside the March came new events, including humanitarian and charity events to support poverty-stricken families, cultural events and familial rallies in public spaces with workshops and playgrounds for children. The evolution of anti-gender contention in Serbia thus underwent two steps. First, from violent, loosely organized riots and gay-bashing organized by small neo-fascist and football hooligan groups to clergy-backed rallies and processions, and second, from religious-nationalist processions to secularized Family marches. After Dveri formally became a political party in 2015, the Church could no longer be associated with it publicly. In addition, driven by electoral logics, Dveri’s leadership now sought to expand their constituencies beyond their core traditional lay Orthodox and nationalist base. The use of the ‘gender ideology’ frame, utilized in 2017 as an addendum to Dveri’s already elaborated ‘totalitarian homosexual ideology’, thus appeared together with the secular face of the Family march. The GI frame is able to condense all that allegedly threatens the family and the nation, namely, homosexuality, abortion, rampant individualism and loose sexual morals that are leading Serbia to cultural, political, and literal (demographic) ruin. However, despite a slight increase in collective action over the years (Figure 12), we can clearly see that protests are not a common action form of anti-gender actors in Serbia, with only a few protests events organized per year, rarely over three.

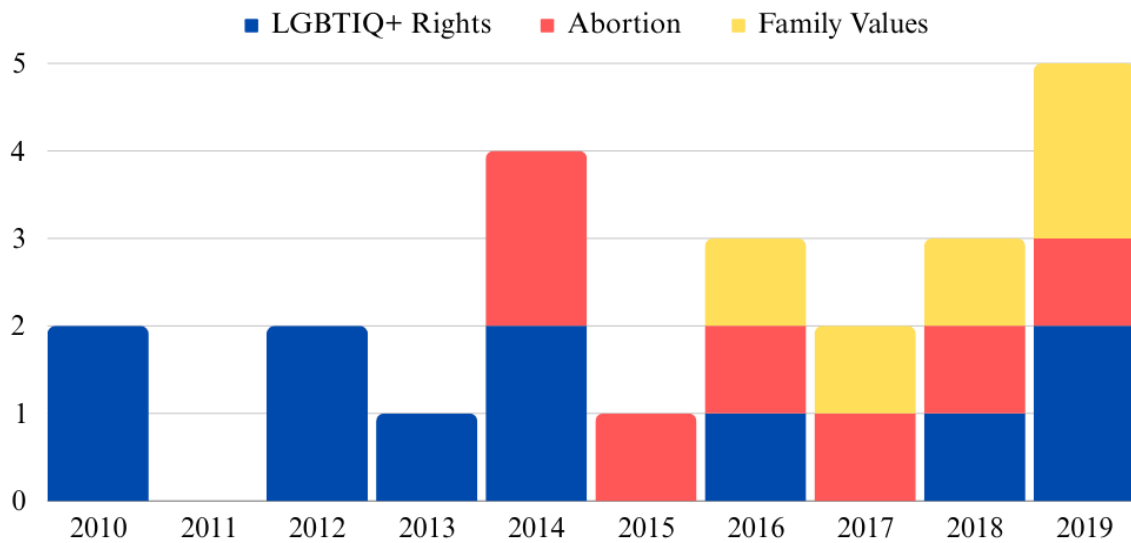


Figure 12 – Timeline of Anti-gender Protest Events and Issues in Serbia

Interestingly, the number of protests per year slightly increases after 2014. Given the right-wing movement-party substitution thesis (Hutter, 2014; Caiani & Císař, 2019), we could expect a decline in protest activity after Dveri's entry into parliament in 2016. However, it seems that the opposite happened – both Dveri and other actors increased mobilization in the streets. This might be due to an increasingly authoritarian nature of SNS's regime coupled with alleged support for LGBT+ rights and the naming of an openly lesbian prime minister in 2017, but it requires further analyses. Nevertheless, according to my interview data, protests, but also conventional lobbying, legislative consultation and press conferences, remain a fairly rarely used action form of anti-gender actors in Serbia overall. Most action forms used both by Dveri and other NGOs in the last decade are expressive and non-political. The expressive actions include educations, training and public forums organized with the goal of spreading the ideology on abortion, sexuality, demography, as well as other nationalist issues concerning Kosovo and Orthodox Christianity. Additionally, and mostly due to the heavy influence of nationalist intellectual circles, a large part of actions consist of non-political (in the strict sense) knowledge and media production, including articles and book publishing, videos, brochures, and film screenings. Dveri single-handedly created a network of satellite initiatives, pro-life individuals and lay Orthodox activists, including a TV show "Serbia – A Friend of the Family" that aimed at movement mobilization, networking and propaganda. Interestingly, there is not much mention of online organizing among interviewees which might be due to the fact that movement constituencies are not as present on social media. Nevertheless, in his book on "pro-

family” activism, Đurković (2019) briefly mentions ‘parental Viber groups’ as playing an important role in mobilizing discontent against the various policy proposal anti-gender actors contended with. The overall low mobilization capacity of Serbian anti-gender actors will be addressed in further chapters on relations with the SOC, and will be particularly visible from a comparative perspective.

In conclusion, anti-gender actors in Serbia face a critical lack of resources, relatively closed political and discursive opportunities, with cooperation centered around Dveri and smaller anti-abortion, pro-natalist initiatives. Since the whole party system is tilted towards the right, including the ruling SNS that has banned Pride parades several times, anti-gender actors are occasionally able to pressure the governments to back down on their ‘Eurocompliant’ policies even without serious mobilization capacities. Furthermore, anti-gender contention was used primarily as a tool of one dominant actor – Dveri – to facilitate their electoral turn and present an allegedly moderate traditionalism of ‘family values’ that banks on politicized homophobia. Despite low levels of street mobilization, protests actually increased as Dveri entered the parliament, challenging the far-right substitution thesis on protest and electoral politics as mutually replacing each other.

8.2. ‘She Nurtures, He Defends’ – Ideology and Framing

8.2.1. A Christian Nation Troubled by Demographic Winter

As in the two previous cases, Serbian SMO leaders were asked about the values driving their organization’s work and the role of religion in it. Figure 13 presents the relative share of individual values coded in composite categories, with the illustration representing the total set of values enumerated by respondents [n=31]. Most importantly, a third of all listed values highlight some form of nationalism or patriotism. The second and third most salient values uttered verbatim in all cases were ‘Christian values’, followed by ‘family values’. Finally, only a few respondents mention ‘traditional values’, ‘life from conception’, and the ‘culture of life’.

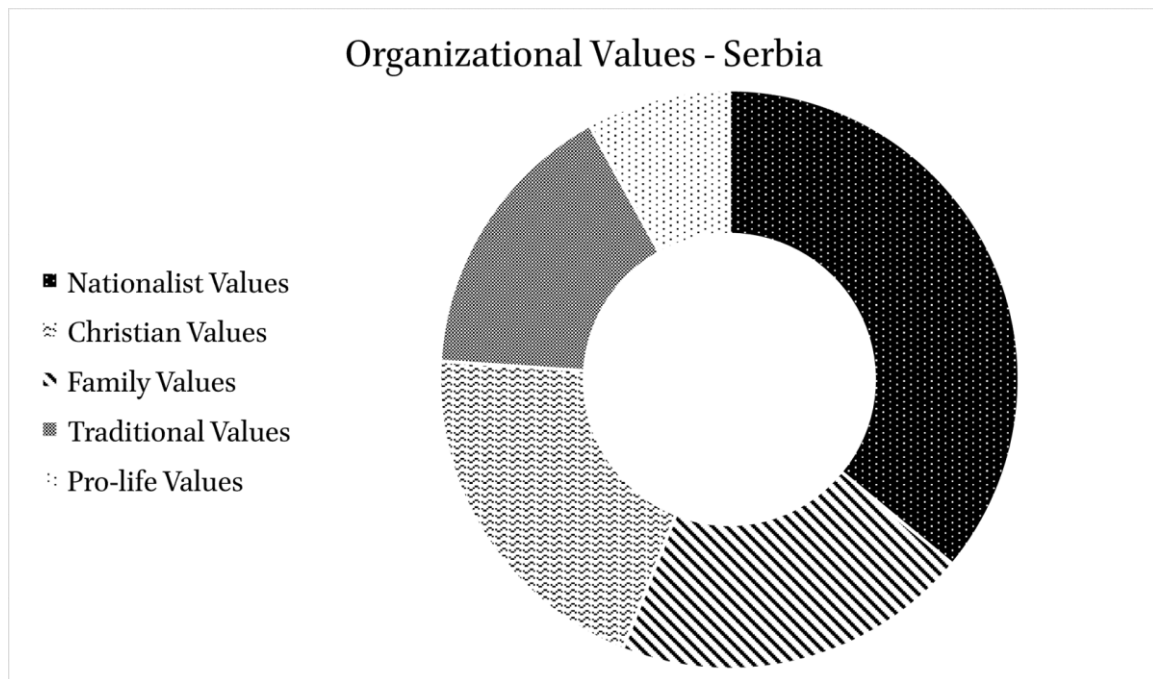


Figure 13 - Anti-gender SMO Values in Serbia [n=31]

Most interviewees explicitly mention religion and faith as a personal motivating factor in their activist and political work. ‘Evgenija’ (B1) and ‘Dušan’ (B6) name the Orthodox church and Christianity as clear sources of authority for their organization on issues like abortion and gender roles. Unlike the Croatian case, where (quasi)scientific argumentation is widespread, only one of my interviewees highlighted the importance of medical sciences in defining life as beginning at conception (Cvetan, B5). Most importantly, my interviewees elaborate on the role of religion in two ways. Firstly, Christianity serves as a source of values and political guidelines for defining the family as heterosexual and the promotion of a ‘culture of life’. Secondly, religion and faith are deeply imbricated with nationhood. As Boris (B2) elaborates, ‘the Church should reassert the position it held in society throughout Serbian history... the spiritual and national identity are of greatest importance’. Clearly, religious nationalism in its Serbian Orthodox form of *svetosavlje* is the central organizing force of Serbian anti-gender efforts. Christian values are intimately tied to national identity: ‘In Serbian history, we have suffered through grave injustices and extermination – it was our faith that saved us ... Had we not stuck to Christian values we would not have survived’. (Evgenija, B1).

Half of all interview participants from Serbia mentioned the issue of demography as a central issue. As one leader pointed out, ‘the first problem of Serbia is the demographic catastrophe known among the people as the white plague’ (Pavle, B8). The ‘white plague’ (*bela kuga*) is commonly used in Serbia to denote sub-replacement fertility. Another interviewee also

emphasizes the white plague, the ‘demographic winter’, and the disappearance of the Serbian people as ‘central threats’ to family values (Boris, B2). According to this narrative, Serbs are dying out – the culture of death, which includes non-traditional family models, should be overcome with policies promoting natality and larger families (Evgenija, B1; Rastko, B4; Dušan, B6; Pavle, B8). Importantly, almost none of my interview respondents rely on human rights framing – a finding further addressed in the comparative chapter. The imbrication of demography, nationalism, and pro-family positions is further reflected in the organizational documents and programs of Serbian anti-gender SMOs. All analyzed initiatives, NGOs, and parties, no matter their organizational identity and issue focus, strongly link social conservatism and anti-abortion positions to patriotism, nationalism, and demography. This link is perhaps most clearly outlined in Dveri’s election program: ‘... all social forces should act to strengthen the family. Without the family, there is neither a healthy individual nor a strong Serbia; without a population, there is no economy nor security’ (Dveri, 2007). The importance of family values is thus directly linked to national security. However, Dveri’s religious nationalism also changes over time. From an emphasis on the ‘faith in God and Serbdom’ and Serbia’s authentic Orthodox culture (Dveri, 2007), a secularized emphasis is put on the family as an ‘active agent of social life’ and the ‘right of parents to raise their children’ (Dveri, 2011, para. 4). Nevertheless, the family model of society remains in the function of preserving the biological survival of the nation as a core part of the party’s ideology. The issue of Serbian survival is central even for specific policy positions – population decline is listed as the number one (of six) problem of Serbia’s education system, for example (Dveri, 2011, para. 6).

While we could expect nationalist worry about demography to appear in the program of a far-right political party, even newer, non-partisan organizations focusing more exclusively on family and abortion issues also firmly integrate social conservatism, religiosity, and nationalism. The Center for Life’s values (The Center for Life, n.d.) can be summarized in the following threefold formula: a culture of life; backed by a Christian model of the family; to support the survival of the nation. Unlike the rest of the anti-gender SMOs, two anti-abortion organizations rooted in Serbia’s small Protestant communities – Choose Life and the Center for Babies – stray from this model by putting less emphasis on nationhood and demography. This might point to the centrality of Orthodoxy and *svetosavlje* as a mediating factor linking social conservatism to nationalism. According to the NGO Choose Life: “the meaning of family, marriage, and children has been devalued – the value of each individual is endangered. The traditional order is disappearing before our eyes” (Choose Life, 2013). While individuals and

families are framed as threatened by the changing social morality, there is no mention of the nation or of Serbia's survival.

8.2.2. 'We are not a Party – We are a Family' – Dveri's Ideology

Given the centrality of Dveri for anti-gender politics in Serbia – the party that introduced the 'gender ideology' frame to the national agenda and organized two thirds of all anti-gender protests – I used thematic analysis to understand their ideology and framing before continuing with the meaning of GI in radical-right contention in Serbia more broadly. Dveri highlight a widespread crisis and dissolution of the Serbian state, society and nation. The problem was initially presented through a nationalist prism, as the "historical decline and fatigue of the Serbian people [...] indifference and national irresponsibility" (Dveri, 2009b). Although occasionally mentioning economic issues, such as neoliberal capitalism, destruction of agriculture or transitional criminal privatization (Dveri, 2012b), the crisis facing Serbia is explained primarily as a moral one. For instance, they claim that, in the past, scarcity never impeded population growth, stating that a strong economy "is not the only condition for creating families" (Glišić, 2011). Serbia's downfall is thus also due to cultural issues, namely, the repression and abandonment of "traditional values of the community: marriage, family, parish, nation, state, social solidarity" (Dveri, 2009). Nevertheless, the key culprit of the contemporary sociopolitical crisis is "the united monopolies of Serbia" – a term used to define domestic tycoons allegedly supported by foreign banks, Western embassies, corrupt politicians, and controlled media (Dveri, 2011). Overall, Dveri emphasizes the auto-colonial mindset of Serbian elites resulting in the "spiritual, moral, ideological, economic and political slavery to foreign societal models" (Obradović, 2010) – whereby foreign primarily denotes Western values, banks, NATO, and EU elites. Their financial power contaminates electoral campaigns and public service, thereby hollowing out democracy and leading to resignation and low voter turnout (Glišić & Obradović, 2011a).

Unsurprisingly, given the far-right traditionalist profile of Dveri, ethnic identity is another important theme in describing the causes and consequences of the crisis of democracy. Firstly, the Serbian nation has been humiliated through territorial disintegration, the dispersion of the Serbian ethnos, and the weakening of its sovereignty, military, and state power (Dveri, 2009a; Dveri, 2009b). Thus, the problem is Serbia's inability to establish full sovereignty over its own territories, which includes not only Kosovo but, tendentially, all areas in which Serbs live,

including Croatia and Macedonia (Obradović, 2010). Secondly, the Serbian people are in danger of becoming extinct. The central concept used here to instil a sense of urgency is one of a “white plague” – a demographic catastrophe of negative population growth discursively linked with abortion, poor economic policies, disease, and addiction (Dveri, 2011; Glišić, 2010). Here, the family figures as the central victim of irresponsible policies and foreign values; marriages are falling apart, couples have fewer children, and the youth are leaving the country in search of a better life.

Dveri reinvented its framing after 2010 by presenting itself as an authentic, familial, patriotic movement. Although claiming to be “a moderate movement of social solidarity”, their vision still retained a visible anti-pluralist principle. Dveri’s leaders called for “supra-party consensus”, a stronger army, a centralized state and less regional autonomy (Obradović, 2010; Dveri, 2011; Glišić, 2011). Furthermore, Dveri’s quasi-theocratic vision gives the Orthodox Church a central role in society which also fits its movement-based identity. The Church is defined as “the biggest NGO with a right to its own influence” (Glišić, 2011) – a tongue-in-cheek response to the secular left’s criticism of clerical involvement in politics. The Orthodox Church serves as a source of legitimization, helping to justify both their irredentism – due to the transborder nature of clerical eparchies – and their political homophobia.

In early 2011, amid widespread anti-government protests, Dveri announced its entry into the electoral competition as “a popular movement that stands for family values and social patriotism” (Glišić, 2011). They entered the election as an independent list of citizens, vowing to crush the “party-parasitical” system while calling for systemic change (Dveri, 2011). An important aspect of their identity framing was their untarnished image — the fact that they were not a political party nor previously active as politicians. In fact, the central part of their selling point was their presence in civil society. They highlight “12 years of experience in social action and direct cooperation with all leading institutions of the Serbian people”, including the Church, the military, cultural and media institutions (Tvrdišić, 2011). Importantly, they listed their movement actions and repertoires as a source of legitimization, noting manifestations, public forums, campaigns, family marches and humanitarian actions undertaken in previous years as proof of their closeness to the people. The importance of anti-partisan arguments has been corroborated within the interviews. The common claim was one of political necessity, of reaching the limits of what is achievable in civil society and motivated primarily by the (perceived) mass support for their protest activities and marches against Belgrade Pride (Boris, B2; Nikola, B7; Pavle, B8). Dveri’s attempt to use anti-LGBT discourse and Euroscepticism to

rebrand itself away from its extremist, clerical-nationalist image towards a socially conservative profile has been previously noted by scholars (Vukov, 2013; Jovanović, 2018). In the context of partial state repression and the consequent constitutional ban of their fellow extremist organization “Obraz” for inciting violence against LGBTIQ+ people, Dveri adapted to a hostile context: “We wanted to avoid the trap of being perceived as evil hooligans and to create a space for opposing the LGBT ‘march through institutions’ in a non-violent, argument-backed, civilized way” (Nikola, B7). Yet, in a highly anti-political culture of widespread disillusionment with parties, leaders, and elites, Dveri had to frame their new identity carefully. The movement-party strategy was thus the result of careful consideration of their own resources, organizational identity, and the context within which they operated.

8.2.3. Gender Ideology – Brought by NATO's 'Gold Diggers'

The GI frame has not been used in Serbia in public debates until 2017/2018. Prior to that, Dveri (2012) used the 'LGBT ideology' frame primarily to oppose Belgrade pride parades. Political homophobia would serve Dveri well in invigorating their anti-Western, pro-Russian profile. On the other hand, gender ideology is perceived by Serbian anti-gender leaders primarily as a negation of the sexual binary. Whether it is interpreted as fluid gender expression or identity or a 'sex change', GI represents an attack on the natural division of sexes into the two distinct categories of man and woman. As such, it is rejected as an absurdity, a folly whereby one can be „a man in the morning and a woman in the afternoon“ (Boris, B2, Pavle, B8). According to Nikola (B7), GI is a claim that sexes do not exist – individuals are moulded by society into genders, allowing them to choose their gender freely – a gross misrepresentation of any serious theory of gender. Finally, transgender persons are implicitly recognized as a dangerous result of such an ideology, which opens the door for children to 'change their sex' and 'men to enter women's toilettes' (Dušan, B6; Pavle, B8). Overall, the heteronormative essentialist assumptions about men and women are juxtaposed to absurd and exaggerated examples of individuals trying to transform into cats or grown men attempting to become little girls (Nikola, B7, Pavle, B8).

Furthermore, from the essentialist understanding of the sexes comes also a heteronormative expectation of sexual behavior, and, thus, a rejection of LGBT+ equality as a central part of GI. Specifically, the second most common examples and descriptions of 'gender ideology' recognize homosexuality as the crux of the matter. The 'gay parade' and the Western-backed

lesbian prime minister are seen as examples of the GI wave that brought decadence and perversion to Serbian society via a 'homosexual march through institutions' (Boris, B2). Furthermore, such 'foreign values' are interpreted through a nationalist frame and externalised as a Western problem. They are 'inauthentic', 'atypical for Serbian society', and were 'brought here by force' (Teodora, B3; Dušan, B6). Nikola's (B7) example brings together the typical conspiratorial arguments about the import of GI from the West:

I know about some cases first-hand because my cousin has been living in Canada for thirty years and he told me already in the 1990s that a transvestite was brought to his daughter's elementary school. The teacher ordered the children to pat the transvestite and that he would show them some desirable ways of behaving. Hence, this is not an ideology you choose, it is imposed through the school system.

A particular concern for most of my interviewees are the alleged dangers of exposing children to GI via education in kindergartens and schools; arguments that are usually accompanied by homo/transphobia implicitly identifying non-cisheterosexual persons as paedophiles. In general, introduction of GI to schools is claimed to be a nefarious aim of 'gender ideologues' and LGBTIQ+ activists that would lead to sexualization, confusion and indoctrination of children, including child sex changes (Evgenija, B1; Boris, B2; Dušan, B6; Nikola, B7). GI is considered to be an attack on 'common sense', normality, as well as Christian, traditional values – an „anti-humanist“ ideology (Nikola, B7), and a „social manipulation aiming at the destruction of the family“ (Pavle, B8).

