THE ANTI-GENDER MOBILIZATION

A European Issue

Report on the meeting II

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It has become obvious anti-gender mobilisations are not specific to a single country. Although they may be spectacular in France, Italy or Poland, they are not limited to these countries, but spread across the continent. This observation lies at the foundation of this project, which studies national manifestations of a transnationally circulating discourse on “gender ideology”, with a special interest for mobilisations where they exist. A comparative study across Europe, based on a common analytical grid, should allow us to unveil transnational logics at the level of discourses, strategies and modes of action. This is the reason why European meetings are crucial, as they allow national experts to exchange over a common research agenda and to share their results with the rest of the group.

Thanks to this methodology, we aim to overcome the trap of methodological nationalism, which has characterised most of research until today. This has often insisted on national exceptionalism, that is presenting these mobilisations as uniquely French, Polish or Italian and explaining them with mostly national factors. A few studies, however, contest this analysis. For instance, while commenting on Polish debates, Elzbieta Korolczuk notices: “Sierakowski is not the only one who attributes “the war on gender” to local rather than transnational trends, and interprets it as a tactic aimed at diverting public attention from paedophilia or financial scams plaguing the Polish Church. There is evidence however that recent mobilisation against “genderisation”, “gender ideology” or the “gender lobby” is not only a local trend.” We share this concern, and attempt to overcome this analytical trap.

As hinted by Korolczuk, there is indeed enough evidence to confirm this phenomenon is transnational and should therefore be studied across borders. Although its manifestations considerably vary from one country to another, we observe similar discourses and mobilisation strategies against gender equality and LGBT rights across borders. This is illustrated by the circulation of logos, flags and names, as well as lines of argumentation. To give an example, the French La Manif pour Tous has been a crucial source of inspiration for activists abroad, as shown by the circulation of its iconographic material. This movement has been directly “exported” to Italy, where activists named themselves “La Manif pour Tous Italia” (in French) until recently, adopted the same image, translated French posters and maintained contacts with its French counterparts.

1 This report is a brief summary of a research project on “Gender Ideology: Mobilization of conservative groups against gender equality and sexual citizenship” comparing mobilizations Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain. This report also contains key results of discussions on anti-gender mobilizations in Europe that took place in April 2015 in Budapest and in November 2015 in Brussels. Both meetings were organized and made possible by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. An edited volume will be published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2017.

counterpart. The logo of what is understood as the only “proper” family (mother + father + children – one boy and one girl) and/or posters have also been copied elsewhere, like in Germany, Slovakia and Croatia. In brief, we see declinations of the same symbols across Europe: depictions of a traditional heterosexual family, use of colour codes such as pink and blue, etc. Modes of action also look alike, as shown by the proliferation of concerned citizens/parents’ committees, the investment of the public space or the launch of civil initiatives.

These similarities are at the starting point of our project, which attempts to understand their origins, their concrete manifestations on the ground and their diffusion across Europe. Unlike most of the literature, we insist on the transnational nature of these discourses and mobilization strategies and we postulate they share common roots through what is called “gender ideology” (or “gender theory” and/or “anti-genderism” in some countries). Research should therefore not explain these mobilisations by national peculiarities, but rather investigate the forms this transnationally circulating claims and actions take in different contexts, as well as highlight why they fit better in some than others. This leads to a reframing of the question of national exceptionalism: national circumstances do not explain the emergence of such a movement, which lies elsewhere, but play a crucial role in allowing this discourse to resonate in a specific society and movements to be successful.

We also claim there is a specific European dimension to these mobilisations. In recent years, research has highlighted the global nature of anti-gender mobilisations. Discourses on “gender ideology” are connected to recent strategies of the Roman Catholic Church, one of the oldest global actors, and appeared in opposition to the results of the UN conference of Cairo and Beijing in the mid-nineties. Modes of action are inspired by the United States and coalitions are built with other pro-life and pro-family actors in different parts of the world. Strong oppositional movements developed in Latin America in the mid-nineties, and there are currently spreading to parts of Africa, where they intersect with postcolonial critiques.

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3 Italians have also successfully imported modes of action, as shown by the example of the Sentinelle en piedi. This movement is directly inspired by the French Veilleurs pour la famille, which were established in France in 2013 as a group of young people gathering on public squares to “watch” over the family. Reclaiming a tradition of non-violent resistance, they organise candlelit sit-ins, during which they publicly read extracts of books they like. Although with significant differences, this experience inspired I Sentinelle en piedi, which emerged to oppose the Scalfarotto law against homophobia. Numerous Italian citizens gathered on public squares to spend hours with a book in their hands. Unlike the French, protesters were standing and remained silent. Interestingly, this movement became much more important in Italy, where it was not restricted to a specific group of young people. This shows how importers may hybridize the object of diffusion, and are not mere passive actors in this process.