Even gender equality – recognized generally as a legitimate societal goal – is also used for nefarious purposes, namely, to introduce LGBT ideology into schools, media, and society in general (Evgenija, B1). Finally, there is a significant presence of anti-feminist rejection of the ideals and policy agendas of gender equality among the interviewees. According to Dušan (B6), feminism is no longer needed – the only ones advocating it today are radical who cast the whole history of society as a story of men oppressing women. His vision is thus a negation of the patriarchy, rejecting the gendered interpretation of violence in favor of the harmonization of familial relations between women and men. Furthermore, Evgenija (B1) and Teodora (B3) share his post-feminist assessment of gender equality as a goal that has already been achieved, and reject feminist excesses, naming women's quotas, affirmative action and gender-sensitive language as examples of artificial intrusions into society that could bring more harm than good. According to one anti-gender intellectual, it was precisely feminist activists, academics and NGOs that have slowly been introducing radical ideologies into Serbian society over the last forty years or so (Rastko B4). When asked about the origins of 'gender ideology', there is no

doubt among my interviewees about the West as its birthplace. A strong anti-occidental framing is present in most of the narratives, especially among Orthodox-nationalist respondents:

We used to call them NATO's gold diggers since they came along with this type of political option. We wanted to send them a message that if they expressed solidarity with the Serbian nation maybe people would accept them. As long as they are acting from this Euroatlantic position, they are, in fact, cutting themselves off from their own society, although, they do get good financial grants to do so.

Non-normative identities, LGBTIQ+ and feminist activists are thus recognized as a foreign body whose allegiances to the national interest of the Serbian people are constantly called into question. Whether the source of GI is located in the US and foreign embassies promoting it in Serbia (Dušan B6) or foreign-funded NGOs that mushroomed as a result of EU accession (Teodora B3), Serbian society is portrayed as a victim – a small country standing exposed in the windstorm of 'foreign global trends'. A nationalist, sovereignist framing of GI is thus a crucial element of the diagnosis, as well as the prognosis of what is to be done.

8.2.4. Political Homophobia – Issues and Strategies

Anti-gender discourse in Serbia is primarily a homophobic affair. In the context of highly publicised, contested and repeatedly banned pride parades in Belgrade, Dveri jump-started their transformation from an Orthodox-nationalist NGO to a far-right movement party by reorganizing their ideology around the Family March and a 'family model of society' in the early 2010s. Hence, Dveri defined two of the three protest issues of anti-gender mobilization, as visible in Figure 14. In fact, along with the Initiative to Ban Abortion, Dveri were one of only two actors organizing all protest captured by my PEA. In 2012, Dveri published an edited volume titled „Global Gay²⁴: The Totalitarian Ideology of Homosexuality“ where 'homosexual ideology' clearly serves a similar function to the as-of-yet locally absent 'gender ideology' frame. The book, meriting a separate study, presents an incongruent conspiratorial narrative of powerful global elites including the Rockfellers, George Soros, and the 'sexual-industrial complex'. The latter are all colluding to atomize societies into weak individuals falsely liberated from the safety of the family, church and nation into the clutches of sexual and economic exploitation and depravity. The alleged „supremacy of the individual over the natural family“ (Dveri, 2012, 50) endangers various *real* human rights, such as the right of parents to

²⁴ In Serbian, 'global gaying' (*globalno zagejavanje*) is a wordplay on global warming (*globalno zagrevanje*)

raise their children according to Christian values, or, most insidiously, the alleged human right of a child to receive healthcare and treatment for the disease of homosexuality (Dveri, 2012, p. 48). Over the years, Dveri shifted towards a more pro-family rhetoric, partially uncoupling their familial politics from Pride parades.

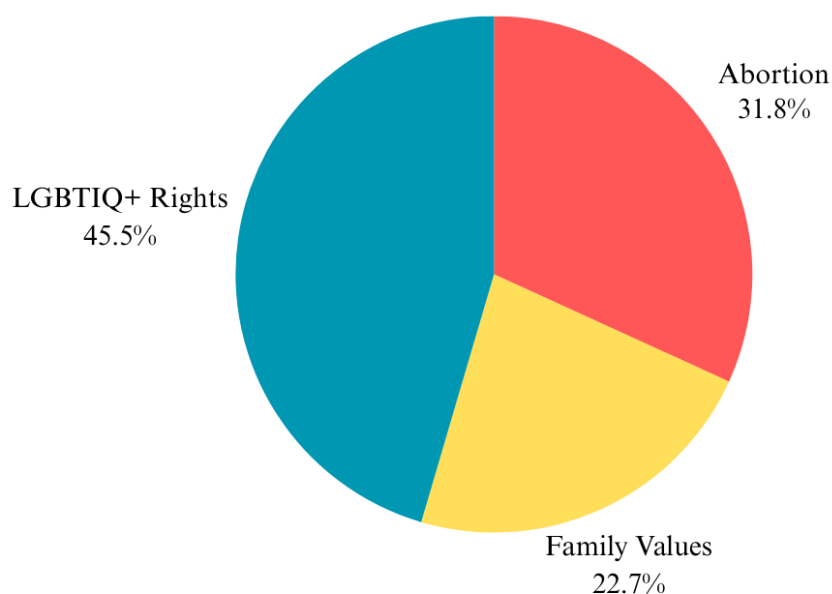


Figure 14 – Main Protest Issues of the Serbian Anti-gender Movement

The first Family March in Belgrade was co-organized by the head of the Saint Sava Monastery and the director of the Belgrade Patriarchate as a procession against abortion and the 'white plague', including a *moleban*²⁵ for mothers, encouraging birth and child-rearing (RTV.rs, 12 September 2009). It was only next year that the event was turned into an anti-LGBT march, as Belgrade Pride was to be held for the first time after the bloody attempt of 2001. Over one thousand people rallied behind Serbian flags for 'family values' to call for a cancellation of the Parade (Jadovno.com, 10 October 2010). The juxtaposition of the first two Family Marches shows how separate issues of abortion and homosexuality are bridged and framed as a threat to the Serbian family, the demographic, cultural, and spiritual survival of the Serbian nation. Orthodox clergymen continued condemning the Parade over the years, contributing to a religious flavor of the March, best exemplified in priests marching with censers to purge and 'cleanse' the city streets of the Parade (Igrutinović et al. 2015). The explicitly homophobic slogans against „faggots“ and movie screenings against „sodomy“ were increasingly coupled with a new pro-family discourse to protect the children: „This is not even about the Parade

²⁵ A Moleban is a form of supplication prayer where one asks for favors from God.

anymore, it is about familial Serbia. We should not allow privileged minorities to influence the life and will of the majority“ (Avaz.ba, 27 September 2014).

After Dveri became a political party in 2015, the SOC could no longer explicitly align itself with or support their activities (Boris, B2; Nikola, B7). However, Dveri had been working on reaching out to international allies as well. Aleksei Komov and Don Feder of the World Congress of Families had already joined the Belgrade Family March in 2013. The partisan turn and the new international connections generated both the need and the resources to reframe the Family March, especially the new Family Week, towards a more peaceful, seemingly moderate event emphasizing „the cultural and artistic program, children's entertainment and songs“ (Dverisrpske.com, 27 September 2013). Family marches, gatherings, cultural events and playground activities for children under Dveri's banner became the cornerstone of the newly formed party after 2015. Importantly, Family marches were no longer held in September as a counter-pride protest, but in May, as a spring celebration of natality and family. Dveri offered a “familial model of society”, promoting child-rearing, “the culture of life”, multiple-children families and legislative reforms favoring mothers, families and young couples (Dveri, 2011). They envisaged a national capitalism that would shield native workers, peasants, and small and medium entrepreneurs. Serbs are to be defended against the neoliberal onslaught via subsidies and protectionism, Church-backed social services and charity, safeguarding the right to private property but preventing unlimited enrichment and monopolies (Dveri, 2011). The „family model of society“ became a nodal point in Dveri's framing and its main ideological innovation. It arguably allowed Dveri to raise a new issue on the political agenda in an already crowded right-of-centre field of parties peddling ethnonationalism.

Simultaneously with the growth of family politics, for Annunciation Day in 2014, the first „Lity for the Banning of Abortion“, a religious procession, was held in Belgrade with the support of the Serbian Orthodox clergy. It was organized by an extreme-right Orthodox nationalist, Radojko Ljubičić from „Movement 1389“ who founded the „Initiative to Ban Abortion“. Although rarely gathering more than a few dozen participants marching around the national assembly to pray for the end of abortion, the Lity had strong official support from both the Patriarch Irinej, and Russian pro-life activists such as Sergej Chesnikov, who personally attended the event several times. The framing of the abortion issue is highly nationalist – the „white plague brings death to countless children and has severe consequences for adults“ (1389.org, 17 March 2014), including the aging and death of the Serbian nation (1389.org, 7 April 2017). The procession itself is a religious-political event in which participants hold icons,

pray against abortion and celebrate the Virgin Mary to invoke „the sanctity of motherhood, the beauty of childbirth, the joy of life“ and „the right to life of unborn children“ (1389.org, 9 April 2016). Whereas the Initiative to Ban Abortion has remained a marginal group of lay Orthodox activists close to the clergy with strongly Christian and nationalist framing, Dveri, as an organization with a longer history and stronger membership, opted for a rebranding away from extremist nationalism towards family values as a crucial step in their electoral turn. It is from this inter-organizational comparison that the significance of Dveri's transformation becomes more clear.

The Family March was conceived as a grassroots gathering of conservatives that would solidify their movementist *credo* ahead of the 2012 election. Dveri chose to participate in the election as a group of citizens precisely because of their disdain towards political parties (Vukov, 2013). The timing of the decision to compete in the elections is also important. In 2011, tens of thousands of Serbian citizens came out to the streets against the government of the center-left Democratic Party. While mass opposition was organized primarily by SNS, Dveri also saw the protest as an opening in the POS, which is evident in their framing of the political moment as a widespread social, economic, and political crisis. Casting a shadow on all parties as evil and immoral, Dveri identified civil society as the new, vibrant space of politics proper. Their pitch of “social patriotism” and “family values” came together with grassroots movement organizing as a two-pronged strategy. It allowed them to present themselves as non-extremist patriots “beyond the left-right division” (Dveri, 2009b). Ultimately, the parties' apparent moderation was a partial success. However, its internal contradictions would help prompt a split in the organization, with Dveri finally registering as a political party in 2015, shedding its collective leadership and movement-like identity (see also Spasojević, 2019). Prior to that, as one disaffected ex-member noted:

...Dveri were organized in a military-monastic way, and could not grow because of the nature of the system in which they operated. The huge mistake of that organisation was its adaptation to parliamentary democracy – a system everyone in the Movement, without exception, called a lie. (Kosanović 2015).

As another interview participant told me, he left Dveri because the organization adopted a leadership principle that they had initially fought against when Boško Obradović registered it as a party: “there was always a tension between two conceptions – a federation of local groups, which I think was the right choice, or a classical hierarchical structure. The latter concept won.” (Pavle, B8). Only after it registered as a political party and campaigned in an electoral coalition

with the more mainstream conservative DSS did Dveri finally enter the parliament in 2016, having one 5.2% of the vote.

In conclusion, nationalism and Christian values are central values of Serbian anti-gender actors, with demographic decline serving as a key nodal point tying in anti-abortion attitudes, religion and nationalism. Anti-gender actors interpret GI as a politically charged and imported ideology questioning the sex binary to further the agenda of ‘homosexuals’ and feminists. Dveri are particularly loud in voicing a religious kind of ethnonationalism by utilizing familist framing against ‘gender’. The party used the 2011 mass protests and discontent with the ruling elites to stage their entry into politics, increasingly presenting themselves as a moderate conservative movement espousing a ‘family model of society’.

8.3. A Dominant Player – Relations and Networks

8.3.1. A Weak Orthodox Civil Society

The vehement public homophobia of the highest echelons of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) is notorious not only in Serbia, but the whole region (Jovčić-Sas, 2018; Subotić, 2019). Bishops of the SOC have used various pejoratives when addressing homosexuality and homosexuals, including: “shame”, “mental illness”, “abomination”, and “grave disorder of the human personality”, to list but a few (Sremac & Ganzevoort, 2018). In addition, members of the Church publicly oppose abortion, with some bishops attacking lesbians and women who have abortions as ‘non-birthers’ or ‘anti-birthers’, including the Prime Minister of Serbia (Jevtić in Blic, 29 June 2017). However, theologically, and institutionally, the Serbian Orthodox Church, like most Orthodox churches excluding the Russian one, does not have a formal, systematized corpus of social and political teachings. Even though interviewees reflected upon the various ways in which individual clergymen and eparchies assisted their organizational efforts, there is no structure of organizational offices and entities that would promote anti-gender campaigning (Jović, personal communication, January 28, 2022). Offices that would correspond to the Catholic Council for Laity or Family are also non-existent, leaving the relationship of clergy and laypersons to everyday, localized organization on the lower levels of eparchies. As Nikola (B7) noted: “The Church does not act in an organized manner with respect to family values [...] Individual priests, temples, bishops – maybe through their blessing, participation in activities. But this is usually on the level of eparchies.” Given my positionality

as a researcher of Croatian origin, my interview participants often spontaneously reflected on and compared the ‘situation in Serbia’ to Croatian conservative movements. One of the leading anti-gender intellectuals, a member of the Coalition for the Natural Family, particularly emphasized this aspect:

In Croatia, it is all tied to the Church, especially when you had the referendum. Here, it's anything but that. Maybe some younger priests... Unfortunately, we don't have any organizational or financial support from the Church. For example, in my parish in New Belgrade, nothing really happens... maybe some humanitarian action every now and then. But nobody will stay after service to discuss politics or public issues, let alone organize something. (Rastko, B4)

Two of my interview participants directly correlate the lack of church support with the theological and doctrinal specificities of the Orthodox church. Rastko (B4) states that “Orthodoxy is a much less social and political religion, which means that it takes huge effort for them [clergy] to engage with anything other than liturgy”, while Boris (B2) is more explicit in claiming that “the Serbian Orthodox church does not have this tradition of creating its own organizations in the NGO sector or in politics, and maybe it differs strongly from other denominations in this sense”. Another important member of Dveri supports this position, claiming that the SOC does not support the movement as much because it is ‘not as present in civil society as the Catholic church’, but it still provides ample spiritual, symbolic, and declarative support (Cvetan, B5). In addition, anti-gender actors point to a lack of financial resources for their activities. As Evgenija (B1) notes, “they [the Church] give money exclusively to those who are directly under their patronage [...] we don't get any financial help, or spaces or communication”. Moreover, Boris (B2) notes that serious movement “structures or organizations do not exist because there is no one to finance them. [...] We don't have grassroots groups stemming from the Church itself. Instead, we laypeople organize ourselves and look for windows [of opportunity] to act”.

Despite the limited nature of cooperation and support from the SOC, most of my interviewees note that their various activities were publicly endorsed and supported by bishops in the Serbian Orthodox Church. As Evgenija (B1) put it “Us, Orthodox associations will get a formal blessing, but that's pretty much it”. Endorsement and other types of support, however, are not typically given by the top of the Church hierarchy, but instead by individual bishops and eparchies interested in collaborating. Some initiatives, such as the Alliance for Life and specific activities by Dveri seem to be the exception. In a rare instance of top-level support from Irinej, the former Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the front webpages of the Alliance for Life boast with his signed and stamped support. It reads:

[...] In principle, the archbishop gives his consent and support for the creation, and encourages an even more active engagement of, this association for the struggle against abortion and for encouraging the natality of our nation (Patriarch Irinej)

As one member of the Alliance pointed out, “our Alliance has the blessing of the Church and most people who are of faith and have understood that the first commandment of God was to ‘be fruitful, and multiply and replenish the earth’” (Dušan, B6). This example represents the previously mentioned characteristic of (Serbian) religious nationalism – anti-abortion activities are viewed through a nationalist prism of preserving the natality and the reproduction of the nation. This issue is closely related to the unresolved issue of Kosovo’s sovereignty and the growth of its Muslim population which is easily framed through racist demographic race scenarios (Yuval-Davis, 1989). In addition to endorsing their campaigns and actions, clergymen sometimes provide support to movement activities by advertising and informing the layfaithful and other members of the Church and its associational sphere. Finally, in rare instances, interviewees note that a partnership-like type of relation between anti-gender organizations and the Church existed during the early days of mobilization. This is particularly the case with Dveri that initially started as an extremist magazine with a missionary Christian purpose, but later broadened its mission towards “rooting ourselves in the total spiritual and national identity which includes also issues of language, script, history, statehood and national customs” (Boris, B2). Dveri’s early extensive collaboration with the Church was not centered around morality issues nor opposition to gender and sexual equality. Abortion was one of the issues primarily due to the nationalist framing concerned with the reproduction of the Serbian nation. It is also indicative that Dveri – the only civil society organization that established extensive decentralized cooperation networks with the SOC all over Serbia – later became the central node of the anti-gender network in Serbia. One of the presidents of Dveri highlights in detail the importance of what he calls a partnership with the Serbian Orthodox Church:

[...] Over 50 different Church dignitaries were guests at our public forums, everyone from the Patriarch to the various bishops [...] We couldn’t have organized anything without the blessing of the bishops. We travelled all over Serbia [...] thanks to full cooperation with individual eparchies. Back then, we were partners. We were all part of the Church, but not as clergymen, religious teachers, or employees. Rather, we were young people and associations eager to act through civil society by applying with the Church for finances to work on various projects”. (Pavle, B8)

Unlike important factions within the Catholic church in Croatia that acted to help generate the anti-gender movement on a strong doctrinal and institutional basis, conservative factions of the SOC did so by proxy of support for Dveri as a nationalist Orthodox-inspired association. Only later will Dveri strategically choose to reorient its identity and activities as pro-family and against

‘LGBT ideology’. Moreover, the importance of the Kosovo issue which has been omnipresent in Serbian politics reverberates within Church politics. This is also illustrated in an anecdote by one of my interviewees, an intellectual close to SOC circles:

When I visited the Patriarch 3 years ago, he demonstrated some understanding for the issue of natality and demography. But when I spoke to him in detail about the problems, he simply does not understand them. Kosovo, Montenegro — these are the issues he’s preoccupied with. The rest [gender] is science fiction to him. Only now is this changing to some extent with a younger generation of priests (Rastko, B4)

The SOC has a strong stake in the material, historical and symbolical aspects of the Kosovo crisis. Compared to Kosovo as the main political issue owned and cultivated by the Serbian (radical) right, issues of morality, gender and sexual equality take a back seat. Finally, the SOC, as most other Orthodox churches, is a weaker partner in relation to the state, unlike the somewhat stronger position of national Catholic churches which have backing from the Vatican City State. Combined with an increasingly authoritarian government in Serbia, these political opportunities are less open both for the Church and radical-right contenders to act. Instead, other spaces like universities provided a safe haven for radical right politics.

8.3.2. Religion as an Obstacle?

In addition to the mentioned problems, religion can also pose obstacles to movement emergence and development. This was particularly highlighted by one Protestant interviewee prominent in the Serbian anti-abortion scene:

There was an initiative to create an umbrella alliance of pro-life, pro-family organizations which would not be tied to the SOC. However, somehow, they still decided that it should be connected to the Church. In the end, all other NGOs which are not aligned with the SOC and their politics ended up being dropped from the network. (Teodora, B3)

We can hypothesize that the SOC’s desire to exert control over movement organizations is twofold. First, without a clear hierarchy and the Church’s authority on its top, supporting political campaigns which the clergy has no control over risks seriously tarnishing the image of the Serbian Orthodox Church in front of its flock and the broader public. Second, collaborating with Protestant and/or Catholic communities, despite common ground on morality issues, is a highly controversial topic for the SOC which is much more closed for cooperation compared to its Christian counterparts. Radical Orthodox activists are mostly pro-Russian and foster close ties

with their Russian brethren, which further antagonizes Protestant communities who often have ties to American religious organizations:

There are a lot of these hardcore Orthodox groups which reject everything not in line with their worldview as sinful. Cooperation with Lisac [Catholic Croat anti-abortion activist] would have been called heretical, for example. There are a lot of these closed communities that view everything through an ideological lense, which is not good. (Pavle, B8)

This example of ideological zeal affirms the importance of nationalism, and exclusivism more broadly, as a barrier to transnational cooperation among far-right organizations and movements. On a more theological level, even the organizational forms and repertoires of action of the anti-gender movement are recognized as potentially foreign to Serbian Orthodox tradition, as a “protestant, western model [...] different from the inward Orthodox spirit” (Pavle, B8). This finding is also relevant, in a secular sense, for the transnational aspect of the anti-gender movement. Arguably, local conservatives and religious right leaders have some difficulties in adopting and adapting the civic repertoires diffused from the West. After all, the diffusion of movement ideas and models from one context to another takes serious and sustained effort of ‘translation’ (Soule & Roggeband, 2019). However, most interviewees highlight a lack of resources and infrastructure rather than relational and coalition-building problems when lamenting the difficulties of movement mobilization.

Despite the limited and predominantly symbolic support of the Serbian Orthodox Church to the local anti-gender efforts, the central network nodes in the early days of mobilization depended on (scarce) lay religious communities. As one of the founders of Dveri explained to me when describing their beginnings in the 00’s: “At that time, we were trying to gather like-minded organizations in Serbia and the diaspora [...] primarily starting with ecclesiastical organizations like the Saint Sava youth communities and Orthodox Brotherhoods” (Boris, B2). While the former are formal clerical organizations for youth outreach, brotherhoods are mostly informal groups of laypersons formed around local pastors and temples. In its early movement-building day, Dveri worked hard on politicizing and ‘raising national consciousness’ in such Orthodox milieus, aiming to build what would later become conservative civil society. In this period, the members of Orthodox clergy helped Dveri by providing financial support for their magazines and projects (Zoran, A9). Granted, at the time, the movement had a more radical, nationalist character, which indicates a theoretically relevant finding. Anti-gender mobilization in the Serbian case sprung from the broader far-right partially as a consequence of the (perceived) state repression of nativist extremism. Nationalist leaders opted for a more moderate religious conservatism which seems to

have paid off in terms of movement mobilization, recruitment, and public support. In addition, this revamping of Dveri's identity, political agenda and framing coincides with its transformation into a movement-party in 2012. This brought about a radical change in Dveri's relationship with clergymen:

Our people withdrew from the Church not to cause any problems. All institutional ties were broken in a friendly atmosphere, only links to local individual priests remained. [...] As soon as we entered the electoral arena the SOC backed away from us, which is normal, because it is not allowed to take part in this type of collective action. (Boris, B2).

Opting for movement-party formation and competing in elections, therefore, had an important impact on the constellation of actors within the broader conservative movement sector, which I will address thoroughly in the section on movement-party relations. In addition to changing its relationship with the SOC, other anti-gender groups started identifying Dveri as a potential ally present in the halls of power who can put forward their concerns on the national agenda, primarily in the Serbian National Assembly.

8.3.3. International Allies from the East and the West

Several years prior to the founding of the Center for Life in Belgrade, an attempt to gather anti-abortion entrepreneurs in Serbia was made with the founding of the Center for the Protection of Family. However, this was a previously mentioned satellite organization of Dveri, represented by Dveri's Nemanja Zarić and Srđan Nogo, the latter infamously jailed by Vučić's regime for sedition during the 2020 COVID protests in Serbia. These attempts represented a strategy of creating front groups that would hide the partisan background of anti-gender politics and present it as born out of familial civil society. The most significant attempt of coordinated cooperation was undertaken by the independent anti-abortion expert Ljiljana Savić and Dveri's Radoš Pejović who formed 'Familial Serbia' in 2018, an umbrella organization consisting of: the Center for Life, Survival, Center for Babies, Orthodox Parent, Center for the Protection of Family, and a few smaller regional groups. Finally, as previously mentioned, the Alliance for Life was formed by Radojko Ljubičić, the head of 1389 Movement, an extreme-right association organizing anti-abortion activities since 2014 with the support of the SOC and Russian Orthodox anti-abortion activists. Attempts of movement coordination and cooperation seem to be stifled by three central problems. First is the *lack of material and human resources*. Commenting on the attempts of creating pro-family umbrella organizations, Rastko (B4) elaborated that "*ad hoc* stories don't succeed in the long run' since people don't have resources

to organize proper campaigns or organizational structures”. Second, as previously mentioned, even the organizations with some organizational capacity have trouble cooperating due to infighting over *religious and ideological differences*. The lines of division are drawn between the more radical, Orthodox activists gathered around the pro-Russian Alliance for Life, and various other regional organizations, the core of which is Protestant-backed, such as the Center for Babies. Religion seems to be an obstacle in this case:

“The Orthodox Church is centralized, decision-making is centralized. To reach a decision it takes ages because priests and patriarchs come and go. Once you are finally able to reach and get support from one of them, another takes his position over. [...] We can’t wait ten years, we are already so late – the Catholic church, in comparison, has comprehensive support for women, not only declaratively but substantially as well” (Teodora, B3).

Third, and overlapping with the previously mentioned divide, infighting occurs over *authority and strategy*. One movement leader confided about serious internal conflicts between the more radical and moderate groups on who should lead the coalition efforts and under whose umbrella (Zoran, B9). Despite a very small number of anti-abortion leaders in general, disputes seem to be commonplace. The impetus for stronger collaboration among pro-family organizations that initiated these (failed) attempts came from abroad, when the regional World Congress of Families was held in Belgrade. In 2015, Brian Brown and a delegation from the International Organization of Families visited Belgrade and Leskovac and held a regional WCF conference. One Dveri’s member credits himself for personally bringing them here when he was ‘building the pro-family platform’ for the newly established movement party (Cvetan, B5). Dveri became formally associated as WCF partners, and a flurry of movement activities ensued, including most of the attempts to create pro-life umbrella organizations. In addition, Nemanja Zarić of WCF, together with Marija Stojić of Orthodox Parents started a Serbian version of the IFAM news portal. One branch of the anti-abortion movement thus started establishing links with the US movement, while another fostered collaboration with Russian activists. As Dušan (B6) elaborated:

“Around 2012 big congresses for life started sprouting in Russia, led by dr. Sergei Valentinovich Chesnokov. It was a bit network of 300, 400 people and I got a call to join them. I went to visit them and was delighted. So we made a decision to start something similar here in Serbia”.

In conclusion, global initiatives to establish cooperation between US and Russian-based pro-family actors through the WCF platform translated to increased, but troubled cooperation

among the scattered anti-abortion groups in Serbia. The far-right anti-ecumenical profile of anti-abortion initiatives in Serbia linked to the Russian Orthodox activists hampered attempts at forming cross-denominational alliances with Protestants and Catholics particularly. However, another important aspect of international cooperation are links with Serbian diaspora communities and Orthodox churches, as mentioned by several of my interviewees (Evgenija, B1; Boris, B2; Dušan, B6; Nikola, B7; Zoran, B9). These networks are particularly important for Dveri's nationalist identity and ideology of protecting and gathering the 'dispersed' Serbs living as diaspora communities or autochthonous minorities in neighboring post-Yugoslav countries. Similarly to the Croatian case, these transborder links are important (potential) channels of diffusion of the anti-gender cause that have so far been unexplored by researchers.

8.3.4. Nationalist Civil Society and Political Parties

As we have established so far, the history of anti-gender collective action in Serbia is closely related to the organizational history of the Serbian Movement "Dveri". As we've seen in the previous chapters, Dveri became the central node of a growing far-right civil society combining religious nationalism, irredentism and movement-like organizing. In terms of social issues, the 2010 success of the Family March, organized as a counterprotest to the first Belgrade Pride, marked a turning point and motivated Dveri to enter the electoral arena. Finally, in 2015, Dveri registered as a political party championing family values with a staunch anti-LGBT agenda. In our interview, one of Dveri's leaders commented on how the successful opposition to Belgrade Pride in the form of a counter-protest influenced their future strategy:

After the success of the Family March in 2010 we asked ourselves which direction we should take with Dveri – humanitarian, publishing, religious-missionary, or politics. [...] We opted for politics for the simple reason that we understood that this is the only way you can influence policy. NGOs can make an impact, I don't underestimate it, but a decisive influence on the levers of decision-making can only be made by parliamentary political parties (Boris, B2)

He added that the NGO has reached a limit with respect to the influence they can achieve through civil society due to its limitations, and that making a real impact will require forming a political party. The success of the Family March in 2010, which Boris (B2) calls "one of the most important manifestations and symbols" of Dveri, directly prompted movement-party creation: "We understood that our ideas had mass support and that the time had come for a political organization which would put families first to appear". Another high-ranking member (Pavle, B8) reasons similarly: "we had huge support from the people... 20.000 people in the

march, it was the biggest gathering of right-wing forces. We accumulated an energy that was previously scattered and realized there was no going back to civil society – we had to form a party”. This reasoning points to an important finding – politicised homophobia was strategically chosen for political visibility and profit.

The proposed movementist rootedness of the new organization in the Serbian nation was another central aspect of Dveri’s electoral turn. It was based in an anti-systemic, anti-partisan promise of rejuvenating politics with new social activism and participatory democracy “in which parties share their rights and responsibilities with other segments of society: patriotic organizations, civic initiatives, spiritual, cultural, and professional societal potentials. (Dveri, 2009b)”. In this new Serbia, right-wing civil society, imagined as a decentralized and specialized field of NGOs, was dubbed “the great Serbian people’s front” (Glišić & Obradović, 2011b). As such, it was supposed to represent a broad political platform in which Dveri would have served as the central driving force or “political managers” (Glišić & Obradović, 2011b). Naming itself “the Serbian Movement Dveri”, this new organization rejected a classical leadership model and aimed to replace it with a Council of Elders (*starešinstvo*). Emphasis on participation and leaderlessness was less prominent in Dveri’s pre-2010 framing. Instead, Dveri initially imagined a kind of pre-modern, organicist vision of a homogenous nation inspired by Serbian Orthodox nationalism (*svetosavlje*) and synodality (*sabornost*). In this context, synodality points to a corporatist vision of society composed of various professional and social groups among which harmonic relations are guaranteed by a strong state apparatus (see Wiesinger, 2008). Specifically, since Dveri’s main recruitment pools were Orthodox brotherhoods and nationalist youth groups, their movement reimaged a vision of religious-nationalist consensus inspired by historical forms of political representation in the Habsburg and Serbian monarchy (*Crkveno-narodni Sabori*) (Barišić, 2016). The concept of synodality (*sabornost*), while originally being an ecclesiastical term, is here utilized to espouse political monism, a culture of consensual decision-making that replaces “divisions and fragmentations” (Lović, 2022). Here is how Dveri presented their corporatist-clerical vision of society back in 2004:

An ecclesial-popular synod of the Fatherland, unlike the republican assembly where each political party fights for its narrow partisan interests, will preserve the general national interest of the nation and the state. (...) The parish community, through NGOs close to it, represents small ecclesial-popular synods of people belonging to various social classes (Dveri, 2004).

This quote showcases how Dveri imagines the restructuring of society along corporatist-clerical lines, where political representation is achieved through lay and clerical associations and synods. Although the idea is precisely to increase people's participation in decision-making, such a vision is both antidemocratic and anti-secular since it excludes those not belonging to the Orthodox Church, not to mention the hostility towards other nations. Dveri became a party primarily to capitalize on the successes of the existing nationalist movement, and due to the perceived superiority of political parties as organizations compared to the inefficacy of NGO organizing in civil society. Interestingly, without being prompted by myself, Pavle (B8) describes Dveri as a movement-party:

"Parties usually represent institutions which have long-term goals, they come into power, lose power, create bodies that respond to the needs of the state apparatus. This differentiates them from movements which are usually ad hoc and tied to a specific issue which gathers people to put pressure on the government. We wanted and tried to do something that would be in between."

As in the Croatian case, Dveri relied on a network of formal and informal ties, associations, and groups from the Orthodox-nationalist milieu, primarily youth Orthodox organizations, brotherhoods, and students. The fertilization of a field of nationalist, 'patriotic' associations was thus a strategic choice considered as a wise move towards influencing policy. Unlike the seemingly more developed and diverse civil society scene in Croatia, Dveri could count on less existing potential allies:

"There weren't a lot of organizations doing similar things. We were a kind of motor that collected all these little organizations to create the broader Serbian Network as we called it, that would be stronger in comparison to scattered individual action. [...] Almost every year we gathered and organized our youth, students, people from Serbia and the diaspora in temples and churches. This coordination of diverse smaller groups later became the nucleus of our political organization" (Boris, B2)

Similarly, another high-ranking member of Dveri concluded that their party "gathered the *crème de la crème* of the NGO sector and channeled it into the party" (Cvetan, B5). However, it should be pointed out here that Dveri are hardly the only political party in Serbia taking socially conservative positions on GSE issues or politicizing homophobia. In fact, with Vučić's SNS, both the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) have opposed Pride parades and LGBTIQ+ rights. The whole party system in Serbia, particularly when it comes to social rights and morality politics issues, thus leans heavily to the right. As Sloomackers (2023) points out, SPS and SRS opposed including sexual orientation in the list of grounds for discrimination as early as 2003, the former's MPs considering homosexuality as immoral, and the latter's a disease. Nevertheless, none of these parties have mobilized around

sexual orientation and gender equality, nor have made it an important part of their party platform. The Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), however, could be considered an anti-gender ally. The DSS splintered from the democratic opposition to Milošević's regime and ruled the country after his fall, establishing an increasingly right-wing profile after Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. As a party that was close to the Serbian Orthodox Church under the rule of Vojislav Koštunica and increased its political influence during its time in Government (Radeljić, 2014), DSS was a natural potential ally for Dveri. DSS's newly emboldened nationalism led it to harsh Eurosceptic positions and exit from the European People's Party in 2012, just as Dveri entered the political scene, having competed in the election for the first time. As an NGO, Dveri had established successful cooperation with DSS's youth branch and had used its contacts with the party to have DSS's mayor of Belgrade sponsor the regional World Congress of Families. Finally, despite all its anti-establishment talk and anti-partisan rhetoric, it was mostly thanks to the coalition with DSS that Dveri barely entered the parliament in 2016. Dveri founded the Patriotic Bloc with DSS led by Sandra Rašković Ivić, daughter of Jovan Rašković, a Serbian extremist from Croatia cited by the notorious war criminal Radovan Karadžić as a mentor and role-model (Bassiouni, 1992). Dveri were thus the only anti-gender actor that has established connections with the political parties in Serbia and then became one itself. Its pro-family image allowed it to move away from a strictly irredentist far-right identity and seize openings in the political opportunity structure. The latter included increasing anti-government protests from 2011 and radicalization of DSS, allowing Dveri to take the electoral turn and form new political coalitions. On the other side, anti-abortion factions are not well connected in the halls of power, other than through Dveri. Associations such as Alliance for Life or Center for Life are mostly linked with the Serbian Orthodox church, lay activists or extreme-right groups such as Movement 1389 that have failed to gain relevance.

In conclusion, the Serbian Orthodox Church lacks doctrinal and institutional infrastructure and demonstrates a strong reluctance to engage with politics through civil society, resulting in a crippled resource mobilization for anti-gender actors. However, parts of the Church, including the higher echelons, have supported natalist, pro-life initiatives of radical-right actors like Dveri, helping to build a nationalist civil society. Utilizing help from transnational anti-gender actors and the increasingly conservative DSS party as an ally, Dveri used anti-gender politics as a tool for electoral gains while attempting to hide the partisan character of anti-gender initiatives behind the smokescreen of 'civic initiatives'. While Dveri themselves did emerge as

a movement party from the nationalist sector of Serbian civil society, we cannot speak of an anti-gender movement in Serbia (yet).

9. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS - ROADS TO ANTI-GENDER POLITICS

Having analyzed in detail the structures and actions, ideology, framing, as well as the network of relations of anti-gender actors across all cases by relying on a triangulation of data, I now turn to an explicit comparison of the cases in line with my research questions and analytical framework. In the first part (8.1.), I mostly rely on PEA data to explore the varying numbers of protests in all cases. I explain them by reference to both available resources and strategies as well as two central elements of political and discursive opportunities perceived by movement members: available institutional/party allies and the hostility of traditional media. In the second part (8.2.), I move on to the comparison of ideology and framing in all cases, from religious nationalism to a more universally framed familism, by isolating four crucial elements of framing: ethnonationalism, discursive secularization, human rights, and family values. In the final part (8.3.), I propose a model of three different roads toward anti-gender contention: one of a far-right actor using the GI frame for an electoral turn towards a movement party (Serbia); one of dense Catholic lay networks forming a full-blown anti-gender movement (Croatia); and one of an opportunistic synergy between Protestant civil society and nationalist far-right parties forming an anti-gender coalition (Bulgaria).

9.1. Breaking into the Public Arena

The type of collective action structures or SMOs is one of the important features of anti-gender innovation. In all three cases, anti-gender entrepreneurs organize around civic initiatives and non-governmental organizations, portraying themselves as respectable citizens and parents concerned about the direction in which their societies and politics are going. Importantly, thus, structures are also strategies, meaning that the choice of organizational forms reflects strategic considerations of how the movement can be presented in a desirable way to break through the negative DOS imposed by a (perceived) media *cordon sanitaire* towards religious and radical-right activism in the public sphere. On one hand, the fronting strategy (Zald & McCarthy, 1986) washes off the religious nature and character of mostly clerical and lay involvement, while the astroturfing strategy of mushrooming ‘empty shells’ (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017) aims to create

the appearance of a strong and robust conservative civil society with grassroots support by the ‘silent majority’.

Nevertheless, the cases differ with regards to the actual size and number of social movement organizations. In Croatia, there has been several NGOs that have developed an organizational identity and history, having been politically active in more than one campaign, covering multiple movement issues, with steady employees and volunteers, such as the Voice of Parents for Children, Betlehem, Vigilare, In the Name of Family, and Croatia for Life. Conversely, only Society and Values Association would satisfy the same criteria in the Bulgarian case, with similar future potential for the newer National Association Hike for the Family and Parents United for Children that have been active only in the last couple of years. Finally, in Serbia, except for the NGO-turned-party Dveri, conservative academics have mostly remained unorganized, while anti-abortion organizations, although present and registered, have remained a largely unpoliticized ‘latent social movement’ (McCarthy & Zald, 1977).

The relatively developed network of anti-gender SMOs in Croatia can be primarily explained by the strong lay-Catholic associational universe, compared to a poor network in Orthodox Serbia mobilizing smaller nationalist and academic groups, and a somewhat stronger one relying mostly on Protestant churches and parental organizations in Bulgaria. We should not, however, underestimate the movement trajectory effects and the openness of the POS. The elimination of the popular referendum participation threshold in Croatia created an opportunity seized by anti-gender actors that have organized 4 referendum signature collections since 2012. Such resource-intensive campaigns required the mobilization and creation of regional and local initiatives and organizations that would prepare for the referendums, thus increasing the organizational richness and network density of the overall movement.

9.1.1. Divergent Levels of Protest Mobilization

Together with resources available for mobilization, the POS and DOS come together to facilitate or hinder the emergence of anti-gender movement and contention, i.e. campaigns, protests, framing, and coalitional processes. The strength of each of the movements is best visible when comparing PEA results across cases (Figure 15). However, future research should engage in comparisons between right-wing and left-wing protests in the region to draw stronger conclusions and derive interpretations that can be generalizable with respect to overall propensity of populations to engage in unconventional collective action in the streets.

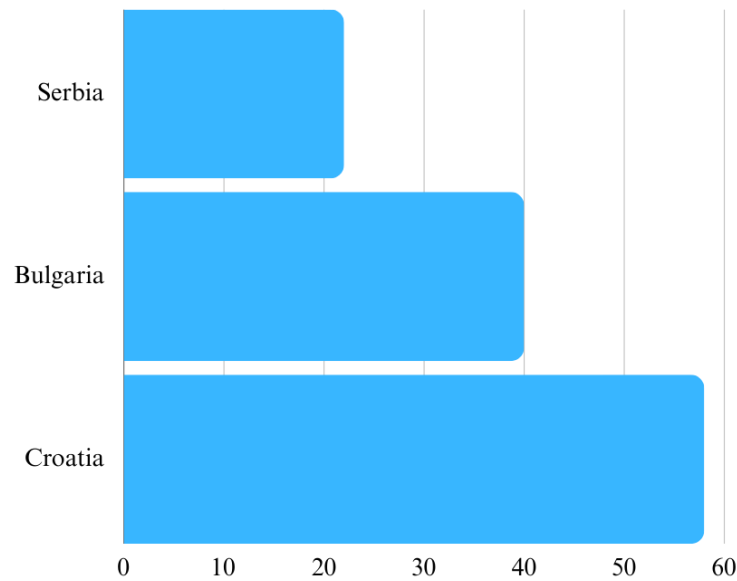


Figure 15 – Number of Anti-gender Protests across Cases (2010-2020)

Although there is a clear comparative difference between the cases, it should be noted that none of the cases can be said to have high levels of mass demonstration and street-level contention. The relatively higher numbers of protests in Croatia are primarily a result of the 40 Days for Life vigils in front of hospitals, signifying the centrality of religious repertoires and Church support for anti-gender contention. The relative irrelevance of street protest for the Balkan anti-gender movements is even more apparent when broken down by year (Figure 16).

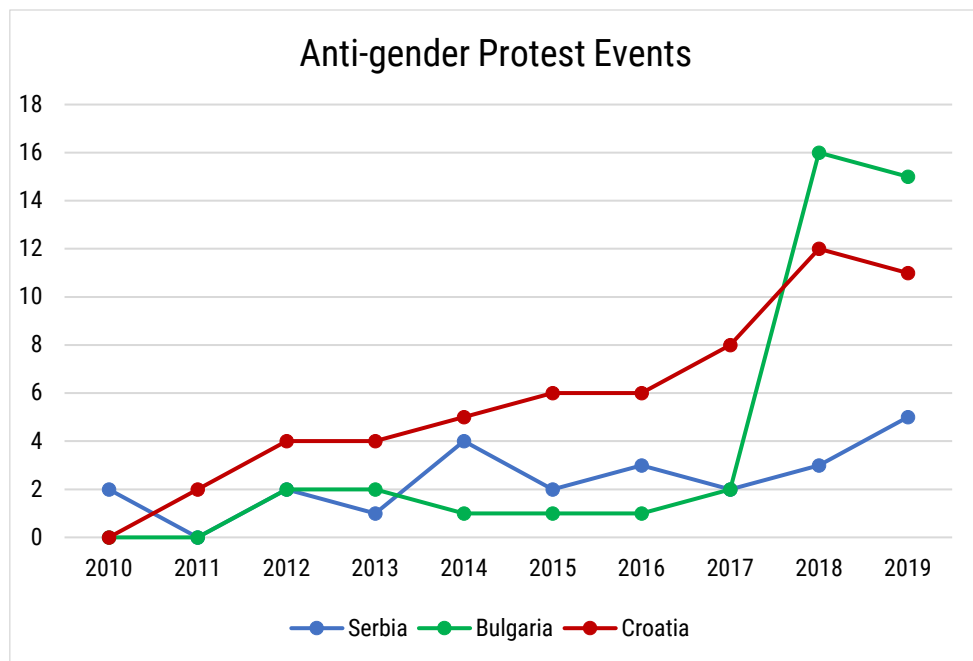


Figure 16 – Anti-gender Protest Events in Serbia, Bulgaria, and Croatia (2010-2019)

Whereas the Croatian anti-gender movement has had a visible steady rise over the years, Bulgaria has only recently had a spike in anti-gender contention when opposition to GI galvanized Protestant and Orthodox radicals alike to come out to the street against the Istanbul Convention, with Serbia consistently stagnating over the years. As I will argue in the next sections, my findings from both the interview and the PEA data call into question whether the concept of a social movement should even be applied to the two Orthodox cases, or if there are other, better ways to grasp the phenomenon. Finally, it should be noted that ultraconservative religious activists, from a micro-level perspective, are not particularly protest-prone and consider such ‘unruly’ and overtly political forms of action with some disdain (McVeigh & Smith, 1999; Arian & Ben-Nun Bloom, 2018), which might help explain the overall low levels of street mobilization. This is especially the case with the resource-poor latent movement groups and academic intellectuals in Serbia that shows the lowest levels of street mobilization, and most protest is a function of Dveri’s political (and electoral) ambitions. Finally, with the state ready to ban Pride parades and co-opt anti-gender discourse, public forums and petitions to lobby the catch-all populist governments of SNS seems to be more opportune. Expressive and cultural activities are important in the Serbian case, which might point us towards the conclusion that the movement is still in its early days of mobilization and collective-identity building. Finally, the *lity* – a religious procession – figures as an important action form, clearly pointing towards the religious-nationalist identity of anti-gender actors in Serbia. Expressive and service-oriented activities take up less importance in the Bulgarian case and are confined mostly to small Protestant NGOs and their charity work. Overall, Bulgaria shows much similarity to the Serbian case, exhibiting low levels of street protest during the non-polarized phase of transactional parental activism. However, the carefully brokered powerful alliance between the ruling VMRO and Protestant radicals in 2017/2018 and a smart utilization of connective action over Facebook led to an explosion of protest against the Istanbul convention, demonstrating the power of GI as an instrument of frame alignment. Similarly to other cases, anti-LGBT activism in Bulgaria has taken a turn from violent street confrontations towards conventional and demonstrative street counterprotesting, showing the power of anti-gender contention in mainstreaming political homophobia and giving it a veneer of respectability.

Finally, the Croatian case shows the growth of anti-gender protests around various causes rooted in Catholic civil society, organized by different organizations in varying local contexts. The movement combines highly politicized reactive campaigns with long-termist cultural activities. Expressive events and public forums play a key role in politicizing the rich Catholic

associational networks. Finally, the opening in POS, unlike the other cases, prompted the use of referendums as important ‘coagulating’ points in time used for mobilization and identity maintenance. Religious repertoires like processions, vigils and public prayers are central to the movement, particularly its anti-abortion faction that took over the bulk of campaigning since 2014. In conclusion, whereas the awkward tensions among Orthodox and Protestant groups in Bulgaria (and partly Serbia), along with strong radical right parties ready to co-opt the GI agenda from civically weak Churches decreased the capacity and need for protest in the two countries, the strong Catholic associational and doctrinal drive for anti-gender contention coupled with a politically stronger and socially liberal left provided the perfect mix for an explosion of anti-gender protest in Croatia.

9.1.2. The Media and the Mainstream Right

Overall, the organizational and action forms of movements are impacted by the actors’ perceptions of political and discursive opportunities. Most saliently across all cases, anti-gender interviewees report a closed DOS and difficulties in getting access to broader audiences due to the hostility of traditional mainstream media such as major newspapers and television stations. This element, among other contextual factors relevant for anti-gender movement emergence, has been neglected in scholarship so far. DOS have had a particularly strong, threefold effect on the Croatian anti-gender movement, although these effects are present in other cases as well. Hostile media forced the movement to constantly moderate and secularize their discourse, to shuffle cadres and leadership who front as the central leaders of the movement²⁶, and to produce their own alternative media websites and content.

The second crucial element of the national contexts are political opportunities. Importantly, in all cases, the anti-gender movement utilized rising discontent and protests against the governing parties to initiate their own mobilization and to brand the ruling MSR parties as pro-EU lapdogs betraying their allegedly Christian-democratic profile in service of Brussels-sponsored ‘gender ideology’. Thus, the relationship between anti-gender SMOs and the mainstream right-wing parties – acting in government for most of the period under analysis – is crucial across all cases. Given the relative weakness and lack of influence of feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements in the Balkans (see Chapter 4), the main oppositional dynamic was one between the anti-gender

²⁶ A particularly strong character assassination campaign was undertaken against Željka Markić who even (unsuccessfully) sued ‘News’ for portraying her face with a Hitler moustache on their cover with the title “How much Fascism”?

movement and the ruling parties pushing liberal EU legislation. Relying on interview and PEA data, the chronology of political events, elections, and the use of secondary sources, we can tentatively summarize the crucial elements of POS that help trigger mobilization (Tarrow, 1994; McAdam, 1996) as low, moderate, or high in the three cases, as seen in Table 7.

	SERBIA	BULGARIA	CROATIA
Increasing Access	Moderate	Moderate	High
Shifting Alignments	High	High	High
Divided Elites	Moderate	Moderate	High
Influential Allies	Low	High	High

Table 7 – Political Opportunity Structures

Whereas all anti-gender entrepreneurs benefitted from increasing access to political participation from the early 2000s, as the three regimes loosened and opened to civil society development under EU pressure, the Croatian movement benefitted greatly from the previously mentioned changes in the popular referendum rules. Secondly, highly shifting alignments benefitted anti-gender actors across the cases as electoral and coalitional instability encouraged a perceived opportunity for mobilization and influence. In Croatia, PM Sanader's resignation in 2011 and the ensuing downfall of HDZ served as an earthquake that shook up the political scene and opened up space for radical-right challengers. In Bulgaria, anti-governmental protests in 2013 brought down GERB's government, setting the party on a course of uneasy partner-seeking from both the left and the far right. Finally, the rule of the Democratic Party in Serbia was brought down by the newly risen SNS under Vučić in 2012. Thirdly, although the ruling SNS in Serbia was itself a result of a split from the more radical Eurosceptic SRS, its internal cohesion, strength, and stability post-2012 served as barrier for movement actors seeking influence, with POS additionally closing as the regime grew increasingly authoritarian. Similarly, GERB did not suffer as much from internal splits, but it was troubled by conflict with its radical-right Eurosceptic partners such as Ataka and VMRO. In Croatia, however, HDZ was rocked both by heightened conflict in the broader party system, internal splits, and warring of the moderate and radical-right factions. Sanader's fall led to a weakened HDZ under Karamarko, desperate to seek (radical-right) movement allies while in opposition. Finally, the most varying element of POS across cases is the presence/absence of influential allies. Whereas Dveri in Serbia could rely on a relatively disinterested and unorganized Church and a

decreasingly influential DSS, with the SNS regime shunning it as ‘fascist’, Bulgarian and Croatian anti-gender movements had much more powerful allies. Anti-gender actors in Bulgaria established a strong coalition between Protestant SMOs and churches, parental groups and the Orthodox-nationalist United Patriots that served as GERB’s coalition partners and intragovernmental challengers. Similarly, movement SMOs in Croatia established strategic cooperation with HDZ while the party was in opposition, and partly even continued cooperation with HDZ’s radical-right faction once it came to power again with a more moderate pro-EU platform.

Finally, I would add here an element that is overlooked in the standard POS model, which is the *ideological congruence* between the movement and the mainstream parties. Alternatively, it can be considered as an element of DOS; namely, as the level of frame alignment between a movement and parties. Whereas social conservatism is widely represented across the various (far)-right parties in Serbia, and even accepted by the strongest centre-left party in Bulgaria, the Croatian party system is significantly more socially liberal, mostly due to SDP’s pro-LGBT and feminist positions and a lack of radical right parties (prior to anti-gender emergence). This ideological congruence can be considered as a factor fostering movement influence and success, but also seems to be inversely proportional to the emergence of mobilization, contention, and protest. As Eisinger (1973) and Tarrow argue (1994), a fully open system discourages contention since movement actors will likely choose more institutionalized channels. Ideological congruence between SMOs and mainstream parties in my cases also seems to decrease anti-gender contention, since it eases ‘infestation’ of the national political agenda. Klandermans (2015, p. 1) notes that collective action is undertaken precisely by those who lack access to politics: “had they had access, there would have been no need for the action”. As similarly argued by Pető (2017), there is no need for a “full-fledged” anti-gender movement if mainstream parties are not culturally liberal. This point will be further strengthened when addressing the relational aspect and interaction of the three movements with political parties.

9.2. Between Ethnonationalism and Family Values

In all three of the cases under analysis, the framing and ideology of anti-gender collective actors and individual movement entrepreneurs are strongly positioned within the exclusionary politics typical of radical-right wing actors. The illiberalism of the movement’s values is not dependent on the varying issue-foci, denominational backgrounds of anti-gender groups or movement factions. What differs is the degree to which ethnonationalist and explicitly religious arguments

are (not) used by movement actors. Mainstream literature, stemming largely from the studies of Western-European anti-immigration politics, identifies the centrality of nativism, most often understood as ethnonationalism, for radical-right ideology (Mudde, 2007, Minkenberg, 2017, Caiani, 2017, Pirro, 2023). Alternatively, as elaborated in Chapter 2, the work of Lenka Bustikova (2019) on defining the radical right in Eastern Europe seems somewhat more illuminating and appropriate for my analysis of anti-gender movements in Southeast Europe. Importantly, even when ethnonationalism is not a salient issue, Bustikova's approach still firmly identifies 'grid exclusion' rooted in social conservatism as radical-right wing politics. This helps us include cases of de-ethnicized (Krasteva 2016) but gendered exclusionary politics of far-right parties. Importantly, this does not mean that nativism and politicized homo/transphobia are mutually exclusive in any way. In fact, gender and sexual minorities are often excluded from the national community as a 'foreign body'. However, it is analytically useful to distinguish between ethnicized and sexualized forms of exclusion as different varieties of radical-right politics.

When looking at the individual interviewees and the SMOs they represent, the differences between their answers seem to largely stem from the varying denominational backgrounds of different groups. While Orthodox-rooted anti-gender actors in Serbia and Bulgaria express nationalist values more often, Catholic, and particularly Protestant groups in Croatia and Bulgaria respectively are more likely to avoid nationalism. Furthermore, these differences also reflect the varying political opportunity structures and their changes over time. Whereas in Bulgaria and Serbia the mainstream had been thoroughly radicalized on ethnic issues by strong radical-right parliamentary parties, Croatia seems to be an exception, witnessing both an absence of politicization of immigration (Lancaster, 2021) and a decline in anti-Serbian mobilization after the early 2000s (Koska & Matan, 2016). Nevertheless, all groups in all three cases express highly conservative positions on issues related to biological and social reproduction. In Croatia particularly, the comeback of populist radical right parties in the 2010s came on the wings of anti-gender contention, not anti-immigration or ethnonationalism.

9.2.1. 'Grid' versus 'Group' Exclusion

Across all cases, "family values" take a central importance in the ideology and framing of anti-gender actors. As recently argued by authors exploring the affirmative side of anti-gender politics (Pető, 2018; Möser et al., 2022; Linnamäki, 2022), familism is a central ideological

tenant. It can be defined as a principle that prioritises and socio-politically privileges the heteronormative, ‘traditional’ family as the central unit of society deserving of particular attention and protection. In contrast to Linnamäki’s understanding of familism as an ideology, it would, perhaps, be more useful to understand familism, natalism, and other *isms* of the ‘illiberal offer’ (Pető, 2021) as political doctrines or principles instructing actors on how to structure society and policies under an overarching ultraconservative ideology²⁷. All issues around which the anti-gender movement mobilizes make sense from the collectivist, conservative ideology that puts the family as an organic whole in front of individual human rights. This anti-individualistic, familialist conservatism thus attacks children’s rights to self-determination or education as separate from parents, subordinates the rights of female victims of domestic violence to the importance of preserving the marriage, and denies the legal recognition of same-sex relationships as detrimental to society due to its reproductive incapacity. Although ethnonationalism often *does* make it into this ideological mix, it is not necessary as a focal point or rationale of exclusion. Anti-gender actors, as we have seen in some of the cases, can find it opportune to discard, hide or de-emphasize ethnonationalist framing as a strategy of moderation, frame bridging and alliance-seeking across strictly ethnic and religious lines.

Finally, despite high social conservatism in all cases, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Serbia differ in the degree to which religious morality arguments are used, i.e. the level of discursive secularization of movement actors. These differences overlap with the frequency of the use of human rights and scientific framing (Juroš et al., 2020), with Croatia, and to some extent Bulgaria, showing higher discursive secularization, human rights and science framing when compared to Serbia. I rely on Rots’ definition of discursive secularization as a complex process whereby Christianity is reconstructed as “the natural, immanent, and commonly shared world view” (Rots, 2017, p. 188) that is increasingly associated with discourses of science and modernity as a strategy of frame alignment with the broader secularized public sphere. Based on the interviews and documents, we can thus summarize the differences of the three movements on these various elements of ideology and framing strategy (Table 8)²⁸. In line with my research questions, the results show the role of religion and radical-right politics in anti-gender ideology and framing.

²⁷ Here I am inspired by Ernest Gellner’s (1997) and John Breuilly’s (1985) understanding of nationalism as a political principle, or doctrine, respectively.

²⁸ For a detailed breakdown, see Appendix 4.

	Central Themes	Croatia	Bulgaria	Serbia
Nationalism	• National identity • Demographic decline • History and culture	Low	Moderate ²⁹	High
Discursive Secularization	• Universal values • Humanism • Appeals to science	High	Moderate	Low
Human Rights	• Freedom of speech • Religious liberties • Parent's and children's rights	High	High	Low
Family Values	• Heterosexual marriage • Culture of life • Parental authority	High	High	Moderate

Table 8 – Central Elements of Anti-gender Ideology and Framing

Croatia appears the closest to an ideal-typical set of characteristics of the anti-gender movement, including familialist framing, discursive secularization, and human rights appropriation, Bulgaria as a middle case, and Serbia as a typically religious-nationalist case demonstrating high preoccupation with ethnonationalism, demography, and Orthodoxy with stronger morality framing. In my interpretation of these differences, anti-genderism is thus not merely a new element of a regionally well-established religious nationalism, but an important innovation and evolution towards a new type of politics. Interestingly, when looking at macro-level factors, stronger discursive secularization in the Croatian case does not align with general levels of secularization (religiosity). The Croatian population demonstrates significantly higher levels of religious attendance, practice, and importance attributed to religion in their life compared to the Serbian population, for example (Pew Research Center, 2018). However, only

²⁹ The two factions of the Bulgarian anti-gender coalition differ here, with the Orthodox faction exhibiting high, and the Protestant faction exhibiting low levels of ethnonationalist ideology and framing.

58% of Croats say being Catholic is very or somewhat important to truly be a national of Croatia, compared to a high 78% of Serbs reporting the same for Orthodoxy (Pew Research Center, 2018). A stronger emphasis on ethnonationalism among Serbian anti-gender actors is thus coherent with a stronger convergence of religious belief and national belonging in Serbia compared to Croatia. Finally, the varying importance of different ideological accents and strategic frames points to the importance of religious actors and their denomination, which likely explains why Bulgaria is a ‘middle case’ since its anti-gender movement consists of both Protestant and Orthodox factions. While the former is more similar to the Croatian anti-gender ideological repertoire, the latter resembles the Serbian Orthodox-inspired opposition to GSE and its religious-nationalist ideology.

9.2.2. What do They Mean by Gender?

Among the various elements of anti-gender politics we could compare between different cases, there is most agreement on how ‘gender ideology’ was understood by my interviewees, regardless of the context. This is perhaps not surprising, given that it is precisely the GI frame that seemingly defines the anti-gender movements and its transnationally recognizable identity. In all cases, ‘gender ideology’ was recognized as an imposed and imported from the West, and the EU more specifically; as a foreign concept bringing harm to the people of Bulgaria, Croatia, or Serbia. To further compare the actual meaning of the GI frame in my cases, I will rely on Eszter Kováts’ useful typology of the different ways in which gender is understood in the political realm (Kováts, 2022). In all three cases, interviewed SMO representatives primarily reject a *poststructuralist* view of gender, but also the *constructivist* view. Whereas the latter recognizes biological dimorphism of the sexes but defines expectations and roles of men and women as socially constructed and thus, subject to contextual and historical changes, the former rejects any “pre-discursive and fixed biological dualism; both sex and gender are fluid” (Kováts, 2022, p. 122). Instead, anti-gender interviewees across all cases adopt a *conservative* view in which a gender binary flows from a sexual binary, with fixed sets of roles and behaviours stemming from an “ahistorical, ontological and anthropological” difference between men and women (Kováts 2022, p. 122). In juxtaposition to this ‘commonsensical’ understanding of sexual dimorphism stands the danger of ‘gender’. As we have seen in the individual cases, most anti-gender entrepreneurs understand GI as an unscientific, ideological attack on the sexual binary that aims to introduce a ‘third sex’ or endless contingent and fluid gender identities.

Secondly, in all three cases, the second most common meaning ascribed to GI is the alleged danger of the LGBTIQ+ agenda, including the spread of acceptance for non-heterosexual orientation and transgender identities in society, and particularly among children. The utilization of political homophobia and transphobia is particularly salient, as a strategy that does not necessarily respond to local LGBTIQ+ activists' collective action or claims-making but is used as a purposive tool of fearmongering to achieve a particular political goal (Weiss & Bosia, 2013). Trans persons especially are constructed as 'folk devils' playing a central role in an attempt to create moral panic around a threatened vulnerable victim – (cis)women and children. (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). Relying on Lyonga's (2019) typology of homophobia, we can also distinguish between the Croatian case in which anti-gender actors rely more on *tepid* and *veiled homophobia*, while the Bulgarian and Serbian actors are more explicit and politicize around *morbidity homophobia*. Whereas tepid and veiled homophobia do not attack the practice of homosexuality but deny the extension of rights to gay people and appear in more disguised forms, morbidity homophobia understands homosexuality as a disease or a bringer of disease. These variants should be understood as adaptations to the discursive opportunity structure, whereas stronger (implementation of) anti-discrimination laws and more tolerant social attitudes towards homosexuality foster more disguised and moderate forms of homophobia. In this sense, the anti-gender rhetoric appears as a successful frame alignment whereby veiled homophobia and transphobia attacking 'ideologies' and not persons is more acceptable to the wider public and can arguably mobilize more supporters. Unsurprisingly, looking at population surveys (EVS, 2017) reveals that the higher tolerance for homosexuality (Croatia) corresponds to more covert forms of the movement's homophobia, while lower tolerance (Bulgaria and Serbia) corresponds to radical and morbidity homophobia, although the potential correlation between these phenomena should be researched separately.

Finally, only in rare instances did anti-gender actors express opposition to GI as an anti-feminist rejection of gender equality. Although they are against 'gender', this mostly does not entail opposing equality between women and men, but the rejection of the SOGI concept that had become attached to the notion of gender equality. As argued by Radačić and Antić (2020), the queer feminist strategy at the UN level to argue for sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) rights within a 'constructively ambiguous' term of 'gender' provided important impetus for framing conservative mobilization as *anti-gender*. This is most obvious in cases of protest against the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria and Croatia, where the central claims were pushed against the IC's article defining gender as socially constructed. Nevertheless, some interviewees

express post-feminist or anti-feminist views questioning the necessity of increasing the equality of women and men. Particularly, as we have seen, Serbian interviewees explicitly attacked feminists as the ones to blame for the introduction of both gender and LGBTIQ+ ideology in Serbia. According to the understanding of most Serbian interviewees, feminism pits women against men, thus harming familial and societal harmony. Such a framing strategy differs from the Croatian case, where some anti-abortion leaders have even called themselves feminist (Laudato.hr, 17 February 2019), trying to signify and appropriate liberal human rights framing. This difference in framing could be explained by a relative absence or irrelevance of a countermovement dynamic in the Serbian case, compared to the Croatian one, where feminists have actively organized against anti-gender collective action (Sutlović, 2019; Bojanic et al., 2021).

9.2.3. Framing in the Streets – Protest Issues

With a longer tradition of anti-abortion activism and abundant symbolic, material, and human resources provided to the anti-abortion movement by the Catholic church in Croatia, the issue of women's reproductive rights is the most salient and protested issue (see Figure 17).

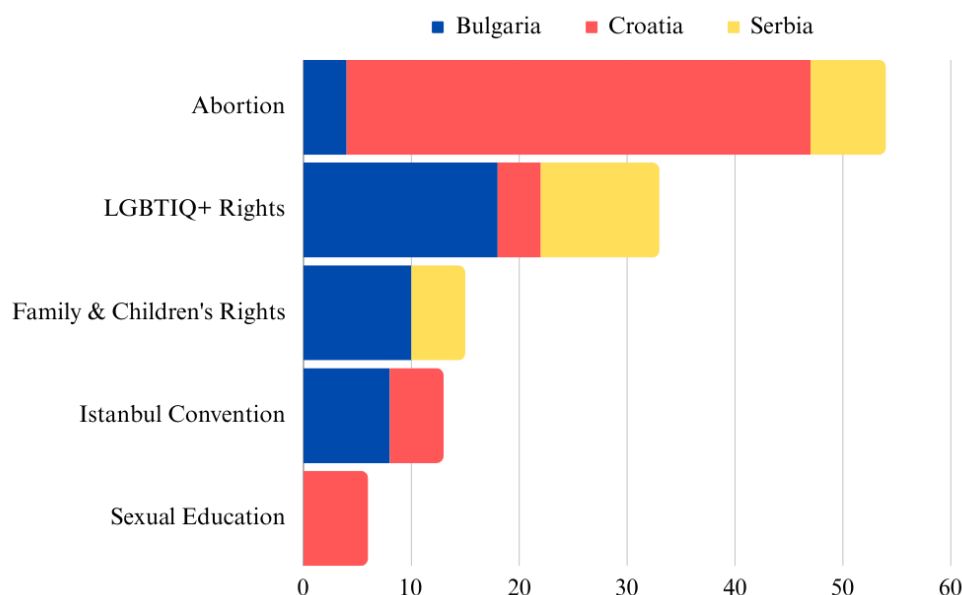


Figure 17 – Protest Issue Salience Across Cases

The presence of highly devout lay-Catholic initiatives and a dense network of associations drawing from Church infrastructure means that religious resource mobilization is a key factor of explaining the importance of the abortion issue, but also the relatively high total frequency

of protest in Croatia. The centrality of abortion reflects the movement's focus on 'pro-life' and 'pro-family' values, as well as the importance of the anti-abortion wing of the anti-gender movement. Furthermore, protest activity in general, and especially around LGBT+ rights and sexuality issues, briefly declined after the successful referendum against same-sex marriage in 2013, as expected when a movement goal is achieved (della Porta 2014).

Abortion has not been as prominent an issue in the Serbian, and even less so in the Bulgarian case. Partially, similar to the Serbian case, this is due to the relative inactivity of the Orthodox church around the matter. In addition, popular support for abortion in Bulgaria is significantly higher than both Croatia and Serbia (Pew Research Center, 2018) and has not been politicized or challenged except for small protestant pro-life initiatives and declarative statements by the BOC. Although it is beyond the scope of the thesis to explain this contextual peculiarity, one explanation might be the historical trajectory of the Bulgarian (post)communist development. Given that the Bulgarian Communist Party, at least since the 1980s, introduced conservative, pro-natalist measures including a partial ban on abortion and restrictions on divorce (Brunnbauer & Taylor, 2004), the post-1989 right-wing democratic opposition would not find it beneficial to politicize this issue against the (post)communists as it did in cases like Poland. The same explanation could be used to understand the BSP's adoption of the GI frame and criticism of the IC, in addition to the pro-Russian stance of factions within the party (Iakimova & Vatsov, 2018).

On the other hand, there are much more similarities when it comes to mobilization against LGBTIQ+ rights across all cases. Whereas opposition to same-sex marriage ignited the anti-gender movement in Croatia, the repeated counter-protesting of pride parades did so in Bulgaria and Serbia. In all three cases, due to closing DOS (anti-discrimination legislation and [perceived] hostility of media), a need to appeal to a larger audience, and/or purely political, vote-seeking motives, far-right nationalism and violence were whitewashed into the politics of 'family values', best exemplified by the Serbian Family March. In Bulgaria, it was the coalitional dynamics and the Orthodox far-right's mirroring of Protestant frames that converged towards pro-family, anti-gender politics.

Finally, sexual education was opposed in all cases as a dangerous indoctrination of children, as an issue that covers most previously mentioned topics. The main arguments are, namely, that children should not be exposed to homosexuality, abortion, 'gender ideology' or sexual permissivity more broadly. Since the collectivist conservative drive of anti-gender organizations to promote and impose conformism to traditional religious social norms is

increasingly unsuccessful and unconvincing in secularizing societies, activists are left with the option of imposing such conformism onto their children. Although children are often presented strategically as victims in the movement's framing, we should not ignore children's rights but rather analyse them as a serious issue mobilizing parents for the anti-gender cause, as most visible in the Bulgarian case. In other words, children's rights are an issue in themselves that can cause contention around social policy changes, with conservative groups opposing the evolution of children's rights conceptions towards a liberal view of autonomous rights separate from the authority of the parent (Buss, 2001). Finally, given the lack of a developed Orthodox civil society, anti-gender entrepreneurs mobilized parental NGOs, which helps explain the importance of children's rights as an issue of protest in the Bulgarian case.

9.3. Anti-gender Movement, Coalition, or Party?

9.3.1. Church-Movement Relations Compared

What is the role of religious institutions in anti-gender mobilization? First and foremost, there is a fundamental theological difference between the two central Christian denominations which is reflected in a non-existent social teaching in the Orthodox case, compared to an elaborated social teaching of the Catholic church rooted in its history, documents and doctrines. The Catholic church is known for its firm (conservative) stances on sexuality, marriage, family, and 'life from natural conception to natural death' – all of which have been carefully developed and elaborated in detail doctrinally by various Popes and Cardinals over vast historical periods. On the other hand, while its individual members might give homophobic and sexist statements unimaginable even in a Catholic context, neither the BOC nor the SOC formally hold social and moral teaching on any of the issues. By the same token, the 'hesychastic' tendency of the Orthodox churches discourages engagement of clergy and laypersons in public and political activism. This is particularly the case in Bulgaria where Orthodox priests are forbidden from engaging in public actions with Protestant (based) actors. Second, and stemming from the former, there is a lack of ecclesiastical bodies, offices and organizational structures dedicated to the lay faithful and families in the Orthodox case, compared to an abundance of such organizational bodies on all levels of the Catholic hierarchy. In fact, a third of all members of the Croatian Episcopal Conference's Council for Laity are prominent anti-gender leaders and politicians. Furthermore, there is no Orthodox counterpart to the Curia's Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life tasked with "the promotion of the life and apostolate of the lay faithful, for the

pastoral care of the family and its mission according to God's plan and for the protection and support of human life." (Wooden, 2016). Third, the political focus of the Bulgarian and Serbian Orthodox churches arguably remains directed at resolving issues of canonical territory disputes and internal factionalism, and in the case of Serbia particularly, the issue of Kosovo. The SOC's support for the movement is in large part a support for patriotic and nationalist activities related to issues such as history, language, and culture, while abortion and morality issues are second-order issues framed through a demographic, nativist narrative.

Despite the differences, several important similarities emerged as well. Firstly, in all cases, it is the lower levels of church hierarchy that are most active in supporting the movement. The higher-echelon clergy avoid active engagement in socio-political support and sponsoring of the movement. In addition, support from clergy is intermittent, depends on the willingness of various local eparchies/bishoprics to engage with the movement, and is predominantly symbolic and declarative. Secondly, a much more important movement role is played by the networks of the lay-faithful. So much so, that, especially in the Croatian case, it is sometimes difficult to delineate the anti-gender movement as a separate, secular political phenomenon from the Catholic associational universe of dense politicized religious activism. When looking at both the structural and processual aspects of the movement, one could convincingly claim that it is in fact a religious movement with strategically secular framing. Finally, in all three cases, significant portions of the two respective churches can impede movement activity. For example, they oppose what is perceived as an imported, protestant-like mode of public religious activism which is inappropriate for the local national traditions. In addition, the hierarchy of both churches is highly concerned about maintaining control and authority over those parts of its associational sphere that engage with the political anti-gender movement in the strict sense. Finally, the lines between clergy and laity in the smaller Protestant communities are much more blurred, but the support from Protestant churches, particularly in the Bulgarian case is quite explicit, as well as their transnational links to Western churches and conservative movements.

In the Croatian case, SMOs utilize the plethora of consultative and associational bodies in the Catholic civil sphere, including pastoral councils, councils for laity, for the family, Catholic student associations, prayer groups and parental assemblies. In the Bulgarian and Serbian case, there are no such organizational vehicles stemming from the dominant Orthodox churches, although smaller Protestant and Catholic religious communities do play a similar role. However, my hypothesized conceptualization of Serbia as a negative case with no notable anti-gender movement structures or campaigns was only partially confirmed. While, indeed, the

SOC does not engage as much with the movement, Dveri found a way to utilize university spaces and youth associations as mobilization networks in addition to the scarce Orthodox brotherhoods and prayer communities. However, the (lack of) clerical support is conditioned by various factors including doctrinal preferences, ideology, level of hierarchy and clergymen's relations with the political elites and parties. Such factors should be explored in future research as relevant issue-specific elements of the political opportunity structure for anti-gender movements.

In conclusion, anti-gender movements are not rooted in mass grievances or deprivation but on a set of highly active, skilled upper-middle class lay zealots, i.e. anti-gender moral entrepreneurs drawing on existing (mostly religious) resources and using anti-gender framing to foment contention. Such an understanding corresponds to the resource mobilization model which emphasizes the role of entrepreneurial leaders recruiting members to suit their purposes (Buechler, 2011). Unlike the Orthodox churches whose support for anti-gender actors mostly took the form of moral and cultural resources (Edwards & McCarthy, 2007), the Catholic and Protestant churches across cases additionally provided social-organizational, human, and material resources crucial for movement emergence and collective action. As Maciej Potz (2020) rightly warned, religious organizations are only potential veto players with a general capacity for exercising power in a polity. This power requires political agency to make things happen. Seen from this perspective, the political agency of anti-gender movement actors pressures the church hierarchy to transform from a potential to an actual veto player. If they fail in achieving this, movement actors can also diversify their strategies, creating movement parties or directly challenging the establishment through the openings in the POS.

9.3.2. Different Roads to Anti-gender Contention

While we have established that openings in the political opportunity structure matter for the emergence of anti-gender contention, we have seen that political threats, especially in the case of reactive anti-gender mobilization, can also foster mobilization. Furthermore, political threats are also a crucial driver of coalition work among anti-gender actors, and establishing functional coalitions is an important part of movement emergence, coalescence, and collective action (Koopmans, 1995; Staggenborg, 2010). Intramovement relations more generally, and particularly the dynamics of cooperation and conflict, can influence greatly the emergence of and changes in framing, movement structures, campaigns, and the effectiveness of action.

Taking an emic approach enables us to look inside movements and recognize internal mechanisms of change and overcome the homogenizing movement-counter movement perspective (Munson, 2010; Avanza, 2018). The most complex constellation of actor relations among the three cases was the one in Croatia. On the one hand, high overlapping membership of leading cadres and pre-existing social ties established through Catholic networks helped the movement build coalitions around a common collective identity. On the other hand, despite the symbolic glue of gender ideology and Catholic familial identity, heavy publicized conflicts emerged over authority and strategy, especially concerning the electoral turn and cooperation with HDZ. Thus, it was not so much the repression/facilitation from the state nor the interaction with an opposing movement, but rather the intramovement dynamics that drove a large part of changes in strategy and framing, and led to the emergence of new organizations, parties, and rival campaigns. The steady growth of collective action against abortion, for example, was not a result of any feminist actions around the issue, but rather a redirection of movement forces and cadres towards a new issue, with a new, long-termist and anti-political credo of ‘changing the culture’. Unlike Croatia, the Bulgarian movement is not much of a movement at all, with low common collective identity between the bifurcated branches of the Christian right. As we have seen, anti-gender contention in Bulgaria spiked only after a coalition was established between previously conflicting Protestant-based parental NGOs and far-right nationalist parties. Here too, the rivalry between the two camps led to a mushrooming of movement activity, rival marches for family, and diversified approaches to social and family policy proposals. Finally, anti-gender actors in Serbia, faced with perhaps the scarcest resources, coalesced around one dominating SMO turned into political party – the Serbian Movement ‘Dveri’. Dveri singlehandedly built a hierarchical network of satellite religious-nationalist, anti-gender associations and informal parachurch initiatives rooted in right-wing youth, civil society, and intellectual academic circles. In parallel, a latent network of anti-abortion initiatives tied to the Orthodox and Protestant churches has so far been unsuccessful in overcoming the elemental barriers to movement formation and collective action.

Two things are, however, similar across all cases. First, there is a lack of coordination towards an umbrella organization and cooperation is primarily built around *ad hoc* reactive campaigns, petitions, and protest typical for fragmented movements (Rucht, 2007). Correspondence in ties, networking and identity in Bulgaria are particularly weak, resembling coalitional processes more than movement ones (Diani & Bison, 2004). In all of the cases, SMOs are relatively new, small, and struggling with building their own organizations, mobilizing resources and

supporters, which discourages umbrella coordination (Zald & McCarthy, 1979). Second, foreign, and transnational anti-gender actors played an important role in all cases, particularly among anti-abortion groups in Catholic and Protestant-based organizations, but also Russian pro-life actors in the Serbian case. Inspiration, know-how, and resources from abroad are listed by interviewees as fostering movement emergence and mobilization. In the case of Orthodox actors, however, transnational links are much less present, which might be due to the autocephalous and ethnophyletist orientation of these actors whose national churches are often in conflict or rivalry with outside and neighbouring Orthodox churches.

Finally, relations between anti-gender movement actors and political parties proved crucial for anti-gender mobilization. Mainstream and radical political parties serve as part of the larger alliance/conflict structure available for anti-gender entrepreneurs. Bulgarian movement actors faced high ideological congruence and an open political opportunity structure, with both the center-left BSP and all the radical-right parties, including those in power, backing the anti-gender agenda to contend with the ruling GERB. The Serbian movement Dveri faced a more closed POS, tying itself to a decreasingly relevant conservative DSS, but facing a generally ideologically congruent party system and exploiting the dishonest GSE liberalization of SNS and its tactical Europeanization. The Croatian anti-gender actors acquired a strong ally in the (radical faction) of HDZ and drew from rich Catholic resources, but also faced a much stronger enemy in the form of the socially liberal SDP. The pathways of the Christian right actors in the three cases towards anti-gender politics can thus be summarized as following (Figure 18).

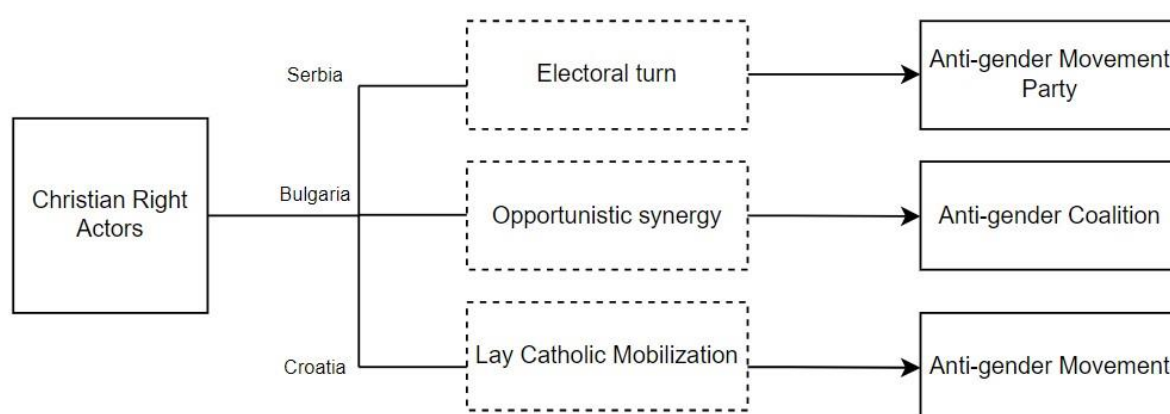


Figure 18 – Different Routes and Forms of Anti-gender Politics

In Serbia, a far-right, parachurch Orthodox organization Dveri used the appearance of Pride parades and the liberalizing threat of Europeanization as an opportunity for scapegoat switching (see Braghiroli and Makarychev 2022 for a similar process) towards familial anti-gender politics as an innovative vehicle to facilitate their electoral turn and transformation into a movement party. In Bulgaria, anti-gender rhetoric served as a tool of frame alignment between two previously antagonistic groups – the parental, Protestant illiberal associations and the Orthodox far-right parties. This opportunistic synergy (Korolczuk & Graff, 2022) established a new radical right coalition fighting ‘gender ideology’. In Croatia, the increasingly rich associational universe of lay Catholic networks birthed a proper anti-gender movement of illiberal NGOs and civic initiatives that filled the vacuum of Croatian radical right politics and established their own movement parties over time. Finally, although the three cases vary in organizational forms, identity, strategies, and intensity of contention, one commonality proved paramount for the emergence of anti-gender politics. In all cases, Christian right actors rose as a response to the (partial) abandonment of socially conservative positions of mainstream right-wing parties that strategically moderated their positions during the EU accession conditionality process. In Bulgaria, Croatia and Serbia, GERB, HDZ and SNS, respectively, had to adopt and implement a series of progressive GSE policies in a top-down technocratic process that did not correspond to a democratic, agonistic process of politicization nor a significant change in the value systems of the predominantly conservative voter pools of these MSR parties. This created an exploitable space for the illiberal Christian right to launch their anti-gender campaigns with the desire to either pressure the mainstream right to adopt their agenda or to defeat them politically.

10.DICUSSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Following the comparison of the three case studies and conclusions drawn from the analytical framework to answer my research questions, I conclude with a more theoretically informed discussion of the results and its contributions. First, I reiterate the importance of looking at religious actors, both churches and lay movements, as political actors that can themselves spur radical-right mobilization and are not just resources or allies of populist radical right parties that (ab)use religion for their own political gains. Following that, I address the important contributions made by taking an emic, internalist approach to anti-gender movements. The latter include a better understanding of the meaning-making, strategies, and perceptions of the actors themselves, and of the internal dynamics, interactions, and relations of cooperation and

competition. Moving on, I propose overcoming the blind spots in countermovement theory by accounting for the internal complexity, diversity, and discord within the (radical) right-wing sector of movement and party actors. Specifically, I suggest that, in the Balkans, interactions between anti-gender actors and center-right parties as carriers of EU-conditioned liberalization are crucial for explaining anti-gender movement emergence and trajectories. Moreover, relations with third parties such as the media, other mass mobilizations and transnational organizations are discussed as important findings emerging from the data. In the final section, I address two important innovations of anti-gender movements in terms of familial identity politics and the creation of family-based anti-gender movement parties.

10.1. Unpacking Religion and the Radical Right

10.1.1. Three Strategies – Discursive Secularization, Fronting, and Astroturfing

In answering the research question on the role of religion and churches in anti-gender mobilization, I add to an important discussion in the field of religion and politics. Unlike previous research on the populist radical right that mostly focused on how RR parties and movements utilise or ‘hijack’ religion (Marzouki et al., 2016; DeHanas & Shterin, 2018; Milton, 2020), I have shown how churches and religious actors themselves generate and/or support right-wing radicalism for mobilization purposes. Religion is not just a useful resource imbued with symbolism that radical-right actors use to help demarcate those outside of the native communities such as Muslim immigrants or autochthonous minorities of a different religion (e.g. Serbs in Croatia or Turks in Bulgaria). Ultraconservative movements and political conflicts within Christian churches can spill over into the mainstream, reinvigorating the existing radical right or even helping the creation of new movements and parties challenging secularism and liberalism. In a way, the role of dominant churches with respect to social movements does not seem to fit the traditional division between resource mobilization and political opportunities. On one hand, churches provide resources to movement actors. On the other hand, changes in church-state relations can also pose constraints or provide opportunities for movement mobilization.

Perhaps one of the reasons why most European literature seems to ignore religious right-wing radicalism, beyond the biases of Western centrism and secularization theory, is the Christian right’s whitewashing of its illiberal politics. My findings across all cases, especially in Catholic

and Protestant contention, corroborate the importance of discursive secularization as a central innovation of the anti-gender movement (Vaggione, 2005; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). The anti-gender movement thus primarily frames its claims and demands as *unsecular*. I borrowed and modified this term from Kalyvas (2003) and Van Kersbergen (2008) to denote political claims inspired by religion that don't directly refer to it. Their arguments are not explicitly religious nor relying on spiritual, morality frames that appeal to God or scripture, but they are also not secular, since they invoke a natural order, a universal Truth that corrodes the institutionalization of liberal differentiation and pluralist neutrality on conceptions of a 'good life' (Kulenović, 2013). Discursive secularization reaches its peak in the Croatian case. Couched in the language of universal human rights, a fundamentally religious understanding of natural law as given to humanity by God is framed secularly in two ways. On the one hand, Croatian anti-gender leaders insist on a non-religious scientific backing of their claims³⁰. On the other hand, they invoke a pan-religious agreement for their claims, demonstrating support from other religions, thus simultaneously communicating a non-parochial, non-nationalist identity, and a universal validity for their arguments. My main findings on anti-gender framing in Croatia thus point towards a substantial change of the traditionally prevailing religious nationalism (Brubaker, 2012; Sremac & Ganzevoort, 2015) towards what I call *unsecular familism*. The latter reflects a centering of family, not nation, as a new issue to be brought to the political agenda by using unsecular framing to overcome hostile DOS and appeal to broader audiences.

Whereas the smaller Protestant communities in Bulgaria also avoid ethnonationalism and adopt discursive secularization, the Orthodox religious-political millieus, organizations and parties in both Bulgaria and Serbia are still legitimized within a religious-nationalist framing and ideology. These comparative differences in framing are linked to structural and institutional configurations of church-state-society relations. To the extent that dense lay networks of religious activists develop within civil society, it is beneficial for anti-gender movements to secularize their discourse and align their frames with the broader society in which they are rooted. Even in the Serbian case, Igrutinović et al. (2015) rightly note a dual strategy of lay and clergy activists: an increasingly secular discourse combined with ritual prayer used for political ends. This difference represents a known strategic movement tension between *reaching in* towards supporters and *reaching out* to audiences (Jasper, 2004). Whereas the secularization

³⁰ This includes claims drawing from a rich field of (mostly American) Christian knowledge-production about life beginning at conception, sexualization of children as threatening their psychosocial development, heterosexual families as ideal environment for child-rearing, and similar 'evidence-based' framing.

of rhetoric aims at broadening support for the movement, the sacralization of public space serves to consolidate and mobilize Orthodox militants. Given this development of framing, we can expect increasing discursive secularization in Serbia if a proper social movement emerges. Finally, despite striving for secular discourse, the deeply religious identity of anti-gender actors is most apparent during contention in all cases – anti-gender actions commonly take on a religious form, as processions, prayers, or vigils.

As we have seen in the comparison of the three cases, there is a fundamental difference between the religiously inspired social movement networks of the lay-faithful and the clergy in Catholic and Protestant communities of Croatia and Bulgaria respectively, and the far-right parties inspired by Orthodox religious nationalism in Bulgaria and Serbia. In the former cases, *ad hoc*, loose initiatives and organizations rely on strong familial and social ties of lay Catholic and Protestant activists forming the backbone of the movement. These organizations perform the function of front groups translating fundamentally religious strategy into civic action (Zald & McCarty, 1986). Additionally, they act as ‘intermittent structures’ (Koopmans, 2009) that can be ‘deployed and then folded up’ when a new period of contention arises. Second, the loose network of *ad hoc* initiatives is created and utilized as an astroturfing strategy ‘to create a false impression of a widespread, spontaneously arising, grassroots movement’ (Datta, 2021), which explains a mushrooming of similar sounding generic initiatives and NGOs. Although they are tightly bound to their clerical sponsor in initial stages of development, they become more independent over time as they establish themselves in civil and political society proper.

My findings on the types of clerical backing for the anti-gender movement resonate with studies of Christian support for popular and emancipatory movements such as the civil rights movement in the US (Zald & McCarthy, 1987; Morris, 1986; Nepstad, 2019). As Yashar (2005) found in the case of Latin America more recently, the Catholic church provided important resources such as communication networks, meeting spaces and civic skills to indigenous movements. From the viewpoint of my interviewees as moral entrepreneurs and leaders forming SMOs, different ecclesiastical resources and networks are at their disposal. Anti-gender entrepreneurs employ the social appropriation of ecclesiastical entities as a “social/organizational base” for collective action (McAdam et al., 2001). Secondly, the Christian networks in both cases function as broader ‘protest communities’ which can periodically be mobilized for action and supply anti-gender campaigns with activists and cadres (Diani, 2009; Tarrow, 2010).

10.1.2. Acting Inside and Outside Civil Society

In the Croatian case, although only certain clergymembers and lay networks mostly at the bottom of the Church hierarchy substantially supported the movement over time, we can conceptualize the whole of the Catholic church in Croatia as a *meta-movement organization*. It “neither ‘causes’ nor ‘becomes’ a social movement *per se*” but is rather a “movement midwife,” (Smith, 1996, p. 16), assisting in the birthing of the anti-gender movement. The Vatican II processes of change within the Church (Casanova, 1996) is of central importance in this regard. Paradoxically, the Churches' internal democratization and reorientation from anti-democratic clerical establishment towards a plural civil society seems to also be driving the rise of a radical-right, anti-pluralist movement. In this sense, the anti-gender movement can be considered as resulting from the spillover (Meyer & Whittier, 1994) of other conservative *intracatholic* movements tasked with ‘new evangelization’. However, church-state-society relations figure as an issue-specific element of POS (Giugni, 2009). The anti-gender movement’s emergence, collective action and trajectory is highly dependant on carefully balancing different stakes. Insofar as anti-gender movement parties threaten the power of HDZ, they also potentially threaten a relatively stable political coalition of the highest echelons of the Church with HDZ as the main guarantor of the Vatican agreements.

Interestingly, the process of anti-gender movement-party creation itself in Croatia closely resembles the historical advent of Christian democratic parties. In their analysis, Kalyvas and Kersberger (2010) identify three stages which lead to the creation of confessional, Christian-democratic parties in Europe. First, the Catholic Church launched a social movement to fight against liberal anticlericalism. Second, the movement became partisan after the Church supported conservative politicians defending its interests. Third, the electoral successes of Catholic conservatives led to their political emancipation and conflict over authority with the church itself. The Church thus subverted its own hierarchy and control “by allowing the lower clergy and lay Catholics to become independent of the episcopate” (Kalyvas & Kersberger 2010, p. 186). It is remarkable how closely the emergence and institutionalization of the anti-gender movement in Croatia have followed this process. As recently argued by Paternotte (2023), “Frankenstein’s monster” is no longer controlled by or from its creator – the Vatican. Juan Marco Vaggione (2005) and José Casanova (1996) wrote about the NGOisation of the Catholic church, and its disengagement with both the state and political society proper in order to act within a pluralist civil society. This process that fostered the creation of a network of

conservative Catholic actors in civil society now seems to be reversing back to ‘political society proper’ through reinvigorated political, partisan Catholicism.

In the Bulgarian case, relying on Potz’s (2020) classification of religious (clerical) types of political action, Protestant churches acted as a part of the social movement, mobilizing in protest against liberal policies and GSE. On the other hand, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church’s opted to pursue the strategy of an interest group, announcing their position via public letters, and criticizing various policies and public issues as against the church’s teachings. Previous scholarship has analysed how loose coalitions of religious and political players intersect against GI, as well as the central role of the Vatican in developing rhetorical counterstrategies against the transnational feminist movement (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Corredor, 2019; Corrêa et al., 2020; Tranfić, 2022). As we have seen, the peculiarity of the Bulgarian case in this sense is in the interplay of Orthodox and Protestant religious actors and churches combatting ‘gender ideology’. The BOC sees the rising Protestant communities in Bulgaria as a threat, despite their agreement on issues of morality, family, and sexuality, which makes cooperation against ‘gender’ limited. Nevertheless, there is some evidence, as Heumann and Duyvendak found in the Nicaraguan case (2014), that interreligious competition can foster politicization around the anti-gender cause. Future research should investigate to what extent religious competition drives conservative movement politics. In any case, the anti-gender movement in Bulgaria was built on a strong backbone of Protestant communities and civic-minded churches. However, given the scarcity of resources and the generally small size of Protestant communities in Buglaria, the anti-gender movement was only fully brought to the national stage when mainstreamed far-right parties co-opted its agenda. In addition, prior to 2017, anti-gender entrepreneurs managed to hijack the broader, ideologically diverse parental network they were part of to mobilize against ‘gender’.

The Serbian Orthodox Church has played an active role in Serbian civil society and politics, both as part of ‘non-governmental nationalism’ (Bieber, 2005) and pro-democratic opposition to Milošević’s regime (Veković, 2021). However, the Church itself has not invested into building an Orthodox associational network of lay organizations that would be similar to Protestant or Catholic civil society. Thus, from a resource mobilization perspective, anti-gender entrepreneurs in Serbia had little to draw from, despite SOC’s support for their goals. Nevertheless, especially in the early days of Dveri’s emergence, the movement could rely on nationalist *parachurch organizations*. The latter are defined by Edwards and McCarthy (2004, p. 123) as organizations that have “no formal connections with religious bodies but claim

religious legitimacy and many times mobilize constituents in “blocs” out of religious infrastructures.” In fact, early Dveri itself could be considered one. In any case, the SOC primarily acted as a *value-based actor* (Potz, 2020), not directly engaging with political parties, but wielding symbolic power to constrict or promote certain policies by, among other venues of action, providing anti-gender entrepreneurs with moral and cultural resources. The material and organizational ones, however, were consistently lacking, as confirmed by my interviewees.

Overall, while there are marked differences between the cases, anti-gender lay activists clashed with clergymen over authority and control over movement actions, framing and types of engagement with politics in all three instances. The existing literature on religion and collective action corroborates the reluctance of religious elites in supporting secular political movements since such support may alienate political and socio-economic elites who provide the church with significant political and material support, especially if there are few competing religions, which is certainly true in my cases (Hale, 2018; Gill, 1998). My findings thus amplify the voices of scholars that warn against treating churches as monoliths with a clear and unequivocal unified voice and direction of action (see Grzymala-Busse, 2012; Carnac, 2014; Ozzano & Giorgi, 2016), as most anti-gender scholarship tends to do. Moreover, as I will argue in the following sections, this rule should be applied to right-wing movements in general.

10.1.3. An Emic Understanding of ‘Gender Ideology’

One of the most important tasks of this dissertation was to engage directly with my central object of analysis, i.e. anti-gender actors, by conducting fieldwork interviews to go beyond secondary data and organizational discourses disseminated in the public by the movement. I have thus followed the steps of researchers that have emphasized the importance of overcoming the ‘externalist bias’ (Goodwin, 2006; Munson, 2008; Avanza, 2018; Castelli Gattinara, 2020) to conduct emic, or internalist investigations of the radical right. Such an approach, with all its drawbacks, has the advantage of allowing us to understand the internal motivation and values, strategies, and perceptions of context, as well as the understanding of terms, concepts and claims made by anti-gender leaders themselves. This agential approach to explaining anti-gender movement emergence and mobilization is thus partly a Weberian effort in reaching a *verstehen* of the actor’s own point of view. For a study dealing with anti-gender movements, surely one of the first questions then must be: what do they mean by ‘gender’? As we have seen, while the ‘gender ideology’ frame was developed as such in Catholic intellectual circles

as a category of analysis (Brubaker 2012), it turned into a more ambivalent category of practice once lay and political activists utilized it. As visible in my interviewee's identification of 'gender ideology' with LGBTIQ+ activism, the sex binary, naturally, imposes a "normalization of exclusively heterosexual desire, intimacy, and family life" (Peterson, 1999). Sexual relations are acceptable only as heterosexual means of procreation within the closed institution of marriage.

Whereas the meaning of 'gender ideology' has been recognized in literature as a floating or empty signifier that "neither denominates specific social phenomena or policies nor an ideological standpoint" (Mayer & Sauer, 2017) and is rather vague, the concept seems to be quite consistently used by anti-gender actors and is at least tentatively exhaustive. I propose understanding 'gender ideology' as having a heuristic framing function analogous to a specific figure of speech, namely, a *synecdoche* (see Laclau & Mouffe, 2014 for an interpretation of synecdoches in representational politics). A synecdoche is a metonymy of a particular kind that functions as a *pars pro toto* relation. For example, when we "offer someone's hand in marriage" or "have hungry mouths to feed", 'hand' and 'mouth' are synecdoches, central parts of the represented whole (in this case, persons). The term 'gender' or 'gender ideology' perform a similar heuristic function – they are concepts that point to a larger system of meaning they belong to, but are just one, albeit central, part of that system. In this case, when not used as a simple denunciatory term, 'gender' is the movement's diagnostic frame that represents the totality of biological and social reproduction. As a signifier, 'gender' can thus 'float' to refer to any of the different elements of biological and social reproduction that it designates but can hardly be considered as empty as other more general signifiers like 'order', 'liberation', or 'justice' (Laclau, 2005). Overall, the advantage of such an understanding of the GI frame is in recognizing the rationality and conservative cohesion of the anti-gender movements' ideology and strategy, rather than brushing it off as moral panics, a conspiracy, or an invention of a straw man to serve as a mere scare tactic, as some authors do (Careaga-Pérez, 2016; Perger, 2018; Žuk & Žuk, 2020; Marchlewska et al., 2019). While Edenborg (2023) has recently argued that 'gender' is not always the symbolic glue of far-right politics, showing how 'traditional values' have played that role in Russia instead, I argue that these various frames are complementary sides of the same coin. Namely, in terms of collective action frames (Benford & Snow, 2000), 'gender ideology' serves as a diagnostic frame identifying societal problems and attributing blame, while 'family values' serve as a prognostic frame, pointing us towards those social and political scripts that protect and preserve the heteronormative status quo as the appropriate

remedy. As Pető (2018) has demonstrated in the Hungarian case, it is precisely the politics and policies of familism that have replaced gender studies as the appropriate illiberal alternative.

The Bulgarian case demonstrates best the centrality of ‘gender’ for anti-gender collective action. It was only the advent of the ‘gender ideology’ frame in 2017, and the accompanying brokerage of leaders like Drenchev and Urumov with overlapping membership in both communities, that brought far-right parties into a coalition with the (Protestant) anti-gender SMOs. Yet, such a coalition would not be possible if the actors had not already shared a common illiberal ideology. Despite the moderate rhetoric projecting an affirmative, seemingly secular discourse of family values, the movement’s radical-right exclusionary politics are made manifest when targeting gender and sexual minorities. Finally, the heteronormative social conservatism of the anti-gender movement is highly homophobic and transphobic across all cases, denying even the basic rights of LGBTIQ+ persons such as the right to public assembly, as visible in the calls for banning Pride Parades. Although moderate conservatives share an affinity to concepts of natural social inequality, hierarchy, and authority, as Pirro (2022) argues, they accept liberal constitutionalism that protects individual and minority rights, which distances them from the exclusionary politics of the radical right. Reactive protests aiming directly to block progressive policy changes do not shy away from radical, exclusivist language employing homo/transphobia with a conspiratorial tone about the harms of GI for children, women, and society more broadly.

10.2. From Right to Radical Right – A Reappraisal of Countermovement Theory

10.2.1. Internal Interactions and Discord as Generative for Movement Mobilization

Having established the core functions of the GI frame as defined by the actors themselves, we can move onto the major contribution and insight derived from an internalist vantage point. Scholars have neglected right-wing intramovement divisions and heterogeneity (Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2018), and reified the homogeneity of the conservative camp, reducing them to “a sound bite, or a simple (and ugly) message” (Munson, 2008; Avanza, 2018). In fact, my thesis demonstrates that intramovement relations, rivalries and discord can generate differences in framing and claims making, lead to a multiplication of organizational structures, waste of movement resources and (re)defining of relations with political parties.

The anti-gender coalition in Bulgaria consists of two factions, one centered around a Protestant civil society focusing on family values and free-market ideology with ties to US conservatives, and one centered around Orthodox political parties focusing on gender as a threat to the Bulgarian nation and state, oriented more towards Russia. Given the relative novelty of post-2017 movement building, we are yet to see whether a proper movement will be established to overcome its internal contradictions. For now, it might be more precise to assess anti-gender contention in Bulgaria as a result of coalitional processes marked by weaker ties and limited networking around specific issues, rather than movement processes that entail shared identities and strong bonds (Diani & Bison, 2004). Most importantly, similarly to Avanza's study on the Italian pro-life movement (2018), my findings point to the centrality of dynamics within the (radical) right-wing movement and party sectors, rather than movement-counter-movement ones, for the emergence of strategic innovation and contention against 'gender'. Anti-gender entrepreneurs mobilize by distinguishing themselves from traditional far-right parties and in order to challenge the mainstream EU-oriented centre-right. The unlikely alliance established between former enemies – Protestant communities and far-right parties who used to denounce the former as dangerous sects – allowed VMRO and Ataka, junior partners in the governing coalition, to reignite their anti-establishment credo while in power. Bulgaria is thus a perfect example of what Graff and Korolczuk (2020) have termed 'opportunistic synergy', a relationship between right-wing populist parties and 'ultraconservative organizations' based on mutual strategic gains. Whereas anti-gender SMOs found their opening in the political opportunity structure to set the policy agenda and gain institutional allies, far-right parties replenished their "moral legitimacy in the eyes of traditionalist voters", adopting a new frame of the issue that allowed them to reach new supporters (Paternote, 2023).

In the Croatian case, a core of about a dozen militant activist connected through dense professional and familial ties forms the center of the Croatian anti-gender movement *proper*. Anti-gender actors act within a multi-organizational field with an implicit division of labor, loose action, and issue-based cooperation. NGOs GROZD, INF, and Vigilare are the central social movement organizations that connect both religious communities and faith-based associations, radical-right actors, and political parties. Discord and open conflict occurred over time, especially with the movement taking the electoral turn. Conflicts over power, authority and political strategy can partially be explained in ideological terms as well. According to Kitschelt (2006), instances of conflict and fissures are common to radical right parties given the patrimonial dominance of a charismatic leader. As I have shown, conflicts between SMOs led

to changes in strategies, from electoral to cultural long-term change, as well as the multiplication of protest events in the case of rival referendum campaigns and rival political parties. Furthermore, the finding that abortion is the most frequent issue of the movement's protests in Croatia makes sense only in light of a longer history of anti-abortion community building and political action, the latter best represented by the Croatian Population Movement of the 1990s and the former by the pro-life NGO 'Betlehem' founded in 2002. Interestingly, and contrary to countermovement theory which could lead us to expect mobilization in response to (announced) progressive changes in legislation or feminist mobilization (Mottl, 1980; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996; Roggeband, 2018), almost all events coded after the year 2014 deal with the issue of abortion, despite no (announced) changes or contention around this issue at the time.

Finally, the unsuccessful formation of a social movement in the case of Serbian anti-gender actors can also be partially explained by relations between different radical-right and religious actors. My findings challenge the assumption, stemming from the view of religious institutions as undifferentiated units, that churches automatically provide resources to friendly movements (Hale, 2017). The burdens of historical national and religious conflicts that weigh on the Orthodox Church proved to be a barrier for anti-gender SMOs' cooperation across strict ethnoreligious boundaries. Of course, this is not only a barrier specific to the right. As social movement literature recognizes, ideological differences and disagreements as one of the central barriers to coalition-building (Staggenborg, 1986). However, it is particularly damaging to transnationalization efforts that are "contradictory to central myths of the right, namely, ethnonationalism and national identity" (Caiani, 2018, p. 2). Obstacles to coalition work crucial for social movement emergence in the Serbian case also plagued intramovement relations, as noted in the troublesome attempts at forming umbrella organizations. Competition and conflict seem to have stemmed at least in some part from ideological tensions between more moderate and extremist groups; between different denominations and groups with varying social bases and strategic preferences (Ruch, 2007). Furthermore, Dveri's electoral turn and transformation into a political party also brought several splits and party exoduses regarding issues of leadership, organizational structure and tensions between ideological purity and compromise. However, as Staggenborg (2010) notes, coalition work tends to divert time and resources away from internal organizational work and consolidation. In a scarce SM environment like the Serbian one, with sparse clerical support in terms of infrastructure and material goods, it is easy to see how this would hamper interorganizational cooperation and consolidation – to the extent

that there even *are* any functioning organizations at all. In fact, only Dveri, with professional leadership, resources and an organization structure centred as a nodal point in the broader movement (Shaffer, 2000) worked consistently to support, gather, and co-opt ‘pro-family’ associations. However, despite all problems, two things proved conducive for coalition-building: a common anti-gender, anti-LGBT ideology framed around ‘family values’, and outsider threats. This confirms Van Dyke and McCammon’s (2010) findings that in some cases, political threats can be more important to coalition formation, and thus – movement emergence, than political opportunities.

In conclusion, while opposition to ‘gender’ is crucial in igniting anti-gender contention, which is visible in the very name of the concept, dynamics of interactions and relations within the radical right go a long way in helping explain how and why anti-gender movements emerge and mobilize. The rich contention repertoire of the movement and collective action on various topics and issues transcending a reactive nature presupposed by countermovement theory supports the recent skepticism over the ‘backlash’ approach (Kováts, 2018; Paternotte, 2020). I would argue that the discussion over the concept, while fruitful, produces a false dichotomy. As my own study shows, the movement is both reactive and forward-looking, as any movement that must diagnose problems and obstacles on one hand, and then propose solutions and motivate constituencies to act on the other. In metaphorical terms, I would not illustrate the movement and its central subject – the heteronormative Christian family – as a bulwark (Payne & Tornhill, 2023), but rather as a phalanx – cloistered while aggressively moving forward.

10.2.2. Center-Right Parties as Allies and Foes

As we have seen in the previous sections, oppositional dynamics with progressive actors are not the main factor in explaining movement mobilization. In Croatia, changes within the mainstream right HDZ and its firm grip on both the government and conservative voters are a central element of the dynamic political opportunities. Particularly, as HDZ slowly moved towards the center-right during the lengthy EU accession period after 2000 (Fink-Hafner, 2008; Vachudova, 2008), its (partial) acceptance, toleration, or at least silence on socially liberal policies fostered both internal and external opposition from radical-right factions. The anti-gender movement largely emerges as part of this phenomenon, utilizing instable elite alignments and establishing alliances in the political party system (McAdam, 1996). This finding challenges the countermovement model that presupposes a movement-countermovement dynamic as crucial for movement mobilization. Anti-gender collective action

in Croatia consists of *transactional activism* of small advocacy organizations like GROZD and INF that engage in networking, cooperating, and communicating with other organizations and institutions (Čisař, 2013). These NGOs form the basis of loose, *ad hoc* citizen's initiatives engaging in *episodic mass mobilization* in reaction to liberal policies, as was the case with the Istanbul convention. Importantly, except for the Marches for Life, mass mobilization occurred only when the movement was supported by far-right factions of HDZ or nationalist and war veteran groups as was the case with the IC, itself an instance of a broader anti-government protest. On the one hand, anti-gender parties act as challengers to the increasingly secular, catch-all Christian democrats (HDZ) who avoid morality issues (Engeli et al., 2012). On the other hand, anti-gender parties count on radical-right factions within the HDZ itself to challenge the government. From a political process perspective, the instability of elite alignments, factionalism of the mainstream right, and the resulting appearance of socially conservative allies (McAdam, 1996) prompted electoral competition. As one MP noted: "It was a moment to seize – to gather around Karamarko and the Patriotic Coalition of conservative forces" (Matej, A6). Furthermore, my findings on the ways in which a closing POS and a hostile media environment were an important factor in motivating movement-party creation resonates with previous studies indicating how political threats foster cooperation and coalition-building (Van Dyke & Soule, 2002; Van Dyke, 2003; Meyer, 2004).

The Bulgarian anti-gender coalition emerged confronting changing political and discursive opportunities, particularly facing both an unpredictable opponent and potential ally in GERB's governments. Just like the Croatian case, GERB is perceived as an opportunistic party far removed from its Christian-democratic *credo* to service liberal EU elites. Nevertheless, riding on the episodic chaos of mass anti-governmental protests, anti-gender SMOs perceived social unrest as an opening in the POS that can increase their blackmail potential to block governmental policy. The parental movement's weariness of governmental overreach (Fábián & Korolczuk, 2017) was easily bridged with the anti-gender movement's anti-statist and anti-communist framing. GERB's recoil in the face of such strong opposition meant opting for governmental stability and protecting their sway over conservative voters in the face of strong far-right competition. Getting GERB's coalition partners, the United Patriots, to talk about the dangers of 'gender' instead of Turks and the Roma, was an agenda-setting victory (Hutter & Vliegthart, 2018) for the anti-gender movement. It serves as a clear example of the success of protesters in contaminating the public discourse via strong party allies, i.e., open political opportunities. From a political cleavage theory perspective, whereas the early 2010 attempts of

collective action against liberal policies had mixed results due to an instable ideological positioning, the post-2017 contention placed the anti-gender movement firmly within the 'integration-demarcation' cleavage (Kriesi et al., 2008) on the side of the radical right opposing the liberalizing agenda of deviant cosmopolitan EU elites. While sharing an authoritarian position with the anti-gender movement on Kitschelt's libertarian-authoritarian cleavage (Kitschelt & McGann, 1997), GERB's integrationist position puts it at odds with the demarcationist positions of the far-right and the anti-gender movement, as expected for a moderate-right party (Lachat, 2008).

As argued by Europeanization and LGBTIQ+ rights scholars (Kahlina, 2015; Slootmaeckers, 2023), Serbian governments, particularly under Aleksandar Vučić and SNS, play an ambiguous game to appease both the EU and its human rights accession criteria and their own nationalist voter constituency. As Slootmaeckers demonstrates, 'tactical Europeanization' is pursued as a utilitarian, ambivalent approach where domestic liberal policies are justified and performed as necessary because EU demands them, while simultaneously rejecting them as foreign to Serbia's national identity (Slootmaeckers 2023, p. 45). Anti-gender entrepreneurs thus act to create moral outrage and pressure the SNS government to reaffirm its conservative, patriotic identity, or at least partially give into their demands. Given the broad-tent, catch-all character of Vučić's increasingly authoritarian rule, he is able to blame individual ministers outside of his party, or minority-protecting institutions for these seemingly unpopular policies and legislation drafts. From the perspective of party politics literature on mainstream right approaches to radical-right challenger parties, radical-right positions on GSE are mainstreamed, as SNS is forced to move from ignoring the far-right 'pariahs' (Downs, 2012) to co-opting their policy positions and narrative framing (Minkenberg, 2018). Thus, the increasingly authoritarian right-wing regime of Aleksandar Vučić and its willingness to co-opt some of the movement issues changed the movement's political opportunity structure. SNS's strategy of tactical Europeanization is simultaneously a barrier and an opportunity for the anti-gender movement to challenge liberal GSE policies. What is evident from a party competition perspective is that, faced with a highly crowded radical-right scene, with heavyweights such as the Serbian Radical Party, Dveri's familial, anti-gender turn, in a context of an increasingly authoritarian, delegitimised regime, paid off just enough to push it over the 5% electoral threshold. Whereas the populist radical right in Western and Eastern Europe traditionally relied on immigration and ethnic minority issues, respectively, as 'omnibus issues' through which they channel other policy positions such as welfare or law and order (Akkerman & De Lange, 2012; Pirro, 2015),

anti-gender family values are brought to the fore as an innovative ‘omnibus’ issue. From a social movement perspective, Dveri realigned their frames around a new nodal point. Their vision of ‘familial society’ frames various policy positions, including education, healthcare, welfare, and even immigration.

In conclusion, what is common across all three cases is the important role of the interactions between ultraconservative and religious actors on the one hand and the increasingly moderate Christian democrats on the other hand, as well as the perceptions of the latter by the former in defining political strategies and claims-making. The narrative emerging from my interviews is as follows: Since the mainstream right does not stand for traditional, Christian values regarding morality and sexuality policies, a new political bulwark is needed against the onslaught of ‘left-liberal’ radicals, secularization, gender ideology and moral relativism. Having said that, the dominant role center-right parties have played in my cases as frequent holders of government office makes it sometimes difficult to delineate between them as parties and the state as such. Yet even this issue itself signals that countermovement theory developed in contexts of pluralism and liberal democracy have limited validity in contexts of flawed democracies with dominant parties. Nevertheless, my thesis calls for a reevaluation of the standard expectations of radical-right backlash as a struggle of a monolithic, uniform actor moving against the progressive left within a clearly demarked cultural war. To understand better the current wave of reactive anti-gender mobilization, we need to look at the relations between various right-wing actors which have been neglected so far (for recent exceptions see Henninger, 2022; Lamour, 2022).

10.3. Third Parties – The Media, the Masses, and Transnational Allies

In addition to allies and adversaries, Dieter Rucht (2007) noted the importance of so-called ‘third parties’ such as media, audiences or mass publics, courtrooms, institutional actors, and brokers that help or hinder movement activity. Most anti-gender and anti-abortion entrepreneurs and actors in Serbia have not overcome obstacles that would allow them to mobilize for collective action given a lack of funding, cadres, and overall organizational capacity, especially when facing what they perceive as closed discursive opportunities in terms of a mainstream media *cordon sanitaire*. To what extent this judgement or perception is true is a different question. One could convincingly argue that Dveri members have, at least over time, become frequent guests in Serbian talk show hosts and media more generally. Yet this might precisely

be a result of their discursive shift towards ‘moderate’ familial politics. Similarly, anti-gender actors in Croatia have lambasted the perceived partisanship of newspapers and TV channels, especially during and after the marriage referendum, and have repeatedly brought journalists to court claiming slander and misrepresentation of their efforts. Finally, Bulgarian anti-gender actors too have decried their representation in the media as ‘Protestant sects’ and claimed that positive appraisals of the traditional family model in media are giving way to deviant ‘gender ideology’. In fact, the first and biggest contextual obstacle for the anti-gender movement’s attempt at mainstreaming, as elaborated by a majority of interviewed leaders, was a hostile domestic media environment. This finding points to a gap in the literature on anti-gender movements that has so far ignored traditional media, focusing either on political (institutional) opportunities (Roggeband, 2018; Lavizzari & Siročić, 2023; Reinhardt et al., 2023) or the use of social media (Harsin, 2018; Darakchi, 2019; Righetti, 2021; Engebretsen, 2022). Mass media play a crucial role in gatekeeping how a movement’s efforts, claims and frames are interpreted by the broader public and are thus the central element of the discursive opportunity structure for collective actors (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004; McCammon, 2013; Caiani, 2017). The importance of the social media proved to be crucial in the case of Bulgaria, where connective action over Facebook groups helped foster the peak of street protest against the Istanbul Convention. Thus, unsurprisingly, the media are only important insofar as they *mediate* the movement’s message to the audiences, i.e. the broader public.

However, anti-gender actors in Bulgaria, Croatia, nor Serbia did not wait for the public to form its opinion on the topics dear to their cause. Instead, they connected their framing, activities, and networks to other mass protests in critical junctures in order to ‘ride the wave’ of popular discontent and push their message as far as possible. As I have demonstrated in the comparative chapter, it is no coincidence that the anti-gender movement parties in both Croatia and Serbia announced their electoral turn during mass protests against the governments in 2011 and 2012, respectively. In a way, mass anti-governmental protests organized around corruption, a failing economy and decline of social services served as an opening in the POS, especially since they rocked the political authority and legitimacy of center-right parties in all three cases. Further research should, thus, investigate, to what extent anti-gender mobilization makes use of street protests, displaced grievances, and other mass movement’s successes. In a somewhat similar manner, Grzebalska and Pető (2016) have argued that anti-gender illiberal regimes in CEE could be conceptualized as ‘polypore states’, named after a parasitic fungus that feeds on rotting trees, contributing to their decay; “the “polypore state” divests resources from the

already existing secular and modernist civil society sector towards the illiberal base, to secure and enlarge it”. As we have seen in my cases, anti-gender actors are willing to hijack protests, mass movements and parental networks of civil society actors to redirect their resources, know-how or media attention towards their own goals.

Finally, transnational actors have been present in one way or another in all three cases at least since the early 2010s. As we have seen, Dveri became a member of the World Congress of Families early on, while the main leaders of both the Croatian and Bulgarian anti-gender movements attended the European Advocacy Academy organized by the European Center for Law and Justice. However, when accounting for the role of movement diffusion between (trans)national actors, it is difficult to assess who is the transmitter and who the adopter (Soule, 2004). This is partly a result of the universal nature, organizational structure, and connections of Christian churches. Faced with a weak conservative social movement sector and mostly hostile parties, Dveri turned to transnationalization. Particularly, by pursuing the strategy of externalization, Dveri’s increasing cooperation through the WCF platform allowed them to increase their visibility, public legitimacy, and other material, symbolic and logistical resources needed for collective action (della Porta & Tarrow, 2005; Caiani, 2018). It reaffirmed their resolve by proving that they were “not alone in this battle”, as Dveri’s international secretary put it (Zarić, 2017). The movement’s collaboration with both Russian and American Christian right leaders such as Brian Brown and Sergei Chesnokov could arguably help align their claims with Serbia’s attempts to pursue a middle-of-the-road foreign policy of cooperation both with the EU and Russia.

Alternatively, in case of Croatia’s flourishing movement emergence, local actors became movement diffusers. My findings point towards an unexplored and particularly promising channel of transnationalization – diaspora communities. Due to its rise to fame on the international Christian right stage after the 2013 marriage referendum, Croatia became an exporter of anti-gender contention and activist know-how, particularly helping in the spread of the anti-abortion initiative 40 Days for Life to Serbia and Germany via the Croatian diaspora. Overall, my research indicates that the anti-abortion faction of the movement has significantly stronger links to foreign organizations, which might partly help explain the upsurge and continued rise of anti-abortion campaigns and activities in Croatia when compared to the stagnation of activity around other issues. Finally, while journalists have reported on financial inflows and support from foreign anti-gender organizations (Ćimić, 2021), we cannot know just how vast and significant this source of resources has been for movement mobilization, although

research on the topic indicates it might be quite high, due to continually rising sums of dollars invested by US anti-gender NGOs (Velasco, 2023).

10.4. A New Type of Conservatism – Anti-gender Innovations

10.4.1. Familial Identity Politics

Movement leaders across all cases report expressive, inward facing and community-oriented activities aiming to inform, provide services, raise awareness, and increase group-cohesion as the most common form of action. As Prearo (2023) recently noted, local, “mini conferences” and public forums often held in parishes have both an informative and a formative role. They are central for building collective identity around resisting ‘gender’ in favor of family values. To overcome what they perceive as rigidly closed discursive opportunity structures enforced by the mainstream media, expressive action forms are used by actors to focus on alternative knowledge and media production. These action forms point to a certain kind of *cultural logic of protest* that is intended to change societal values and norms and to “educate the public to a different understanding of the world” (Alimi, 2015). Additionally, the family marches themselves mirror both pride parades and religious processions, coming off more as theatrical “postmodern marches” (Alimi, 2015) expressing the colorful subjectivity of parental and religious identities than a utilitarian demonstration. Finally, the familial identity politics combined with anti-abortion vigils and prayers correspond to a specific logic of protest that della Porta and Diani (2006) have called the ‘logic of bearing witness’. The latter does not focus on demonstrating numbers or force but on a symbolic display of commitment to “an objective deemed vital for humanity’s future”, with “activists willing to run personal risks to demonstrate their convictions and reinforce the moral message” (della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 176). This is particularly true in case of activists praying against abortion in front of hospitals – the most vital and growing action form of anti-gender protests in Croatia.

Unlike traditional radical-right ideology in Croatia that expressed conservatism as a function of its ethnonationalist identity, only marginally concerning the rejection of feminists and homosexuals as threats to national reproduction, traditional morals, and demography, the anti-gender movement is not *primarily* nationalist. In terms of Minkenberg’s classification of the radical right, we can speak of a ‘religious-fundamentalist right, in which nationalism merges with religious rigidity in an anti-liberal and anti-pluralistic way’ (Minkenberg, 2015). Conservatism is thus weaponized in an authoritarian way, attacking the constitutional protection

of gender and sexual minorities with a “punitive conventional moralism” (Mudde, 2007). From the vantage point of far-right scholarship and social psychology, anti-gender movements aim at enforcing conformism to natural law in service of collective social control and order (Šiber, 1998). Yet, as different authors dealing with societal stereotypes and prejudices argue, we’ve witnessed a shift from explicitly stated and consciously held prejudices towards more hidden, coded, and implicit forms of prejudice in the last decades (Pelinka et al., 2009; Álvarez-Benjumea, 2023). Even within groups whose identities are strongly formed around prejudices – such as the contemporary radical right – prejudiced language is often ‘coded’ and masked or reserved only to specific situations or milieus (Kovács, 2013). If social prejudices are increasingly hidden as unacceptable, a movement would be wise to align its frames to an increasingly moderate sociopolitical discourse. To overcome a double barrier in the political and discursive opportunity structures – the rejection of far-right exclusivist language and of clerical interference in politics – anti-gender actors employ more acceptable, secular frames to be taken seriously, as legitimate actors able to align their frames with broader audiences (McCammon, 2013).

Moreover, the Croatian movement also skillfully identifies openings in political opportunity structures to assert itself on the national stage – the abolishment of the threshold for popular referendums being the crucial case in point (Petričušić, Čehulić & Čepo, 2017). Importantly, as Kriesi and Wisler argue (1996), there is a strong push towards moderation of action repertoires for social movements taking the road of direct democracy via referendums. This is certainly the case with the Croatian anti-gender movement that campaigned for four referendums within a five-year period. Additionally, signature collection for referendums represents a kind of distinct action form; an opportunity for mobilization that demonstrates movement vitality (della Porta et al., 2017) and has been amply exploited by anti-gender NGOs in Croatia to present a civic, moderate, pro-democratic face of the movement. Importantly, based on my PEA data, one could hypothesize that anti-gender contention channeled and moderated the previously violent expressions of intolerance, particularly violent attacks on Pride parades last seen at the 2011 Split Pride. Nevertheless, a feminist lense on anti-gender contention could point towards a different conclusion, one recognizing symbolic violence as an important element of anti-gender repertoires. As Page and Lowe (2022) argue in the UK case, 40 Days for Life initiatives of anti-abortion prayer in front of hospitals can be interpreted as harassment and gendered violence. Finally, although the advent of anti-gender organizations might have brought a more peaceful repertoire of actions to oppose GSE in terms of counterprotesting, the movements’ mass

mobilization and presence in the public discourse may have also emboldened other incidents of sporadic violent attacks on LGBT people.

In Bulgaria, similarly, despite the disruptiveness and radicalism marking the height of the anti-gender panic in the 2018-2020 period, the movement's action forms are mostly conventional and demonstrative. This corroborates the interpretation that anti-gender movements can be interpreted as a non-violent transformation of opposition to gender and sexual equality. Christian politics mainstreamed heterosexism away from neo-fascist violence towards a more respectable, and thus, potentially more dangerous, and potent form of collective action able to mainstream its positions more effectively. Protestants in Bulgaria 'contaminated' (Prearo, 2020) far-right politics with their anti-gender agenda. Moreover, the Bulgarian anti-gender movement's values, ideology, and framing expressed in organizational documents and interviews point to three important conclusions. Firstly, the movement, and especially its Protestant faction, focuses on family values and human rights, relying on discursive secularization to make claims that, while rooted in Christian arguments, mostly avoid appealing to scripture or religious morality (Vučković Juroš et al., 2020). Secondly, like the Croatian case, the anti-gender flavor of radical-right politics is not rooted in ethnonationalism, which seems to reflect intramovement ideological and denominational differences. In this sense, pro-family and anti-gender politics are a strong vehicle of frame bridging between various illiberal factions.

Although first texts against 'gender ideology' in Serbia were written around 2017, all ingredients central to the anti-gender innovation (Paternotte, 2023) and reinvigoration of the radical right's push for social conservatism were already present or in the works around 2011: modernization of discourse and appropriation of human rights framing; transnationalization efforts; and peaceful movement-like collective action in the streets. Within the context of highly politicized national and international contention around (banned) Pride parades in Belgrade, it made more discursive sense to attack 'homosexual' or 'LGBT' ideology, instead of drawing from the (foreign) Catholic anti-gender toolkit According to Pirro's (2015) analysis of the populist radical right in Central and Eastern Europe, irredentism and clericalism are important 'pre-communist' issues around which PRR parties mobilize. Unlike the revamped anti-gender politics in other contexts, Dveri, at least until the mid-2010s, fully fits this profile and issue-focus. In this ideological declension, abortion, homosexuality, and gender ideology are all threats to the already catastrophic birth rate and 'demographic winter' that is ominously juxtaposed to increases of the Muslim population in Kosovo and immigration policies of the EU. Although Dveri's 'family model of society' significantly pushes towards discursive

secularization, this is also partly related to a divorce that occurred between the organization and the SOC once Dveri became a political party, and the need for a broader electoral base beyond committed lay Orthodox nationalists. Dveri's Family March brings several innovations that attempted to break with the religio-nationalist tradition, enter the national public sphere and assert itself as a political actor to be taken seriously. The March itself represents a moderation of action repertoires that channelled previously violent rioting against gay prides, now replaced by an affirmative pro-family message and middle-class, parental respectability politics.