4 American pro-life and similar organizations and their website and media are a strong source of information for European anti-gender movements and numerous “good practice” models are taken over from the United States.
However, despite this global dimension, we claim there is a specific European flavour, which relies on specific forms of circulation across the continent. Europe is indeed a propitious region for cross-border diffusion and transnational activism. Despite linguistic diversity, short geographic distances and efficient transport networks have incentivized activist collaboration across borders. This has been reinforced by the more recent developments of modern technologies, cheap air travel and deepened multi-level governance structures, both through the Council of Europe and the European Union. This draws a picture of Europe, which does not only rely on institutional settings, but involves a dense network of cross-border interactions and the circulation of ideas and imaginaries. It also suggests another geography, which does not coincide with the borders of the EU. The UK or Scandinavian countries are indeed absent from our story, while Russia appears as a crucial actor, moving the border of Europe further East. Finally, while Europe would allegedly be defined by its endorsement of liberal values, anti-gender movements articulate another normative identity, which relies on Christianity and tradition. This often implies a rejection of Islam and resurgences of anti-Semitism.

In our research, we map the different forms of circulation. We do not focus on specific individuals or organisations but attempt to understand the roads through which anti-gender mobilisations circulate across Europe. Without claiming exhaustiveness, we trace how these ideas and modes of actions travel across borders. Four routes are explored: transnational diffusion, transnational activism, Europeanisation, and globalisation. Each is illustrated by examples from our various case studies, focusing on mobilisations and resistances referring to “gender ideology”. In several countries, however, these intersect with rising populism, anti-intellectualism, anti-European and/or anti-western feelings, etc.

**Diffusion**

Diffusion refers to the circulation of ideas, strategies, modes of action, etc. from one point to another, in this case from one country to another. It implies punctual exchanges and contacts among domestic actors or through a common third country, leading to the adoption of foreign strategies, goals, etc. Such contacts may be direct and personal or indirect and without any personal contact (through newspapers, internet, etc.). We include the circulation and translation of texts in this section. It must be said that it is not always easy to trace the existence of personal contacts.

**Non-relational diffusion**

It implies the absence of personal contacts in the process of transnational diffusion, which often happens thanks to the media. This is reinforced today by the development of Internet and the development of new media, which are, extensively used by anti-gender activists. We can observe non-relational diffusion when activists in one country
learn from their homologues abroad without establishing contact with them. This may lead to the emulation of discourse, strategies, etc. This has happened across Europe at the time of the Manif pour Tous, which was carefully followed outside of France. Indeed, the “gender debate” started or rebounded in several countries at the same time the French were in the streets and one may wonder whether the French success in a country which is often not regarded as welcoming for religious actors urged activists to do the same in other countries.

Russia offers an interesting example of indirect diffusion, which unveils the key role of the media. Indeed, Russian television has been particularly active in recycling anti-gender discourse as a way to distinguish Russia from the decadent West, where “gender ideology” is part of the problem. Major propagandists include Arkady Mamontov and Dmitry Kiselev (the head of Russia’s media organization), who host debates and “documentaries” that feature anti-gender activists from Europe like Gabriele Kuby and Marine le Pen. Anti-EU deployment of “anti-gender” propaganda ramped up during the Sochi Olympics and even more during the Ukraine crisis in early 2014.

Relational diffusion
Unlike the former case, relational diffusion implies punctual exchanges between domestic actors, leading to the import/export of ideas, strategies, modes of action. We cannot, however, identify the emergence of a transnational network, which would be characterised by a higher density of exchanges.

Research has for instance documented the travels of French activists in Europe, especially Ludovine de la Rochère and, to a lesser extent, Frigide Barjot. In 2015, the former started a European tour with visits to Stuttgart, Helsinki, Dublin, Madrid, Rome, the Vatican or the United States. Former leader Frigide Barjot was invited to Croatia to meet her local counterpart Željka Markić and lectured to 300 Christian political leaders at the European Prayer Breakfast held in Brussels in December 2013. Željka Markić was herself invited to tour Slovakia and assist in organizing the referendum on same-sex marriage.