In conclusion, as we have seen in all three cases, collective action is usually accompanied by an illiberal offer (Pető, 2021), a constructive, agenda-setting project towards an illiberal sociopolitical regime firmly rooted in conservative philosophy. In the words of the illiberal philosopher Patrick Deneen (2018),

Communities maintain standards and patterns of life that encourage responsible and communally sanctioned forms of erotic bonds, with the aim of fostering the strong family ties and commitments that constitute the backbone of communal health and the conduit of culture and tradition.

Familism thus plays a key role, aiming to replace the destructive force of individualism with a communitarian vision of society rooted in religious and familial networks. Such a project requires a new type of parental, familial identity politics that is tasked with building a dense conservative civil society, or as INF (2020) frames it, to “empower families to take on the role of a social subject”.

10.4.2. Anti-gender Movement Parties

Unlike the *opportunistic synergy* approach elaborated by Graff and Korolczuk (2022) in which anti-gender organizations and right-wing populist parties are distinct entities entering into political alliances, anti-gender actors in Croatia themselves formed anti-gender movement parties in a context of a weak, or non-existent radical-right parliamentary parties. Faced with closing opportunities for transactional activism and collaboration with institutions due to a liberalizing party system in the late 2000s, anti-gender actors decided to bank on their movement successes and take the electoral turn post-2013, having deemed political parties as more efficient vehicles of political and policy change when compared to civil society. Simply put, since the Croatian anti-gender movement failed to ‘contaminate’ HDZ fully with their agenda, and no successful radical right parties were available as allies, they had to make their own parties. Based on the interview data and individual activist paths of the central movement

leaders, I propose a prototypical model of anti-gender recruitment and politicization demonstrating an intensifying politicization of Catholic communities (Figure 19).

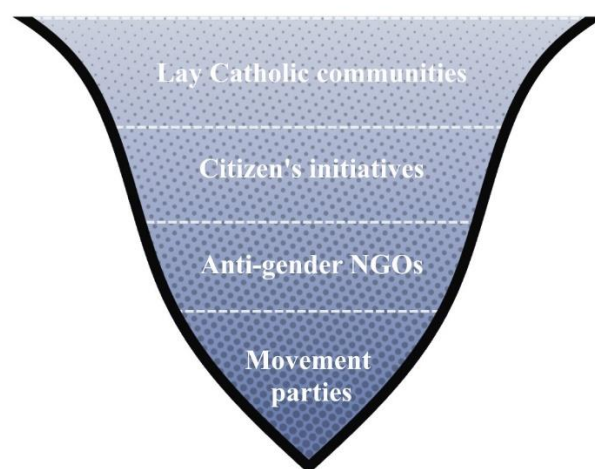


Figure 19 – Anti-gender Recruitment and Politicization

It is important to note that the proposed order of recruitment is not unidirectional. For example, one of my interviewees was first a HRAST member and only later joined to act as a regional coordinator for INF’s marriage referendum (Sebastijan, A21). From the perspective of movement-party literature, anti-gender entrepreneurs form coalitions of political activists “who emanate from social movements and try to apply the organizational and strategic practices of social movements in the arena of party competition” (Kitschelt, 2006). In addition, if we approach the issue from the viewpoint of possible interactions between movements and parties, we are witnessing a fusion or enmeshment of both elements (Rucht, 2018) in the form of an anti-gender movement party. My interview subjects’ membership often overlapped between political parties and SMOs, thus providing valuable insight into the actors’ strategic considerations and perceptions of political opportunity. So far, scholars researching far-right movement-parties have not included the anti-gender movement in their analyses, except for the recent work by Lavizzari & Prearo (2019) who analyzed anti-gender political Catholicism in Italy. The formation of parties influenced the dynamics and trajectories of the anti-gender movement as a whole. Failed attempts of electoral competition such as the Family Party, Project Homeland, and partially HRAST (despite its short-lived participation in government) created a wedge within the movement, with conflicts weakening support from the movement grassroots. Hence, the movement SMOs themselves have retained more power in relation to the various failed parties, creating a ‘movement-powered’ dynamic (Rucht, 2018). Anti-gender parties

aimed at gaining access to the ‘levers of power’, which created a series of conflicts and dilemmas in the broader movement, similarly to the Italian case. The partisan, political project was juxtaposed to the cultural, activist one, which created a hybrid space of political Catholicism (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019).

In Serbia, there is a high overlap between anti-gender civil society and party activities, meaning that collective action and more conventional, electoral politics can be conceptualized as “different but parallel approaches to influencing political outcomes, often drawing on the same actors, targeting the same bodies and seeking the same goals.” (Goldstone 2008, p. 8). However, as seen in the case of conflicts over leadership in Dveri, adding the electoral strategy to the movement’s repertoire risked permanently changing the constellations of players and arenas. More importantly, the creation of, or cooperation with, political parties can be very risky, as it threatens to alienate supporters of movement organizations who are distrustful of conventional politics (Borbáth & Hutter, 2020). In Serbia, Dveri became the strongest, central actor, mobilizing an entire galaxy of smaller nationalist, Orthodox and conservative groups of students, lay faithful and radicals. It thereby enmeshed both elements of movements and parties in one cohesive movement party. Furthermore, Dveri consciously utilized the movement party form not only as an organizational innovation, but also as a framing strategy (Kralj & Tranfić, forthcoming) used to demonstrate their anti-establishment, anti-partisan character and rootedness in civil society. Dveri were able to rely on secular, non-confessional nationalist, and student associations as well as (scarce) lay Orthodox communities while also mobilizing resources, support, and know-how from previously successful right-wing parties such as the DSS. Anti-gender contention in Serbia thus largely served as a tool of one far-right NGO to enter electoral politics, reinvent its image to broaden its support and bring a new issue to the crowded field of ethnonationalist politics. Moreover, my findings in both the Croatian and Serbian cases contribute to increasing evidence in the literature (Císař & Vráblíková, 2019; Peterson, 2019) challenging the findings that the electoral successes of the (radical) right lead to a decline in protest action (Hutter & Kriesi, 2013; Hutter, 2014). As visible from my PEA data, protest events continued to rise after the formation of anti-gender movement parties in both cases. In terms of party-movement interactions, right-wing parties in Bulgaria were fully open to cooperating with the anti-gender movement, whereas the movement was somewhat weary of getting tainted by association with party politics, leading to cooperation and agenda appropriation (Caiani & Císař, 2019). Given the instability of the Bulgarian political and party system and a quick rise-and-fall rate of radical-right parties, a symbiotic/symmetric relationship

was established between the movement and the parties (Rucht, 2018). In conclusion, anti-gender politics in Bulgaria emerged as a result of a somewhat contentious coalition of Protestant civil society backed by Orthodox conservatives and established far-right parties co-opting anti-genderism to renew their anti-establishment *credo* against the pro-EU center-right.

10.5. Limitations and Future Avenues of Research

In the previous sections I have highlighted the benefits of my methodological and analytical choices as well as theoretical contributions. I continue by looking at some of the main limitations of my work and possible future avenues of research. Both the stronger and the weaker aspects of my PhD project reflect the nature of interviewing as a method and the specificities of interviewing radical-right actors. Collecting meaningful data from interviewees depends on establishing rapport and a working relationship of trust which I was not always able to fully achieve. Insofar as anti-gender emergence relies on behind-the-doors transnational financial transfers and support from the financially non-transparent churches, I was unable to capture an important element of the *explanandum*. I tried to overcome such limitations by relying on existing studies of transnational diffusion of anti-gender politics and databases such as the WikiLeaks Intolerance Files. Furthermore, to the extent that my arguments and interpretation touch upon the strategies and actions of clergy and mainstream-right parties, it would have been beneficial to include them to the list of interviewees in addition to anti-gender organizations. Future research should unpack religious institutions as well as mainstream conservatives to understand the dynamic relations that define anti-gender mobilization. Finally, my conclusions on the relative irrelevance of oppositional dynamics between the anti-gender movement and feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements might also at least partly be a result of methodological limitations. My interviewees seemed reluctant to mention their opponents or give them relevance, which might stem from strategic considerations or fear of disclosing held intolerances and prejudices. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the centrality they gave to intramovement discord and relations with mainstream right actors.

Regarding the generalizability of the findings of my thesis, they are to some extent limited to Southeast Europe, given the regional characteristics I have defined (see Table 2). However, most of the contextual particularities of the area are shared with other Central and Eastern European countries, namely, the experience of communist-era state atheism, (post)socialism, and Europeanization. Furthermore, the central findings that relate to church-state society

relations and denominational differences, the meaning of ‘gender ideology’ in collective action and relations with third parties are pertinent for other cases with dominant Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant churches. The internal dynamics of these churches and their drive to resist and combat secularization and liberalism is in no way particular only to Southeast Europe. Thus, my work on the Croatian case might be of interest to scholars analyzing religion, gender and politics in predominantly Catholic countries, my analysis of the Serbian and Bulgarian cases for those working on Orthodox cases, and my investigation of the cross-denominational dynamics between Protestants and Orthodox actors for those interested in religiously plural societies. Finally, in times of widespread democratic backsliding and autocratization in Europe and beyond, analyzing the interaction between religious, radical-right, and center-right actors is increasingly important if we want to understand the mainstreaming of right-wing radicalism and consider ways in which democracy can be defended.

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13. APPENDIX ONE (A1)

INTERVIEW GUIDE	
Themes	Question Script
Main theme: 1.) Values and ideology	Focusing introduction: <i>In the first part of the interview, I am interested in what inspires and drives your organization's work; what visions and ideas of society motivate your public actions and what you aim to achieve with them.</i>

Sub-themes: Introduction 1.1) Values 1.2) Claims/Frames 1.3) Religion 1.4) Gender ideology	Questions: <i>Could you describe the circumstances that led to your engagement? How did the initial group of people from [organization] come together?</i> <i>Which values drive your organization's work?</i> <i>What are the main demands of your organization in relation to those in power?</i> <i>Does religion play a role in your work?</i> • <i>[If yes] Could you give an example?</i> • <i>[If no] I am asking because [example]</i> <i>In the last few years there has been a lot of talk about 'gender ideology'. How would you describe it?</i> <i>If you had to guess – when did GI arrive to [country]? Who brought it here? Why?</i>
Main theme: 2.) Actions and context	Focusing introduction: <i>In the next part of the interview, we are going to focus on the activities of your organization and the way in which you view the context in which you are acting.</i>
Sub-themes: 2.1) Activities 2.1.1.) Specific forms of action 2.2) Perception of POS	<i>Could you please name the campaigns and initiatives that your organization has carried out?</i> <i>Have you supported any campaigns organized by others?</i> • <i>[If no] Maybe some initiative or petition?</i> <i>I would now like to focus on the specific forms of action you use. This can be anything from public letters, online petitions to protests and referenda. Which specific actions did you use in the campaigns you mentioned?</i> <i>[One more question and then we move on to the last part of the interview.]</i> <i>All movements and organizations act in a setting which can be helpful or hostile to their work.</i> <i>Did you consider the political context around you as posing constraints on your organization's actions or as favourable?</i>

	<i>Which specific events or elements of this broader context helped or hindered your public action?</i>
Main theme: 3.) Relations	Focusing introduction: <i>In the last part of the interview, we are going to talk about the broader field of organizations and actors that surround your organization. I am interested in the cooperation and relations with others that you have developed while working on your goals.</i>
Sub-themes: 3.1) Horizontal relations 3.1.1.) Ideological proximity 3.1.2.) Cooperation 3.1.3.) International Cooperation 3.2) Vertical relations 3.2.1) Churches 3.2.2.) Political Parties	<i>Which organizations, groups or initiatives in Bulgarian civil society could you name as friendly in the sense of values they represent?</i> <i>Have you met and exchanged ideas with any of them? Have you organized any activities together?</i> <i>Are there any international organizations you consider as allies? Did your organization ever participate in any international events?</i> <i>The [church] supports the values your organization stands for. Have you ever received support from the [church]? What about other churches?</i> <i>[If yes] How would you describe your relations?</i> <i>[If no] Prompt with example.</i> <i>Which political parties are close to your organization when it comes to values you represent?</i> <i>Have your received any support from them? Have you ever cooperated with any of them? [prompt]</i>

14. APPENDIX TWO (A2)

Interview data is de-identified to protect participants' confidentiality. Pseudonyms are linked to an identifying code which relates to individual participants in a document securely stored and

known only by the researcher. To ensure meaningful analysis and a degree of transparency, pseudonyms are also linked to a typology of organizations³¹. in A2.1.

A2.1 – List of Organizations and Initiatives

NAME	TYPE	COUNTRY
Croatia for Life	Anti-abortion organization	Croatia
Students for Life	Anti-abortion organization	Croatia
Betlehem	Anti-abortion organization	Croatia
Dalmatia for Life	Anti-abortion organization	Croatia
40 Days for life	Anti-abortion organization	Croatia
March for Life	Anti-abortion organization	Croatia
Center for Babies	Anti-abortion organization	Serbia
Choose Life	Anti-abortion organization	Serbia
Alliance for Life	Anti-abortion organization	Serbia
National Association ‘Hike for the Family’	Anti-abortion organization	Bulgaria
In the Name of Family	Anti-gender organization	Croatia
Association “Alojzije Stepinac”	Anti-gender organization	Croatia
Voice of Parents for Children	Anti-gender organization	Croatia
Parents Institute for Education	Anti-gender organization	Croatia
The Truth about the Istanbul Convention	Anti-gender organization	Croatia
Alliance of Orthodox Women	Anti-gender organization	Serbia
Coalition for the Natural Family	Anti-gender organization	Serbia
Parents United for Children International	Anti-gender organization	Bulgaria
Society and Values Association	Anti-gender organization	Bulgaria
National Network of Parents	Anti-gender organization	Bulgaria
Home Education Association	Anti-gender organization	Bulgaria
HRAST	Anti-gender party	Croatia
INF – Project Homeland	Anti-gender party	Croatia
Family Party	Anti-gender party	Croatia
Dveri	Anti-gender party	Serbia
Vazrazhdane	Anti-gender party	Bulgaria
Christian Reformist Party	Anti-gender party	Bulgaria

³¹ Participants belonging to several organizations crossing three or more organizational types are marked as having ‘overlapping membership’ and are considered as particularly important within the broader movement.

A2.2 – List of Interview Participants

A2.2.1 – Bulgaria

PSEUDONYM	ID	INTERVIEW DATE	ORGANIZATION TYPE
Dimitar	C2	16 Mar 2023	Anti-abortion organization
Krasimir	C4	21 Feb 2023	Anti-abortion organization
Nadejda	C6	22 Mar 2023	Anti-abortion organization
Tatiana	C1	23 Feb 2023	Anti-gender organization
Asen	C3	1 Mar 2023	Anti-gender organization
Svetlana	C5	25 Apr 2023	Anti-gender organization
Atanas	C8	2 Mar 2023	Anti-gender organization
Valentina	C10	22 Feb 2023	Anti-gender organization
Stoyan	C11	8 Mar 2023	Anti-gender organization
Aleksandar	C7	8 Mar 2023	Overlapping membership
Violeta	C9	22 Feb 2023	Overlapping membership

A2.2.2 – Croatia

PSEUDONYM	ID	INTERVIEW DATE	ORGANIZATION TYPE
Ivan	A1	8 Sep 2021	Anti-abortion organization
Eva	A2	11 Oct 2021	Anti-abortion organization
Paula	A7	9 Dec 2021	Anti-abortion organization
Lovro	A13	29 Oct 2021	Anti-abortion organization
Ana-Marija	A16	4 Nov 2021	Anti-abortion organization
Domagoj	A17	23 Dec 2021	Anti-abortion organization
Suzana	A19	10 Jan 2021	Anti-abortion organization
Ante	A22	23 Sep 2021	Anti-abortion organization
Marija	A3	29 Dec 2021	Anti-gender organization
Izidora	A4	28 Oct 2021	Anti-gender organization
Gabrijel	A5	27 Oct 2021	Anti-gender organization
David	A8	11 Oct 2021	Anti-gender organization
Adam	A15	8 Oct 2021	Anti-gender organization
Diana	A20	15 Feb 2021	Anti-gender organization
Sebastijan	A21	16 Nov 2021	Anti-gender organization
Matej	A6	20 Dec 2021	Anti-gender party
Antun	A11	21 Oct 2021	Anti-gender party
Marko	A18	28 Dec 2021	Anti-gender party

Katarina	A9	28 Oct 2021	Overlapping membership
Josip	A10	20 Oct 2021	Overlapping membership
Luka	A12	14 Oct 2021	Overlapping membership
Borna	A14	17 Nov 2021	Overlapping membership

A2.2.3 – Serbia

PSEUDONYM	ID	INTERVIEW DATE	ORGANIZATION TYPE
Teodora	B3	6 Aug 2022	Anti-abortion organization
Dušan	B6	28 Jul 2022	Anti-abortion organization
Zoran	B9	31 May 2023	Anti-abortion organization
Evgenija	B1	29 Jul 2022	Anti-gender organization
Rastko	B4	25 Jul 2022	Anti-gender organization
Ada	B10	7 June 2023	Anti-gender organization
Boris	B2	2 Aug 2022	Anti-gender party
Cvetan	B5	12 Aug 2022	Anti-gender party
Nikola	B7	12 Aug 2022	Anti-gender party
Pavle	B8	9 Aug 2022	Anti-gender party

15. APPENDIX THREE (A3)

A3.1. – Expert Interview Protocol

1. What are some of the most important factions or lines of division within the [church], especially in relation to social and political issues?

2. Does the [church] have specific ecclesial bodies or offices for laity or the family?

3. Are there any differences within the [church] with regards to how morality issues such as abortion, gender equality and sexuality are addressed?

4. Gender ideology has become one of the important issues against which the [church] speaks out. Why do you think this is so?

5. How would you describe the role of the [church] in relation to the anti-gender movement/campaigns in [country]?

5.1.1. The organizational/logistical role

5.1.2. The role of Church resources

5.1.3. The role of Church doctrines or documents

6. How would you assess the relations between the [church] and the main political parties in Bulgaria?

7. How would you assess the importance of foreign actors or international organizations in [country] when talking about campaigns against gender ideology?

A3.2. – List of Expert Interviewees

PSEUDONYM	ID	INTERVIEW DATE	FIELD OF EXPERTISE	COUNTRY
Vlasta	E1	10 November 2020	Religion and Gender	Croatia
Darko	E2	13 November 2020	Religion and Politics	Croatia
Branka	E3	13 November 2020	Religion and Gender	Croatia
Bogdan	E4	22 December 2020	Religion and Politics	Serbia
Ivanka	E5	18 November 2020	Religion and Gender	Serbia
Slavica	E6	2 March 2023	Religion and Politics	Bulgaria
Dragana	E7	2 December 2020	Gender and Politics	Bulgaria
Iva	E8	16 January 2023	Religion and Gender	Bulgaria

16. APPENDIX FOUR (A4)

Response Composites with Corresponding Individual Codes

1. Bulgaria

- 1.1. Human Rights – ‘freedom of conscience’, ‘freedom of expression’, ‘freedom of speech’, ‘liberty’, ‘non-discrimination’, ‘anti-authoritarian values’, ‘religious freedom’
- 1.2. Family Values – ‘heterosexual marriage’, ‘child-rearing’, ‘family values’
- 1.3. Parent’s and Children’s Rights – ‘Parent’s rights’, ‘Children’s rights’
- 1.4. Christian Values – ‘Christian Values’
- 1.5. Traditional Values – ‘Traditional Values’
- 1.6. Nationalist Values – ‘Demographic Renewal’, ‘National spirit’, ‘National identity’
- 1.7. Pro-Life Values – ‘Pro-Life Values’, ‘Protecting Life’

2. Croatia

- 2.1. Family Values – ‘family rights’, ‘heterosexual marriage’, ‘family values’
- 2.2. Universal Values – ‘universal values’, ‘human dignity’, ‘dignity of life’, ‘humanism’, ‘general human values’
- 2.3. Pro-life Values – ‘life from conception until death’, ‘the culture of life’, ‘pro-life’
- 2.4. Justice and Human Rights – ‘justice’, ‘fairness’, ‘political rights’, ‘equal rights’, ‘freedom of thought and speech’, ‘social rights’
- 2.5. Christian Values – ‘the Catholic faith’, ‘religious freedoms’, ‘Christian values’
- 2.6. Other – ‘conservative values’, ‘love’

3. Serbia

- 3.1. Nationalist Values – ‘national identity’, ‘national values’, ‘national liberation’, ‘historical identity’, ‘demographic values’
- 3.2. Christian Values – ‘Christian values’, ‘Orthodox values’
- 3.3. Family Values – ‘family values’
- 3.4. Traditional Values – ‘traditional values’, ‘folk values’
- 3.5. Pro-life Values – ‘life from conception’, ‘child-rearing’
- 3.6. Other – ‘social injustice’, ‘social rights’