The Slovakian Alliance for Family also took part in international conference “Family: The Key of Demographic and Economic Recovery” (October 22-23, 2015, Zagreb). In 2014, one of the most relevant young leader in HazteOir.org, Pablo Santana (also head of the association Derecho a Vivir) went to France to participate in the Coalition Leaders Forum (convened by Americans for Tax Reform and held in Aix-en-Provence) and Spanish documents have long been spread and translated in Europe. Members of the Slovenian civil initiative “Children are at stake” (Za otroke gre) have also been in contact (and helped by) the members of the French Manif pour tous when preparing the second referendum on marriage equality in Slovenia in December 2015. Finally, several of these actors have been invited to Russia, either by the Moscow Patriarcate or by foundations like the
St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation. This foundation has also supported networking between politicians from Europe like HC Strache (Austria’s far-right Freedom Party) and Marion Maréchal-Le Pen (Front National).

**Mediated diffusion**

Mediation implies that diffusion does not happen from A to B but through a third point or actor. It means that activists from country A learn about country B through media or actors from country C, for instance the United States or Russia. Or through the Vatican, which has sometimes acted as a diffusion channel and a place to connect actors internationally.

**Circulation and translation of books**

One must also pay attention to the circulation of books and materials across borders, as they are good for the circulation of ideas. The most widely translated authors are Tony Anatrella, Gabriele Kuby, Marguerite Peeters and Michel Schooyans. They are however not equally translated all over Europe. Kuby is for instance poorly known by Francophones or Spaniards while she is widely read in Central and Eastern Europe, where she has been active on the ground. Reversely, The four are either active at the Vatican or well connected to the Curia.

Other books are also circulating across Europe, such as *Sposati e sii sottomessa* (Get married and be submissive) by Constanza Miriano. Interestingly, while it can be found in any major bookstore in Italy, the publication of this book has fuelled public controversies in France and in Spain. Dale O’Leary’s seminal *The Gender Agenda* has been translated into Italian. The book *Nueva izquierda y cristianismo* by Spanish authors Francisco José Contreras and Diego Poole was translated into Slovenian in 2015 with a special Slovenian introduction focusing on gender theory.

Finally, we cannot underestimate the circulation of Vatican and other catholic documents. The *Lexicon: Ambiguous and Debatable Terms Regarding Family Life and Ethical Questions* was originally published in Italian in 2003 but it has since then been translated into numerous languages including German, French, English, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian and Arabic. Digests and excerpts have also been published. Documents from national churches are also translated and diffused abroad. The Slovakian Episcopal Conference translated an original document of the Spanish Episcopal Conference entitled *La verdad del amor humano. Orientaciones sobre el amor conyugal, la ideología de género y la legislación familiar* (The Truth of the Human Love. Orientations on Conjugal Love, Gender Ideology and Family Legislation). The Slovak Bishop’s conference letter on gender theory has been translated into Hungarian and Slovenian.

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5 It has also been translated into Polish.

6 We have also found an English short version (power point) of the same document translated and adapted by CBCP for Life, from the Philippines. The document has also been referred to by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and the American Opus Dei in discussions about *Obergefell v. Hodges* at the U.S. Supreme Court.
Transnational activism

Transnational activism differs from relational diffusion inasmuch it relies on sustained and frequent contacts among actors. Within these networks, actors do not only exchange ideas and strategies, but also elaborate them altogether. In other words, these groups do not only encourage diffusion and exchange of some ideas and practices, a situation in which they operate as a bridge between different countries, but they also constitute laboratories where new ideas and strategies may emerge and can be discussed before being used in national arenas. Two specific forms of transnational activism, including European and global networks, are discussed in the next sections. Here, we address sustained forms of exchanges between domestic actors as well as the emergence of transnational brokers.

Over the last months, several actors have tried to transnationalise their action. This is for instance the case of the Manif pour Tous. The French were indeed complicit in the transnationalisation of their movement, contributing to the diffusion of their own movement. On 2 February 2014, LMPT organised a European demonstration, which led to (rather small) demonstrations in Germany, Spain, Italy, Belgium, and Slovakia. LMPT also mobilised for the European elections, and started the Europe for Family Campaign in 2014. HazteOir, in Spain, has also been the driving force behind CitizenGo, who played a key role in the One of Us initiative. Finally, the European Citizen’s Initiative Mum, Dad & Kids could be included here, although with a specific status. It involves indeed both key domestic activists who are active transnationally, like Ludovine de la Rochère and Željka Markić, and European actors such as Roger Kiska, Maria Hildingsson, Gregor Puppinck and Paul Moynan.

The latter example highlights the emergence of transnational brokers, who connects people and groups across borders. These include Ludovine de la Rochère but also Luca Volonté and Alexei Komov. The latter, himself working for the Orthodox Church, is the most active figure in spreading the messages of the World Congress of Families, the self-styled “Ambassador of the WCF to the United Nations”. He has travelled widely and networked with anti-gender activists across the EU and in the Balkans. Luca Volonté is an Italian politician who chaired the EPP group at the Council of Europe from 2008 until 2013. He chairs the Catholic think tank Novae Terrae and serves on the board of the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute (C-FAM) and of the World Congress of Families. He also travels intensively.

Europeanisation

European institutions, both the European Union and the Council of Europe, appear as additional levels of action, with their own actors. Neil Datta\(^7\) has identified three groups of conservative actors in European circles: an old Catholic network active close to

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the Vatican, a Northern group mixing traditionalist Protestants and Catholics who are sometimes joined by Orthodoxes and the Ultras who are often opposed to Vatican II. These groups may occasionally collaborate and the first one is by far the biggest and the most influential. It includes European Dignity Watch, led by Sophie Kuby (who recently became the Director of EU Advocacy at ADF International in Brussels) and the European Centre for Law and Justice, directed by Gregor Puppinck. Beyond their role in lobbying European institutions and litigating at European courts, they also create connections between activists on the ground and their leaders have visited several of these countries during these mobilisations, as exemplified by the cases of Croatia and Slovakia during the referendum campaigns. As any transnational actor, they may strengthen domestic actors by sharing resources and know-how while reinforcing informational flows across Europe.

It would be misleading, however, to assume that everything is decided in Brussels or Strasburg and then applied on the ground. These European actors are additional ones, which should be understood in complementarity to those on the ground. These are not necessarily well known at a national level and gain their legitimacy from their action at European level and the resources they may offer to national actors. We should also not regard these actors as a monolith: they do neither necessarily work together nor do they always agree with each other. Some, like ADF and the European Centre for Law and Justice, are the European branches of US/global organisations.

**Globalization**

We must finally bear in mind that these mobilisations are part of a global movement, and actors may sometimes be connected at a global level. Buss and Herman⁸ have described the long history of these relations at UN level, and these actors also have met in other settings, including in the United States, in Russia and at the Vatican (such as the Humanum conference in 2014).

Contacts with US organisations, like the National Organization for Marriage, have been documented in several countries. For instance, US activists and intellectuals were extremely present in Croatia during the referendum campaign. Sociologist Aleksandar Štulhofer was under attack because of his earlier collaboration with the Kinsey Institute and Dutch sociologist Teo Sandfort, while Judit Reisman, one of the leaders of such accusations in the US, who claimed that both the Kinsey Institute and Sandfort are promoters of paedophilia, came several times to lecture in this country. Such US influence was not new, as conservative groups tried to introduce American sex abstinence programmes in Croatian schools in the mid-2000s. Similarly, the European chapter of the US organization Alliance Defending Freedom, and its

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European Director Roger Kiska, were strongly involved in the Slovak referendum.

Strong connections with the United States have also been identified in France. Brian Brown, president of the National Organization for Marriage, came to Paris in 2012-2013 to meet with the organizers of the LMPT and participate in the marches. One of the main organisations behind the Manif pour Tous, the Fondation Lejeune, has a US branch, which includes various French in its board. Robert Oscar Lopez, a bilingual professor, anti-gay marriage activist, has been deeply involved in U.S. activism but is also personal friends and well connected with his French counterparts. He spends time in France, translates the LMPT propaganda into English, and coordinates across multiple groups in both countries. Leaders of the Spanish group HazteOir are also active in the United States, as exemplified by Ignacio Arsuaga, who participated in the II National March for the Marriage as well as in the Global Forum Marriage in Washington (held by International Organization for Marriage) in 2014.

Finally, organisations like the World Congress of Families, established by US and Russian activists in the nineties, specifically attempt to build a global network to promote “family values”. In 2012, the Spanish association HazteOir.org hosted the 6th edition of the World Congress of Families in Madrid. Organisers included the Howard Center, Alliance Defense Fund, Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute, Focus on the Family and the Spanish Centro de Estudios de la Familia (Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, owned by the Legionaries of Christ), Profesionales por la Etica and the media partners, ABC and La Razon (conservative newspapers). Ignacio Arsuaga received the first Natural Family Man and Woman of the Year Awards in Sidney in 2013 and was a speaker in Salt Lake City in 2015.

In the past 5 years Russia has also been increasingly active in this organization. The 2014 WCF Congress in Moscow (rebranded as The International Forum on Large Families and the Future of Humanity because of sanctions) was hosted in the Kremlin and at Moscow’s largest Orthodox cathedral. It was financed by two prominent oligarchs: Vladimir Yakunin, the CEO of Russian railways, who runs the Center for National Glory and the Andrey the First-Called Foundation; and Konstantin Malofeev, who runs the St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation.