

Gionathan Lo Mascolo (ed.)
The Christian Right in Europe

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Gionathan Lo Mascolo (ed.)

The Christian Right in Europe

Movements, Networks, and Denominations

[transcript]

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Dedicated to Rosetta Lo Mascolo

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The European Christian Right: An Overview

Gionathan Lo Mascolo and Kristina Stoeckl

A few weeks before the parliamentary elections in Hungary in 2018, Pastor Sándor Németh, leader of the 70,000-member Pentecostal Faith Church, ascended the stage of Europe's largest megachurch in Budapest for the Sunday service. As customary, the Sunday service was broadcast to tens of thousands of households on television and online through his family-run media empire.

In response to a question from his congregation about his endorsement of the far-right politician Viktor Orbán as the only suitable candidate for prime minister, Németh explained what he had been saying repeatedly in recent months: voting for the opposition meant “allowing 10,000 Muslims a year into Hungary.” He added that only Orbán could protect Hungary from same-sex marriages and gender ideology. He also expressed concerns that if *Islamization* and *cultural Marxism* were allowed in Hungary, “Hungarian Christianity would never be able to recover” (Adam 2018).

One year later and a few thousand kilometers to the south, the square in front of Milan Cathedral was packed as Matteo Salvini, the Deputy Prime Minister of Italy and head of the populist radical-right party Lega, concluded his party's election campaign for the European Parliament. He had previously criticized Pope Francis's remarks on refugee admission, invoking some of the patron saints of Europe. “I personally entrust Italy, my life, and yours, to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, who I am sure will lead us to victory,” he proclaimed, drawing a sacred rosary from his breast pocket amid roaring applause from his supporters waving Italian flags (Vista Agenzia 2019). Two years later, in 2022, Giorgia Meloni, Salvini's competitor and ally, would eventually become the first Italian prime minister with a past in a neofascist organization. During her campaign, she emphasized the importance of “God, fatherland, and family”—a modern reinterpretation of “God and fatherland,” the fascist motto previously used by Benito Mussolini (Evolvi 2023).

In the same year, Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church and its approximately 100 million believers, delivered his weekly Sunday sermon, which once again made headlines worldwide on account of his homophobic and anti-Western rhetoric. During the months since the invasion of Ukraine, Kirill had been increasingly justifying the war theologically, advancing the idea of *Holy Russia* (*Russkii Mir*) as the last bastion of Christianity against what he perceived as the supposed moral corruption of the West. During the sermon, he responded to the recent announcement of his long-time ally Vladimir Putin regarding the mobilization of reserve forces to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine, stating as follows: “The Church realizes that if someone, driven by a sense of duty and the need to honor his oath, remains loyal to his vocation and dies while carrying out his military duty this sacrifice washes away all the sins that a person has committed” (Radio Free Europe 2022).

Even though these episodes occurred thousands of kilometers apart, it is clear that they were neither isolated incidents nor mere coincidences. They disclose a development that has been gaining significant traction worldwide. This development is not exclusive to Europe, nor is it solely found within Christianity. It can also be found as Christian Nationalism in the USA and Brazil, as Hindu nationalism in India, and Religious Zionism in Israel. These episodes represent symptoms of a subtle yet momentous shift that is profoundly shaping European politics today. They reveal two major colliding phenomena, giving rise to a dangerous and far-reaching combination: the politicization of religion, often driven by religious actors, leaders, and institutions, and the sacralization of politics, driven by far-right parties and actors (Van der Tol and Gorski 2022). Signs of these shifting dynamics can be observed during the last 20 years in various stages and forms across the continent, from Portugal to Romania and from the United Kingdom to Greece. Adherents of this development aim to overturn both liberal democracy and the role of traditional religious authorities by challenging the established relationships and norms between politics and religion in Europe.

However, examining these dynamics only within their respective national borders merely scratches the surface. The origins, strategies, and influences of these narratives and actors are not confined to the corridors of power of any specific capital, as they intentionally cross borders, ideologies, and denominations, as well as institutional barriers, even though the overwhelming majority of Christian churches across Europe remain strongly committed to liberal democracy. A closer examination reveals highly sophisticated networks—across Europe and beyond—between think tanks, non-governmental

organizations, oil and gas companies, dubious financiers, state-funded charities and associations, extremist parties and groups, church leaders, and other initiatives. These networks have covertly intertwined, operating away from the public eye and forming formidable and ambitious lobby groups. For instance, many of the previously mentioned actors are connected in one way or another to the World Congress of Families, a powerful US-based organization that through intensive networking has made an imprint at the global level and that will be examined more closely across the country-specific case studies in this edited volume.

These multifaceted developments unveil a global exchange of ideas, trends, and strategies in a transformation that is more commonly associated with the US–American context, with which it shares the most similarities, but that also operates according to its own inherent patterns: the emergence of a Christian Right in Europe.

What is the Christian Right in Europe?

The definition of *Christian Right*, which determines the case selection and analysis in this volume, is made of three building blocks: ideology, institutions, and strategies. We define the Christian Right by what its representatives think, how they operate, and the goals they pursue. We include in the Christian-Right phenomenon only those groups that meet the definitional criteria for all of the following three aspects.

- a) The Christian-Right ideology includes the following ideas: rejection of abortion; preference for a patriarchal family model (according to which the socially desirable family is made up of a married heterosexual couple with biological offspring); rejection of rights pertaining to sexual orientation and gender identity (e.g., gay marriage or transgender rights); hostility vis-à-vis Islam and the conviction that Christianity is a superior religion; support for the idea that one's nation is Christian and that Christianity should play a special role in a country's everyday culture and politics (e.g., when it comes to the display of religious symbols in the public sphere or the celebration of public holidays); and belief in doomsday narratives such as the *Great Replacement*. In more abstract terms, the actors studied in this volume privilege nationalism over globalism, particularism over universalism, legal sovereignty over international law, patriarchy

over equality, hierarchy over democracy, the collective over the individual, religion over the secular, and duties over liberties. While not all groups and individuals that we include in our analysis hold all of these ideas, each of them sustains at least one of them on a wide spectrum from mainstream conservative to extreme-right ideas.

- b) The Christian-Right actors studied in this volume come in different institutional forms: political parties in government or in opposition; individual politicians; epistemic communities made up of public intellectuals, scholars, and journalists; and civil society organizations (e.g., NGOs or charities) and religious organizations and groups. One part of our definition of the Christian Right in Europe is that it is a *networked* phenomenon: the Christian-Right groups studied in this volume connect across denominations (they are interdenominational) and across countries (they are international) (Lo Mascolo 2021). Christian-Right organizations often emerge out of or refer back to churches and congregational constituencies. Christian-Right groups obtain support from priests or bishops, and they often use the church setting as a venue to propagate their ideas and political strategies. But the Christian-Right groups studied in this volume are usually *smaller* and more *sectarian* than mainstream churches; in fact, they often challenge the Christian mainstream and religious hierarchies for not being conservative enough. It is only in very isolated cases that entire congregational bodies become part of the Christian Right.

A central point with regard to the institutional form of Christian-Right organizations is that the membership is active and primarily identitarian. People actively identify with the Christian Right, and this identification becomes the basis for their actions: they vote for Christian-Right candidates in elections; they take part in manifestations and events organized by these groups; they attend religious congregations with priests who support their ultra-conservative agendas or even convert to another religion that is less compromising with the modern world; they post and follow Christian-Right content on social media; and some of them even organize their private and professional lives in ways that allow them to maintain a distance from the rest of society (e.g., through the practice of homeschooling or self-employment).

- c) The Christian Right pursues strategies that aim to influence and even radically change the liberal democratic consensus that has shaped European politics in the last decades. In particular, they contest the role of religion in society and politics as a matter of identity. Contrary to the doctrine of the

separation of church and state in the United States, European states maintain a variety of church–state relationships. While many states have gone through processes of secularization, some states maintain forms of cooperation between church and state, and some have state churches (Madeley and Enyedi 2003). Whatever the arrangements are, all of the examples of the Christian Right in Europe contained in this volume take issue with the status quo of religion–state relations. Usually, they consider the existing arrangement as too lenient, view the relationship between religion and the state as too close, criticize the churches for being too liberal and for making too many compromises with the secular part of society, and work toward strengthening the status and visibility of their Christian identity in politics and the public sphere. For the most part, the groups analyzed by the contributors to this volume aim at altering the liberal democratic framework in their respective countries, as they consider it *too progressive*, *too liberal*, and *too secular*. Others seek to maintain the status quo and prevent future change in situations where conservative policies are in place. The following are examples of the strategies and goals of the Christian Right: preventing or dismantling legislation on sexual and reproductive rights; demanding and implementing restrictive migration policies, especially with regard to Muslim immigrants; creating or upholding constitutional and legal conditions that make it difficult for minorities to obtain equal rights; asserting national legal sovereignty against EU institutions or international human rights legislation; advocating policies that privilege the family unit over those that help individual family members (e.g., in taxation); and demanding a privileged and visible role for cultural Christianity in the public sphere, while at the same time calling for the dismantling of the privileged position of the mainstream churches.

In the context of highly secularized European societies, such demands are often categorized in public opinion as obsolete and minority opinions, especially since the Christian Right is often only one current in otherwise highly secular identitarian far-right parties. If analyzed from a national perspective alone, the emergence and potential of politically oriented religious networks with these kinds of demands are easily underestimated. These groups might be perceived as disjointed, minoritarian, and insignificant in their respective contexts. From a transnational perspective, however, they form a powerful network and an important—albeit minoritarian—subcurrent of the far right in Europe. Therefore, this volume brings together a wide range of country case studies to show the ideological con-

vergence between different religious denominations and networks and between actors that share the same ultra-conservative concepts and political agendas.

It is along these three dimensions—*ideas—institutions—strategies*—that the contributors to this volume have identified the Christian Right in Europe. As readers engage with the case studies, they will get a clearer sense of this definition, which is not static but circumscribes a shifting target.

One frequent definition of the Christian Right is that it is *fundamentalist*. This is often true in terms of ideas and institutions, but it is not always the case when it comes to strategies. Sociologists of religion concur that religious fundamentalism is a phenomenon that can be found in all religious traditions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.), and the term itself actually derives from Protestant theology (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan 2003; Marty and Appleby 1991–1993). However, fundamentalist religions are not actually always political. In fact, fundamentalist sectarian groups have historically sought to retreat from *the world*, which they consider pagan or doomed. *Fundamentalist* is thus a term that catches a crucial ideological dimension of the Christian-Right phenomenon (*ideas*), but it leaves undetermined the practical (*institutions*) and political (*strategies*) consequences of these ideological choices. Unlike the fundamentalist groups that retreat from the world, Christian-Right fundamentalism actively enters into politics.

Another aspect regarding the definition is whether the Christian Right is made up of religious groups that become politicized or (conversely) political groups that incorporate religious ideas into their agendas for politically opportunistic reasons. In fact, both of these pathways explain the emergence of the Christian Right in Europe. In this volume, there are religious groups that mobilize politically. There are also examples of originally secular political groups that were already pursuing illiberal and right-wing strategies and subsequently adopted a religious language to gain new persuasiveness (e.g., the Italian right-wing party Lega, which has adopted conservative Christian ideas largely in response to immigration from Muslim countries). Lately, the latter phenomenon has been labeled *the hijacking of religion* (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2015; Hennig and Weiberg-Salzmann 2021). Many far-right movements in Europe are explicitly secular and critical not just of Islam but also of Christian values, beliefs, and institutions, which they perceive as too lenient on issues such as immigration and religious freedom. Yet, this secular post-religious right often still seeks to use Christian symbols and language

as secularized identity markers of the nation in what Cremer (2023) calls “a godless Crusade,” thus creating the basis for “a Faustian bargain” between the mainstream secular and identitarian right and the subcurrent of the Christian right.

What is *new* about the Christian Right in Europe?

This book is the first to popularize the term *Christian Right in Europe* in its title. What is special about this expression and why is it *new*? Could it be an exaggeration to speak of a European Christian Right, given the existing denominational discord and liturgical and doctrinal differences characteristic of Europe’s religious landscape (Lo Mascolo 2021)? Europe, while historically and culturally shaped by Christianity, as well as by Judaism and Islam, is today a highly secularized continent that is characterized by a plurality of religions, ethnicities, and worldviews. Notwithstanding the sustained trend toward ever greater secularization and pluralization across all European societies (Inglehart 2008; Casanova 2006), Christian churches continue to play a role in European politics. With some variations, many churches hold conservative social ideas along the parameters outlined above (patriarchy over equality, hierarchy over democracy, the collective over the individual, religion over the secular, and duties over liberties), while others espouse highly progressive values (especially regarding the protection of the environment or immigration). Until a few decades ago, most of the churches’ conservative ideas on social issues were actually societally mainstream or even on the progressive end of the divide. It suffices to point out that discrimination based on race, religion, sex, or national origin was outlawed in the United States only in 1964 at the behest of the religiously inspired civil rights movement; divorce became legal in Italy only in 1970; homosexual conduct was a penal offence in Austria until 1971; and physical violence as a legitimate aspect of parental care was outlawed in West Germany only in 1980. A whole range of what we consider part of the liberal democratic consensus today, such as women’s equality and respect for gender diversity, are in fact rather recent achievements.

In this context, *regular* Christian positions have come to stick out as conservative or right wing in the overall context of liberalization and secularization that has characterized Europe (and the United States) for decades (Inglehart and Norris 2004). Could it therefore be that, at least in terms of *ideas*, there is actually nothing new about the Christian Right in Europe—that it has al-

ways been around and is only becoming visible now as societies turn increasingly post-Christian? For the contributors to this volume, the Christian Right is not a residual phenomenon but something that needs to be distinguished from the (diminishing) Christian mainstream along the three dimensions outlined above: ideas–institutions–strategies. The terminological choice is indebted to the analogous *American Christian Right*, and we thus discuss the question of what is *new* about this phenomenon in Europe with reference to the Christian Right in the United States.

The rise of the American Christian Right as a political movement began in the 1970s (Schulman and Zelizer 2008; Dowland 2015; Lassiter 2008). American society in the 1960s and 1970s was changing rapidly. The Civil Rights Movement ended racial segregation; feminist struggles achieved, among other things, the legalization of abortion; and the counter-cultural movement associated with sexual liberation and new lifestyles profoundly changed youth culture. One effect of racial desegregation was a conflict between religious colleges and the government of the United States, which threatened to withdraw the tax-exempt status from colleges that refused admission to black students. The religious colleges framed the topic as an attack against their religious freedom (Balmer 2021). In short, by the middle of the 1970s, what had hitherto been the ideal of American social politics—the white Christian middle-class family with a breadwinning father, a stay-home mother, and their biological offspring—appeared to be in crisis.

Conservative politicians and Christian actors blamed a culture of permissiveness and the consequences of the sexual revolution on the influence of leftist ideas, as well as on secularization and the erosion of the Christian foundations of American society. In the 1980s, the United States experienced the rise of the Moral Majority, the earliest Christian-Right movement, which successfully supported Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign. Founded by the televangelist Jerry Falwell, the Moral Majority quickly grew into a Baptist-dominated non-denominational Christian movement against gay rights, abortion, contraception, sexual education, etc. Their emphasis on values and morality helped conceal the racist origins of the Christian Right, which preferred to focus on morality politics rather than race questions in order to garner a popular consensus and the support of the Republican political mainstream (Balmer 2021; Flowers 2019). Racism and white superiority remained, nonetheless, important ideological components of the movement that contemporary scholars also describe as *White Christian Nationalism* (Gorski and Perry 2022).

In Europe, meanwhile, the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s unfolded against a very different historical background. Europe was still recovering from the experience of Nazism, fascism, and the destruction of World War II, and it was weighed down by the confrontation with the USSR and the East–West division of the Iron Curtain. In particular, the Protestant churches had discredited themselves by first supporting and later only half-heartedly opposing fascism and National Socialism, while the Catholic church was from the beginning active in anti-Nazi resistance, even though it had tolerated the formation of clerical fascism, a hybridization of fascism and Christianity in the interwar period (Feldman and Turda 2007). Both reentered the political game after the war, humbled and in a spirit of compromise with the secular and liberal democratic order. With the exception of Spain, Portugal, and Greece, where alliances between the fascist leadership and the clergy remained until their demise in the mid-1970s (even though clergy were often involved in resistance activities underground), the churches in most Western European countries became powerful pillars of liberal democracies. For example, they upheld links with the political establishment (especially with Christian democratic parties), had a decisive role in establishing liberal democracy and European integration as a way of defending their interests (Grzymała-Busse 2015), and otherwise acted as a critical part of civil society.

In the communist part of Europe, all churches and religious groups were repressed by communist regimes and had little opportunity to enter into politics. The Western European Christian churches and the Christian democratic parties by and large sustained socially conservative positions and rejected the political demands of the feminist and student movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Their political antagonists were usually the equally powerful social democratic parties, although these were also often fueled by religious actors, such as Christian socialists. As a result of this political constellation, many charged policies (e.g., on abortion and divorce) passed as compromise solutions between Christian democratic and social democratic parties and against the will of the reluctant churches, while on other issues, the churches were at the helm of the progressive movement, as in the peace movement and the environmental movement (Minkenberg 2003).

The European situation was different from the United States, where religious conservative and progressive groups found themselves on a level playing field, and each side tried to garner public support and consensus by lobbying politics for their ends. Whereas in the US, non-state actors created coher-

ent and strategic alliances in support of the Republican Party, in Europe, state co-funding exercised greater control over the nonprofit space (Hennig 2022).

The metaphorical *playing field* in the US soon turned into a battlefield, and the American *culture wars*, a term coined by sociologist James D. Hunter in his book of the same title (1991), began to unfold. Hunter's book started from the observation that moral debates in American society in the post–World War II period were no longer primarily defined by denominational differences between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews but by ideological differences between moral progressives and moral conservatives. Importantly, this divide was not between the secular and religious parts of American society—although much of the popular narrative portrays it that way—but bitterly ran right through religious communities themselves. On both sides of the culture wars divide, social movements, NGOs, and foundations were created to advance specific policy goals. On the progressive side, feminist movements and LGBTIQ+ groups lobbied for equal rights and inclusion; on the conservative side, pro-family and anti-abortion groups resisted such changes. NGOs such as Focus on the Family, Family Research Council, the American Family Forum, Concerned Women for America, the Campaign Life Coalition, and the American Life League came to make up a coherent, powerful Christian-Right movement with a direct influence on politics (Flowers 2019). These institutions and their leaders defined the ideas, institutions, and strategies of Christian-Right conservatism that have become relevant today in Europe.

The American model of civil society organizing stood in stark contrast to the cooperative models of state–church relations that remained in place in most European countries. Given the role of the churches and mainstream Christian-right parties before the 1990s, Western Europe had no real counterpart to the American Christian-Right intellectual and institutional (ideas–institutions–strategies) complex, made up of powerful NGOs with many members and wealthy foundations to back them up and encompassing a whole portfolio of issues (gun rights, abortion, pornography, school prayer, race, etc.). Until the 1990s, the situation for moral conservative mobilization in Europe was thus very different from that in the US. That we now speak—as we do in this book—about a Christian Right in Europe has its roots in a process generally defined as the *globalization of the American culture wars* (Berkley Center 2019; Hennig 2022).

Scholars connect the globalization of the American culture wars—and with it the American Christian-Right ideas–institutions–strategies complex—with the expansion of the international human rights regime. From the

1990s onwards, UN institutions started to address and include in their human rights work issues that Christian conservatives wanted to keep off the list of human rights politics: women's rights, sexual orientation and gender-rights, children's rights, and reproductive rights (Bob 2012; Marshall 2017; Butler 2000; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Chappel 2006; Buss and Herman 2003).

Besides American conservative NGOs, the Catholic Church under Pope John Paul II also played a central role in pushing moral conservative positions on family and women's issues within the UN framework. It did not take long for them to enter into cooperation against the UN agenda, with the support of the Global South and often in opposition to the more secular-oriented West. The Vatican realized that its intransigent positions in terms of sexual morality and reproductive rights were no longer widely supported by the highly secularized Western European publics (McIntosh and Finkle 1995, 248). Consequently, the Catholic Church oriented itself more strongly toward the Global South while at the same time opening up to the American Christian Right, entering into cooperation with groups that were not Catholic and that included Evangelicals, Protestants, Christian Orthodox, and Anglicans, as well as on occasion Jewish and Muslim groups. In other words, at a moment when—especially in Western Europe—national churches were moving toward more progressive positions and were no longer able or willing to influence the policy decisions of their governments, alternative players stepped up, particularly the conservative civil society organizations of the American Christian Right.

The end of the Cold War accelerated the globalization of the American culture wars. Across Central and Eastern Europe, religion returned to the public sphere after decades of communism, often playing a critical role in the pro-democracy movements in the former Eastern bloc, as prominently seen in the *Solidarność* movement in Poland and the peaceful revolution in Eastern Germany (see Casanova 1994). While economically liberal and democratic, many new EU member states were predominantly socially conservative and thus had little space for the pluralism and minority rights advocated within the EU's rights framework. Religion and moral values emerged as a new and unexpected cleavage in secular Europe (Katzenstein 2006).

Meanwhile in Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church and the increasingly autocratic leadership of Vladimir Putin imposed a conservative turn built around traditional values, patriotism, and anti-liberalism. Russia's traditionalist turn was not entirely homegrown. Russian Christian-Right actors borrowed ideas, institutional forms, and strategies from American Christian-

Right groups with which they interacted frequently over many years (Stoeckl 2020).

In short, just as we saw a *Europeanization* of the American right in the 2010s with the adoption of secular European identitarian, ethnopluralist, and populist methods and rhetoric by the Trump movement (Cremer 2023), since the 1990s and 2000s, we have seen in Europe the rise of a coherent Christian-Right complex that challenges the traditional cooperative model between religion and state in Europe. This European Christian Right resembles and imitates—in terms of ideas, institutions, and strategies—the American Christian Right and in some ways is even directly connected with it. However, just as Trumpism is no carbon copy of Europe's secular, identitarian populist right, ultra-conservative Christian activism in Europe is not simply a copy of the US Christian Right; rather, it is the result of intensive transnational interactions between local and international NGOs and social movements that show a remarkable organizational cohesion.

These organizations and groups have adapted to the political, religious, and cultural characteristics of the European continent and have embedded themselves in their own new environments in which they operate successfully. For example, the American Christian-Right law firm Alliance Defending Freedom has opened an international branch in Vienna, from where it conducts legal cases before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg (ADF International 2022). Another organization, the American Center for Law and Justice, has opened an office in Strasbourg and regularly intervenes in policy debates at the Council of Europe and European Commission (ECLJ 2018). In this volume, readers will find numerous examples of European organizations with ties to or roots in the American Christian Right, one prominent case being the World Congress of Families, which is discussed by several authors. What the case studies in this volume indicate is that across Europe, there is a relatively coherent Christian-Right *blueprint*: the stress on rights, the organizational form of grassroots NGOs, the use of lobbying and strategic litigation, the closeness with (far-) right parties, and the targeting of international organizations and high-level court cases.

Dominant features and strategies of the European Christian Right

Main themes

The increasing similarity to the US Christian Right in matters of strategy and shared narratives, as well as the convergence and development of interwoven networks of grassroots movements, churches, and far-right parties within Europe, is particularly evident in the common anti-gender effort (Behrens, Heimbach-Steins, and Hennig 2019). In fact, the case studies in this volume clearly show that the Christian Right in Europe is kept together by two dominant themes: anti-gender ideas (Kováts and Põim 2015; Graff and Korolczuk 2022) and anxieties over immigration (Schain 2018; Hennig and Weiberg-Salzmänn 2021). To some extent, both of these themes can be connected to a single idea, namely white Christian nationalism, as described by Gorski and Perry (2022) for the United States.

While white Christian nationalism in the US is a specific product of America's history of both slavery and its founding myth as a Christian nation, which led to a nationalism that was specifically race-based and pro-Christian, in Europe, nationalism has historically been much more secular and cultural in nature. Specifically, it has been built around the rejection of immigration from Muslim countries and sub-Saharan Africa and the rejection of the pluralism, diversity, and non-discrimination advocated by the progressive side of the political spectrum and European institutions. The idea of defending *Christian Europe* is primarily an identitarian and secularized idea of *civilizationism* (see Brubakar 2017), involving a wide tent of concerns: pro-natalism and traditional gender roles, anti-immigration policies, intolerance vis-à-vis Islam, the conviction that Christianity is a superior religion and more progressive in respect to others, and Christian nationalism, not least because it has produced secularism and is used as a cultural identity marker. In a few countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, Christian-Right actors were able to blend Christian nationalist narratives with conspiracy theories about COVID-19, radicalizing and mobilizing new members by using their pre-existing skepticism toward liberal democracy and gender and immigration policies (Strube 2023; Van der Tol 2023).

The identification of Islam as an external and increasingly internal threat after 9/11 served as an additional factor in closing the ranks between ultra-conservative Christians and the more secular far-right mainstream in Europe (Brubakar 2017; Cremer 2023). The prominence of the *clash of civilizations* theory

(Huntington 1993), which stated that religious identities would be a significant reason for conflict after the Cold War, strengthened the concept of a secularized, historically Christian Europe at war with Islam. Radical-right parties had been anti-immigration for decades (Wodak and Reisigl 2000), but with the rise of global Islamism as a major political threat in the 2000s and 2010s, long-held xenophobic attitudes merged with anti-Muslim racism. Nativism and advocacy of closed borders garnered the populist radical-right parties electoral success. As part of a strategy to deflect from the inherent racism involved in agitating against migrants, religion started to be used as an important identity marker of the *other* (Marzouki et al. 2015).

In secular Europe, it was often only given this religious definition of the other as *Muslim* that Christianity emerged, alongside secularism or *laïcité*, as an analogous cultural identity marker of the *us*. Critically, this did not empirically coincide with a resurgence of any form of Christian belief, practice, or affiliation in Europe. Rather, it was symptomatic of a culturalization—perhaps even a secularization—of the symbols of Christianity itself in Europe’s increasingly secular societies. In the European far right’s *godless crusade*, there is a clear dissociation of Christianity as a faith from *Christendom* as a cultural identity marker of the nation (Cremer 2023; Roy 2019; Brubakar 2017).

Interdenominational and transnational collaboration

A central feature of the Christian Right in Europe is interdenominational collaboration. Why is this cooperation between different religious denominations—Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, Evangelical, etc.—special? It is important to remember here that Europe has a history of religious wars and religious intolerance (Casanova 2009), and until fairly recently, scholars suggested that Europe’s main fault lines were actually determined by religion and culture (Spohn 2009; Katzenstein 2006). The phenomenon of the Christian Right in Europe shows that the conflict lines relevant for contemporary European societies do not run (at least most of the time) along state borders or cultural, linguistic, and religious frontlines but right through each and every society (Stoeckl 2011): they are conflicts over values.

Just as in the United States, where Hunter (1991) pointed to interdenominational ties as a main feature of the Christian Right, also in Europe, Christian groups collaborate across religious traditions and with secular currents: an organization such as the World Congress of Families brings together Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christians in the name of anti-genderism or shared

conservative values and works together with proponents of strict secularism (*laïcité*) at the National Conservatism Conference. The resistance in Europe closely relates to the concept of gender ideology, promoting the idea that gender and sexual diversity are a fundamental threat to society. This was first promoted by clergy from the Catholic Church (Bracke and Paternotte 2016) and later mainstreamed through both the Christian and the secular populist right in Europe. This cooperation between theologically opposing faith groups is particularly noteworthy, as traditionalist and fundamentalist groups, in particular, were highly hostile to the ecumenical dialogue that evolved in the post-war period, often seeing their counterparts as heretical and sectarians.

Not all religious actors approve of this kind of cooperation; in fact, the Vatican itself has changed position on the global culture wars under Pope Francis, calling Christian-Right transnational networks “an ecumenism of hate” (Spadaro and Figueroa 2017). Most of the Catholic activism that readers will find in this book thus takes place in spite of the reluctance of the Catholic Church to join with the far right in Europe and the US (Casanova 2020). Similarly, the support of far-right movements from Protestant mainline churches is mostly an effort of the conservative grassroots in opposition to the liberal church mainstream and leadership. This conservative grassroots effort is partly the consequence of the increasing cultural and consequently political influence of US-style evangelicalism within Christianity in Europe (Elwert and Radermacher 2017). The Russian Orthodox Church, however, plays a significant role in organizing the transnational Christian Right (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022). Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has since changed the picture, making the future of Russia’s role in interdenominational alliances less clear. From the perspective of the global culture wars, it is only of secondary importance whether those engaged in the struggle are Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox Christian, as the decisive characteristic becomes whether they identify as conservative or liberal. This binary, characteristic of the American context since the 1970s, is beginning to impact politics in Europe.

The transnational character of the Christian Right is not primarily the result of bottom-up outreach by nationally organized Christian-Right networks, but it is strategically used to strengthen the Christian Right’s self-perception as a successful global movement. The strong transnational collaboration of the Christian Right does not contradict their Christian nationalist ideology, as they view themselves as united with their European counterparts in a common struggle (Hennig and Hidalgo 2021).

In contrast to populist extreme-right parties within the EU, the Christian Right in Europe experiences fewer fundamental policy disagreements that hinder transnational coalition building. Instead, these networks can fully utilize populist instruments without being constrained by the need to propose programs and laws that must navigate institutional and international norms and restrictions.

Relationships with right-wing parties

The emergence of the Christian Right in Europe stands in an intricate and complicated relationship with the rise of populist radical-right parties, which have established themselves in the European system over the past 15 years (Mudde 2020). As a result, in their relationships with one another, politicians and clergy are initially very cautious about not overstepping the established public norms between politics and religion.

While religious tropes, narratives, and symbols have increasingly been used by radical-right parties in the last decade, these parties are prudent in avoiding being perceived as distinctively Christian-Right parties, as their association with Christian fundamentalism could deter their secular or pagan far-right supporters and obstruct their mainstreaming strategies for attracting more voters from the political center. Moreover, even right-leaning clergy are often equally careful not to openly support far-right parties, while the more liberal mainstream of the established churches often count among the most vocal critics of the far right in Europe (see Cremer 2021). As a result, even highly conservative clergy may limit themselves to supporting far-right ideas and slogans or criticizing their political opponents and their political ideologies. Exceeding this norm by openly endorsing a candidate is avoided, as it could jeopardize their position and influence, hence resulting in disciplinary proceedings within the hierarchically organized mainstream churches, as well as endangering the goal of gaining more influence within the churches.

The rise of new Christian-Right organizations offers a political opportunity for Christians and their faith leaders who are dissatisfied with the political status quo and the Christian democratic and conservative parties. This schism within EU politics became increasingly evident following the fragmentation of the European People's Party (EPP) group in the European Parliament in 2019. Accusations concerning the political trajectory of the coalition led to the exit of its most conservative faction, resulting in the formation of new European parliamentary groups on the right: the European Conservatives and Reformists

group and the Identity and Democracy group. While most of the members of these parties are secular populists, some others are connected to the network Agenda Europe, an alliance comprised of 20 US-based think tanks and European Christian-Right organizations, further emphasizing the shifting landscape of European politics (Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019; Chelini-Pont 2022).

As the chapters in this book show, the cautious relationship between the Christian Right and right-wing parties in Europe has led to outcomes that are only in part comparable to the United States. First, within the European Christian Right, anti-gender NGOs play a role as central policy-making platforms, where both religious and political actors can move beyond institutionalized patterns and traditional norms in the collaboration between politics and religion (Tranfić and Koch 2022). However, this *triangle of collaboration* between far-right parties, conservative clergy, and anti-gender NGOs is not a mandatory component; it is only needed until the open links and endorsements between parties and church have been successfully de-tabooed by the narrative alliances in place.

The second consequence is that the uneasy alliance between right-wing Christians and the extreme right has shifted from the public square to the back room, far from the critical public sphere and the more liberal Christian mainstream. Outspoken partisan support, such as clergy publicly praying for and calling for the election of politicians or joint appearances at election rallies or church services, are considered rare exceptions and strongly opposed by church hierarchies who remain largely united in their condemnation of the far right and seek to maintain social taboos around them among their voters (Cremer 2023). Indeed, unlike in the United States, Christians in Europe are on average significantly less likely to vote for far-right parties than their secular neighbors, leading scholars to speak of a longstanding religious immunity against the far right in Europe (Siegers and Jedinger 2021; Cremer 2023; Perrineau 2017; Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Montgomery and Winter 2015). Finally, the aforementioned secrecy, together with the comparison with the strident US Christian Right, leads to the European counterparts being underestimated by the general public, politics, and academia, as well as within religious groups themselves, and they are thus able to engage in transnational networking and fundraising without generating attention.

Lawfare

Another central strategy in the collaboration between Christian-Right organizations in Europe is lawfare. Lawfare describes the use of lawyer associations to achieve political goals, namely through forms of “legalized contestations over political and social change, where ideologically opposed groups use rights, laws and courts as tools and sites of battle” (Gloppen 2023, 1). This dynamic is linked to the juridicalization of politics (Hirschl 2011), moving conflicts around migration, gender, and sexuality from political arenas to courts. It is increasingly relevant due to the ongoing efforts to harmonize anti-discrimination and sexual education policies within the European Union as well as the role of the European Court of Human Rights, as analyzed in the chapter on the United Kingdom (Hatcher 2023). Supporting and leading legislative initiatives against abortion or same-sex marriage increasingly build on a transnational network of lawyer associations adapting to the human rights laws on libel used in both local and supranational institutions (Yamin, Datta, and Andión 2018). For example, they attack researchers, journalists, and institutions with strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) in order to silence and intimidate them. The use of legal strategies to achieve their political aims is similar to another strategy that is often employed by the Christian Right, namely framing their arguments in secular language in order to increase their appeal and influence, also known as *strategic secularism* (Bailey 2002; Cornejo-Valle and Blázquez-Rodríguez 2022).

Differences in legal systems have further consolidated the idea that there is a clash between gender and sexual diversity rights and traditional family values. While many Western European countries follow an individualistic legal tradition, defending gender and sexual diversity rights based on international human rights standards, many conservative governments in Central and Eastern Europe and, in particular, Russia have formulated new laws for the promotion of traditional family values (Mancini and Palazzo 2021, p. 409).

Online spaces and the Christian Right

As social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter surged in popularity across Europe, they became powerful tools for political and religious communities to mobilize their constituencies, circumvent traditional media, and inflate the relevance of their own ideologies. The internet has provided not only a cost-effective platform to promote various campaigns but also an avenue for

recruitment and reaching new audiences. Initially, Christian-Right activism and anti-feminism appeared as separate movements. However, the emergence of Gamergate, an outburst of online misogyny under the cover of ethical standards for gaming journalism, generated new discussions about ways of addressing online harassment and sowed the seeds of radicalization within far-right movements (Ging 2019), eventually leading to a symbiotic association.

This intersection gave rise to a shared narrative of perceived threat, creating the foundation for right-wing alliances across Europe (Fejós and Zentai 2021). By pivoting to family politics, these groups found a common rallying point, and online spaces served as the perfect platforms to enable this political realignment. Social media platforms played a pivotal role in the diffusion of this narrative by amplifying the most vociferous voices. Powered by algorithms designed to boost engagement, social media disseminated these messages widely, sparking interactions. Thus, contentious religious debates, particularly those concerning gender and sexuality, were not only popularized but also mainstreamed and normalized through the extensive use of social media (Persily and Tucker 2020). These platforms nurtured a unique blend of religious and nativist ideas, setting the stage for a new wave of conservative discourse across the European continent.

Conflicts surrounding online harassment have significantly influenced the strategic approaches of Christian-Right organizations. First, organizations had to evolve with the changing media landscape, modifying their messaging and reframing their ideas in line with the standards set by hate speech regulations. For example, they have had to use softer content or codes that are either harder to detect or no longer violate community standards. Because of these adaptations by Christian-Right groups, mainstream social media platforms, including Instagram and Facebook, continue to play an integral role in the Christian Right's communication and recruitment strategies, even though alternative messaging clients, such as Telegram, are increasingly used. These platforms host Christian influencers and mainstream Christian-Right media outlets, thereby expanding their outreach. Second, these organizations have invested considerable resources into the development of alternative social media strategies. Their goal is to bypass the restrictions imposed by hate speech legislation by using various other platforms and alternative news channels, as well as successfully transferring their print outlets into the digital market.

A prominent example of the occupation and shaping of online spaces by Christian-Right and anti-gender networks is the development and dissemination of the CitizenGO platform. Launched in 2013 by HatzeOir, a Madrid-based

anti-gender organization, CitizenGO is a global-focused, multi-language platform for online petitions, highlighting issues ranging from anti-gender activism and abortion to religious freedom (Barrera-Blanco, Cornejo-Valle, and Pichardo 2023). The aim is to constantly mobilize existing supporters and recruit new ones from a variety of backgrounds. In their petitions, they refer to supposedly objective and specialized far-right news portals, which, however, also belong to HatzeOir and indirectly point to far-right parties as the political implementers of their views (Datta 2021).

The business model also includes the fact that CitizenGO, according to its own statements, makes its technology available to other NGOs free of charge. Above all, the personal data and interests of the users collected through the petitions are passed on to generate further petitions, articles, calls for demonstrations, and user organizations tailored to specific interests (Datta 2021).

These alternative strategies not only provide platforms for their messaging but also ensure the continuity of their communication efforts despite the stringent regulations.

Astroturfing and finances

The increasing use of social media platforms has led to innovations in political strategies that have affected both radical-right parties and the Christian-Right networks in Europe. Astroturfing, defined as a tactic to deceive the public about the real dimensions and origins of a campaign, is arguably an important part of the Christian-Right mobilization.

First, astroturfing is used to cover up a lack of far-reaching popularity by setting up fake organizational activity online that creates the false impression of a spontaneous grassroots movement. The Christian-Right groups analyzed in the chapters in this book are, by and large, minorities in their respective national contexts. For the most part, their ultra-conservative, right-wing views exist as minority opinions even within their own churches. Despite being small organizations with few members, many Christian-Right organizations are very active online. One of the aims of astroturfing is the manipulation of potential target groups, such as politicians who are induced to think that the political demands are backed by a substantial part of the electorate. As Strube showcases (2023), astroturfing is used to manipulate and lure potential supporters into thinking that they will be part of a mass movement. In reality, most of these organizations are controlled by a few moral conservative entrepreneurs, some of whom operate several such organizations in

parallel. The supporters are emboldened and strengthened in their process of radicalization and social isolation, an effect that is reinforced and amplified online (Zerback and Töpfl 2022). This is used as a strategy to influence online discourses and shift perceptions of social norms online, as well as to normalize Christian-Right ideas. As a consequence of this strategy, ideas that actually represent radical, extremist, and fringe opinions in the theological and political mainstream are amplified and legitimized.

Second, astroturfing is used to conceal the provenance of funding. While most Christian-Right organizations pretend that their funding is provided through their grassroots support, research by the European Parliamentary Forum (EPF) for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (Datta 2021) shows how transnational connections, rich business sponsors, and foundations are instrumental in securing financial resources for Christian-Right activities. According to the EPF, a substantial part of funding for anti-gender actors in Europe between 2009 and 2018 originated in the US, specifically from US Christian-Right organizations. Organizations such as the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, the American Center for Law and Justice, and the Alliance Defending Freedom International, as well as several other American Christian-Right advocacy organizations, have doubled their financial support to European organizations since 2009, supporting European networks with funding and strategical advice. The money that the US Christian Right distributes in Europe can itself be traced back to conservative foundations and mega donors such as the Koch family, whose wealth is based on fossil fuel industries and who have made significant contributions to the US Christian Right, the Republican Party, and a number of climate change deniers.

The leading role that the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church have played in promoting the Christian-Right ideas in the last 10 years is also reflected in the fundraising networks. Oligarchs such as Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev, who have close ties to Putin and Patriarch Kirill, have set up think tanks, institutes, conferences, and news portals to disseminate their ethnonationalist, anti-democratic, and anti-gender convictions in Russia and abroad. Some Russian Christian-Right actors have also set up cooperation agreements through which they fund far-right parties in Europe, such as the Italian Lega and the Rassemblement National in France (Shekhovtsov 2017). While the sanctions after the invasion of Crimea in 2014 did little to stop the financial support from Russia for European anti-gender and Christian-Right organizations, the sanctions imposed after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 are

more likely to have incisive financial consequences for the ultra-conservative organizations that have so far benefited from Russian money.

Most importantly, an increasing part of the funding for anti-gender activities comes not from private donors but from public funding. In some cases, tax payers' money is used by conservative politicians and governments to fund programs run by Christian-Right groups. Examples of this are so-called *crisis pregnancy centers* and organizations that propagate reactionary sexual education material in public schools (Datta 2021), such as in Spain and Italy. The illiberal governments in Poland and Hungary are actively sponsoring Christian-Right NGOs, such as *Ordo Iuris* (associated with Tradition, Family, Property), with money derived from EU funds (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Curanović 2021). Frequently, they create *government-organized* NGOs that mimic civil society and grassroots engagement while reinforcing the governments' socially conservative ideas domestically and internationally.

Successes and dangers

A common thread among these examples consists of shared political goals and strategies that span different regions and value systems: the weakening of liberal democracy and the rule of law; changes in the role and composition of the highest courts; vehement opposition to sexual diversity or gender equality; and populist, nationalist agendas aiming to marginalize and discriminate against people who are identified as foreign or simply *different* (Hennig 2021).

The political track record of the Christian Right in Europe exhibits significant variations. The contributions to this book suggest a correlation between the influence of the Christian Right in a respective country and the success of illiberal political actors. In countries such as Poland and Hungary, where it represents a considerable electoral force, the Christian Right has played a significant role in the ascent and sustenance of illiberal governments. By contrast, Christian-Right politics in Russia has emerged as a significant instrument for shaping foreign policies, in particular. In the rest of Europe, the political success of the Christian Right has been more varied and is closely tied to the popularity and electoral achievements of parties that support their ideology. Where successful, depending on their political clout, these efforts have led to delays and obstacles in passing legislation or in the reinforcement of existing legislation, as well as participation in lawfare. In countries where referendums are possible, Christian-Right organizations and networks have been able to break

out of these limitations, as seen in Croatia (Grozdanov and Zelić 2023) and Romania (Alecú 2023).

The Christian Right in Europe poses an immediate but less visible threat through the deliberate manipulation and influence of societal discourse. This has been achieved, for example, by employing strategies associated with the American culture wars. Inspired by the tactics of the New Right, which aims to politicize the pre-political space, the global nature of the culture wars allows for the rapid importation and adaptation of the latest tactics, talking points, and strategies that are in circulation. A current example of this is the utilization of anti-trans narratives (Brockschmidt 2022). Furthermore, culture war strategies provide opportunities to form alliances with secular far-right parties, scandalize, and reach beyond their target audience, impacting the secular conservative mainstream and the wider public discussion.

The significant consequences of these strategies are clearly evident in the United States. Over the course of decades, their implementation has led to an escalation of polarization and divisiveness, resulting in a substantial decline in civil discourse and the erosion of social cohesion. This has had political ramifications, such as the radicalization of the Republican Party during and after the Trump presidency and policies such as the notorious Muslim ban of 2017 and the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the 2022 Dobbs case (Gorski and Perry 2022). It is often suggested that these polarizing strategies have contributed to the radicalization of the political right in the US, culminating in the Capitol insurrection of 2021.

The rise of the Christian Right in Europe threatens churches and religious traditions. Conservative churches and religious communities often share the ideological base of the Christian Right and their ideas on gender, family, and abortion. However, they do not tend to share or support the institutional ambitions and strategic outlooks of right-wing groups, and they sometimes speak out against them. Mainstream churches remain tied to traditional hierarchies, support for liberal democracy, and the consensus-oriented dialogues with governments that were established in past decades. From a theological perspective, the rise of the Christian Right threatens fundamental Christian dogmatic beliefs, especially those related to the dignity and equality of life for all human beings, as well as bringing the danger that ideas, identities, or ideologies take the place of God's universality. The confrontational style of the Christian Right and its association with the nativist far right can alienate believers; especially those of racial minority backgrounds who are themselves becoming majorities in many congregations. However, just as Christian Democratic parties are

losing ground to more extremist right-wing groups, mainstream churches are being challenged by more sectarian and radical groups among some of the congregants.

An overview of the Christian Right in Europe

This volume provides analyses of Christian-Right movements from 20 European countries (Austria, Belarus, Croatia, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, the Netherlands, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom), as well as examining their activities within European institutions.

Four chapters are placed outside of alphabetical sequence and follow the introduction directly. This reflects their pivotal role in enabling us to comprehend the Christian Right in Europe. The chapter on the European bubble not only provides an overview of the different NGOs attempting to advance anti-gender legislation at the European level but also underscores the concentrated and transnational efforts of the Christian Right. The chapter on Russia emphasizes the distinctive role that Russian actors have played within the Christian Right and the influence they have exerted on the Ukrainian conflict and the broader European landscape. The chapters on Poland and Hungary illustrate how empowered and influential Christian-Right actors can contribute to the erosion of democracy in Europe.

In order to facilitate comparability and access, each chapter starts with a short summary of the political system and the political landscape, followed by an overview of the religious landscape that is characteristic of the country in question. What is the constitutional church–state relationship? What are the major confessions and traditional affiliations, and how have they developed over time? The authors subsequently identify the Christian-Right protagonists in the specific contexts that they analyze. Are there groups/denominations that are ultra-conservative and actively pursuing political alliances? Who are they? Are they seeking interconfessional alliances? Is it minority Christian groups or rather Christian majorities that are engaged in processes of politicization or radicalization of religion? The contributors to this volume—and the attentive reader—identify across the case studies several international ties and connections between like-minded parties and organizations. Each of the chapters identifies and analyzes the narratives and ideologies that motivate the Christian-Right groups in question. Some of these narratives are transver-

sal in that they exist in many countries (in different languages and with different religious focuses), while others are country-specific. Finally, the chapters address the question of how successful Christian-Right groups are in the political game—on the domestic level, but also on the level of transnational alliance building or EU institutions.

The wealth of information contained in this volume throws into sharp relief how the Christian Right in Europe is not a fringe phenomenon but instead poses a real threat to liberal democracy. The chapters show that Christian-Right politics has succeeded in many areas of policy making and has become part of the political establishment in many countries. Christian-Right ideas are represented in many European institutions and governments, including the coalition governments in Italy, Sweden, Austria, Poland, and Hungary. In some of these contexts, Christian-Right ideas interlock seamlessly with an older Christian democratic agenda; in others, they actually constitute a break and challenge the more moderate Christian democratic mainstream (Biebricher 2018). It should not be overlooked that this development has created a new political home for fundamentalist Christians who were already critical of the political establishment and their churches for gradually becoming *too* liberal, reformist, or compromising. While these fundamentalist Christians are within their churches and also within the far right, their demands are amplified by political actors on the right who echo their radical ideas. While these leaders may not share all aspects of a religious teaching, let alone follow them in their private lives, they nonetheless capitalize politically on a positive language of religion, culture, tradition, and family.

The aim of this book is to inform academics, policymakers, religious leaders, and the general reader about a political phenomenon that poses a real challenge to liberal democracy. Balancing out different worldviews and normative commitments is part and parcel of any democracy. Reconciling religious and secular sensibilities can fail and lead to trade-offs and frustrations. This is quite normal in modern societies, and no side—neither progressive nor conservative—is immune from having to make compromises. The starting point for this volume lies elsewhere. It is the observation that the politicization of Christian ideas in Europe has shifted in the last decade or two, giving rise to greater polarization and leading to new forms of mobilization and novel political strategies. Far-right parties, which in the past were either pagan or non-religious, have discovered Christianity as a cultural identity marker of the *us* against the *Islamic other*, thereby challenging the mainstream churches, academic theology, and our democratic institutions. This book provides evidence

of the urgency of the need to understand the development and dynamics of this phenomenon. It is hoped that academics, policy makers, religious leaders, and those invested in the development of democracy and constitutionalism in Europe will benefit from it.

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"Gender Ideology" Battles in the European Bubble

Neil Datta and David Paternotte

Setting the stage

In December 2013, the European Parliament (EP) unexpectedly rejected the *Report on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights* (SRHR), known as the Estrela Report after Edite Estrela, the Portuguese MEP in charge of drafting the report (Estrela 2013). This report was meant to encourage EU member states to improve their domestic policies in a range of areas, including contraception, maternal health, abortion, sexuality education, youth empowerment, and overall women's health. Human rights advocates hoped that it would provide an impetus for the European Union (EU) to become a global leader on SRHR. Following an unprecedented campaign that claimed that "the Estrela report calls for minors to act as sex education propagandists in the EU and in candidate countries" (Mertz 2013), the EP instead adopted a weak alternative resolution of a mere 235 words from the center-right European People's Party (EPP), which recalled that SRHR policies are the competences of member states ("European Parliament resolution of 10 December 2013 on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights" 2013; Mondo and Close 2019).

A few months later, in April 2014, the EP hosted a special hearing on a European Citizen's Initiative (ECI) entitled "One of Us" ("European Parliament hearing on 'One of Us'" 2014). This ECI, an instrument created by the EU to foster direct democracy, had gathered over 1.7 million signatures of citizens across member states, calling on the EU to ensure that no funding was used for activities that "presuppose the destruction of human embryos."¹ By far the biggest at the time in terms of signatures collected and countries involved, this ECI qualified as a success, and its backers beamed with enthusiasm in the packed

1 https://europa.eu/citizens-initiative/initiatives/details/2012/000005_en

room of the EP where they presented their initiative to Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), later followed by a personal meeting with the European Commission (EC).

The enthusiasm, however, was short-lived. In May 2014, the EC issued a 19-page rejection, stating that “a funding ban would constrain the Union’s ability to deliver on the objectives set out in the MDGs [Millennium Development Goals], particularly on maternal health, and the ICPD [International Conference on Population and Development], which were recently reconfirmed at both international and EU levels” (Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2014). In reaction, the ECI organizers mounted a legal challenge to the Commission’s rejection, which the defendants eventually lost in December 2019 (Court of Justice of the European Union 2019). In parallel, they established a permanent pressure group by transforming the ECI into a non-governmental organization (NGO), the One of Us Federation (Datta 2021). In 2015, some of the same actors organized another, albeit far less successful, ECI, “Mum, Dad & Kids,” to establish a common definition of marriage and the family across the EU that would have hampered the mutual recognition of nationally granted rights for LGBTIQ* people (Mos 2018).

Contestation of Gender at the European level

Human rights defenders experienced these two events as a major blow, while anti-gender actors celebrated them as the start of what they hoped would be many similar initiatives (Datta 2018; Peiro Trapero 2021). These two events, a few months apart, marked the beginning of what would become protracted battles around *gender ideology* in the *European bubble* (the universe of policy makers, civil servants, lobbyists, and civil society organizations that gravitate around the EU and other European institutions centered around Brussels and Strasbourg). They also signaled that the EU’s support and leadership on SRHR could no longer be taken for granted.

While contestation of gender-related issues, or anti-gender activism, has attracted a great deal of scrutiny in academic, journalistic, and activist literature at the national level, the engagement of the same phenomenon with European institutions remains a near *terra incognita* (Marques-Pereira 2021; Ruzza 2021a). Extant scholarship focuses on parliamentary debates (Kantola and Lombardo 2020; Ahrens and Woodward 2021) and the progressive response (Cullen 2021; Ruzza 2021b). One exception, Émilie Mondo’s doctoral

research, explores EU-level morality politics through the prism of culture wars, with a focus on the ECI One of Us (2018).² In his work on international norms in the field of LGBTIQ* rights, Martijn Mos has also studied the ECIs One of Us and Mum, Dad & Kids to sketch the emergence of Religious-Right actors in European politics (2018; see also Mos forthcoming). Finally, some scholars have studied EU anti-gender activism through the prism of populism and far-right politics (Ruzza, Berti, and Cossarini 2021).

Among the scholars quoted above, Mos is the only one to use the expression *Religious Right*, which he presents as synonymous with *Christian Right*. In this chapter, we follow this line of research to highlight the role played by actors who invoke so-called Christian values to oppose SRHR in Europe today. Indeed, if it would be misleading to claim that all anti-gender actors active in European politics are inspired by Christian values (some are known secularists or atheists or prefer to claim political values over religious ones), many—both among NGOs and politicians—display overt connections to ultraconservative understandings of Christianity. Therefore, *gender ideology* is not only a Catholic invention (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017) but also remains to a large extent a predominantly Christian battle, including in European institutions.

This chapter provides readers with key milestones to help navigate the Christian-Right universe active in the European bubble³ with the hope that more researchers will investigate further. It discusses three aspects: the growth of a new ultra-conservative civil society at the European level; the ways in which these actors engage in European politics and the evolving traction of anti-gender stances among politicians; and the differences between the 2013 and 2021 EP reports on SRHR.

The growth of an ultra-conservative civil society

The defeat of the Estrela Report and the success of the One of Us ECI were the direct result of the mobilization of a myriad of recently created Christian-Right groups in Europe. Today, a complex galaxy of actors and organizations involved

2 For information on anti-gender politics at EU level, see also Marques-Pereira 2021 and Ruzza 2021b.

3 This chapter focuses on the EU. However, in the domains of rights and values, it is impossible to isolate this institution from the Council of Europe. As a result, several of the organizations mentioned in this chapter are active in both institutional settings.

in European politics has emerged, with actors cooperating and at times competing with each other. Some are based in the institutional hubs of Brussels or Strasbourg, while others are anchored at national level and may only occasionally travel to European capital cities (Zacharenko 2016 and 2020).

Table 1: Main anti-gender organizations active in the European bubble

European branches of US organizations	New European organizations	Organizations linked to religious institutions	International fora
European Center for Law and Justice (ECLJ)	CitizenGo	Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE)	Agenda Europe
Alliance Defending Freedom International (ADFI)	One of Us Federation	Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE)	Political Network for Values (PNV)
World Youth Alliance (WYA)	Ordo Iuris and Tradition, Family, Property (TFP) Europe for the Family/La Manif Pour Tous European Dignity Watch (EDW)	European Christian Political Movement (ECPM)	World Congress of Families (WCF)

These actors fall into three broad categories: European branches of US Christian-Right organizations, newly created European organizations and networks, and organizations directly linked to religious institutions. In addition, they have forged specific transnational networks and fora where they can meet and coordinate their actions. Most of these actors claim to be inspired by their Christian values, justifying the use of the label *Christian Right*. Several are also connected through various Catholic networks such as Opus Dei, the Charismatic Renewal, the Neocatechumenal Way, and Tradition, Family, Property. It is crucial, however, to distinguish these from religious institutions

such as the Roman Catholic Church and traditional but less professionalized and more local faith-based political engagement, as found, for instance, in older pro-life groups. The development of this new ultra-conservative civil society, which recalls the *NGOization* of ultra-conservative religious activism elsewhere (Vaggione 2005), has occurred in a three-fold process relying on the professionalization, generational renewal, and transnationalization of *pro-life* (anti-abortion) and *pro-family* (anti-LGBTIQA*) activism in Europe.

European branches of US organizations

As part of the internationalization of their activities (Datta 2021), several organizations from the US Christian Right have opened branches in Europe, namely the European Center for Law and Justice (ECLJ), the Alliance Defending Freedom International (ADFI), and the World Youth Alliance (WYA). Both the ECLJ and the ADFI are specialized in legal advocacy and strategic litigation. The ECLJ is the European offspring of the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), while the ADFI has opened several offices in Europe since 2014. The ECLJ served as the legal focal point for the One of Us ECI and led the opposition efforts to the Estrela Report, while the ADFI has argued that religious freedom constitutes a higher order of human rights above LGBTIQA* and women's rights. The WYA, with an office in Brussels, claims to serve as the voice of young people regarding Catholic social doctrine, with a focus on human dignity.

New European organizations

In the last 20 years, several organizations have emerged in Europe to mount anti-gender campaigns, some devoting much of their efforts transnationally. Launched in 2013, CitizenGo is an ultra-conservative, multi-lingual petition platform and advocacy group headquartered in Madrid with affiliates in 15 countries around the world. Journalists have revealed connections with far-right actors spanning Italy, Mexico, the Russian Federation, and the US (Datta 2021).

The One of Us European Federation for Life and Human Dignity (the One of Us Federation), based on the successful eponymous ECI, gathers all those in Europe advocating for the *right to life*, with *life* reduced to lobbying against

abortion and euthanasia. Present in 24 EU countries, the One of Us Federation presents itself as “the most representative and global pro-life movement.”⁴

Created in 2013, the Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture (Ordo Iuris) is a Polish organization that is part of the transnational movement Tradition, Family, Property (TFP), a neo-feudal network originally from Brazil but now composed of over 30 organizations spread across Europe, Latin America, and the United States (Datta 2020). In Poland, Ordo Iuris is behind policy initiatives such as the 2016 bill to ban abortion and the “Stop Paedophilia” law, which criminalizes sexuality education and allows *LGBT-free zones*. From its domestic policy and fundraising successes, Ordo Iuris has founded a higher education institution in Warsaw, the Collegium Intermarium, launching branches in half a dozen countries.

Two other organizations merit mention: Europe for the Family, which aimed to monitor French MEPs following the success of the *Manif pour Tous*, and the defunct European Dignity Watch (EDW),⁵ which was long headed by Sofia Kuby (the daughter of anti-gender thinker Gabriele Kuby and now the Director of Strategic Relations & Training at the ADFI). EDW ran an annual European Advocacy Academy where prominent anti-gender leaders trained a younger generation of activists.

Religious organizations

A third category includes organizations officially connected to a wider religious institution, namely the Roman Catholic Church, as well as to other groups professing religious beliefs. The main actor is the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union (COMECE), which serves as the official representation of the Roman Catholic Church to European institutions. The COMECE enjoys privileged access to EU decision makers through a formalized dialogue with EU institutions. The COMECE hosts another Christian-Right actor, the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe (FAFCE), which gathers family associations inspired by Catholic social teachings from various European countries and lobbies EU institutions to promote family-friendly policies.

In the early 2000s, several Christian actors joined forces to establish the European Christian Political Movement (ECPM) as the only explicitly religious

4 <https://oneofus.eu/about-us/organization/>

5 Established in 2010, the last sign of EDW dates from December 2018.

European political party. Historically close to the Dutch Reformed Church and its associated political parties, the ECPM has moved toward a defense of conservative Christian social values. It includes several minority Christian political currents that are not part of the wider world of Christian Democracy, be they Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant in inspiration. It is the only organization with such an overt ecumenical profile in the European bubble.

International fora

These actors are tightly interconnected through both formal and informal channels. For instance, the leaders, staff members, or spouses of one organization may sit on the board of or work for another or several other groups. For example, Luca Volonté was at the same time founder of the Novae Terrae Foundation, board member of CitizenGO, and president of the Dignitatis Humanae Foundation close to US far-right strategist Steve Bannon. Inside the European bubble, there is Maria Hildingson, who heads the FAFCE, while her spouse, Tobias Teuscher, has served as a staff member for several of the European Parliament's most vocal anti-gender MEPs and ran as a candidate for the European Parliament as a member of France's Pro-Life political party, which was itself headed by the president of the FAFCE. In addition, these actors and organizations regularly address each other's events, forming veritable echo chambers (Datta 2021). They have also established several fora where they meet regularly for networking and strategizing. The most noteworthy fora are the World Congress of Families (WCF), Agenda Europe, and the Political Network for Values (PNfV).

The best known is the WCF, established in 1997 by Russian and US civil society actors and operated today from the US by the International Organization for the Family. At its latest meeting in Verona, Italy, in 2019, the WCF gathered all the main currents of European alt- and far-right political actors as well as Russian personalities, US Christian-Right leaders, and Catholic actors openly critical of the Vatican. Recently, the WCF has focused on Europe, and its most recent gatherings before Verona took place in Moldova (2018), Hungary (2017), and Georgia (2016), often with significant support from public authorities. The Verona gathering attracted substantial critical media coverage and mass street protests, and the WCF has not since announced a new gathering.

Diametrically opposed is the secretive Agenda Europe, a loose network of over 300 organizations and individuals from more than 30 European countries closely connected to the Catholic hierarchy, which has held closed annual meet-

ings since 2013. Agenda Europe involves transnational and national anti-gender NGOs, conservative academics, and officials inside European and national administrations, as well as a significant number of US Christian-Right actors who draw inspiration from a common manifesto entitled *Restoring the Natural Order: An Agenda for Europe*. Agenda Europe's members-only meetings have provided a platform to strategize and deploy over 15 policy initiatives across Europe (Datta 2018).

Finally, the Political Network for Values (PNfV) focuses on gathering political actors, such as parliamentarians and ministers, with *pro-life* and *pro-family* civil society. Focusing on the Americas and Europe, it holds regular strategizing sessions on how to restrict, prevent, and eventually ban abortion and halt the expansion of same-sex marriage. The Hungarian minister and since May 2022 President of the Republic of Hungary, Katalin Novák, has also chaired the PNfV. The latest transatlantic meeting took place in May 2022 in Budapest, with the aim of building a “pro-freedom agenda globally.”⁶

European Christian-Right engagement in the European bubble

Christian-Right actors engage in the European bubble through four distinct approaches: seeking formal recognition, traditional advocacy and campaigning, discrediting supranational institutions, and attempting infiltration.

As new actors in the European bubble, the first step was establishing credibility. The manifesto *Restoring the Natural Order* calls on Agenda Europe members to seek accreditation with international institutions (Datta 2018). This resulted in several Christian-Right NGOs registering on the European Parliament Transparency Register (CitizenGO and Ordo Iuris) and seeking formal recognition at the UN (CitizenGO and Ordo Iuris) and the Council of Europe (ADFI and FAFCE). This approach has had mixed results, as some have successfully established themselves as respectable interlocutors (FAFCE), while others have been rejected (ADFI) or faced controversy (Ordo Iuris and CitizenGO) (Datta 2021).

Next, these actors engage with European decision-making processes in traditional advocacy. They employ the same legal, advocacy, and campaigning techniques as progressive actors and, apart from their values and policy claims, are similar to other organizations gravitating around the European

6 <https://politicalnetworkforvalues.org/en/>

bubble. Examples of such engagement include their activism to defeat the EP reports on SRHR. A subset of actors have specialized in SRHR *lawfare* (Yamin, Andion, and Datta 2018), specifically the ADFI and the ECLJ (Relano Pastor 2021), while Ordo Iuris (Datta 2020) was recognized as "Bully Lawyers of the Year" in 2021.⁷ Some actors have also sought to secure EU funding, such as the WYA, which has tapped into the ERASMUS program (the EU's youth exchange program), and the ECPM, which has benefited from core funding from the EP since 2010 (Datta 2021).

However, these actors engage in a *double-jeu* with European institutions (Mos 2018): in parallel to their traditional advocacy, they proactively attempt to discredit them, an observation consistent with anti-gender discourse (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). For instance, the One of Us ECI organizers explained that the Commission's rejection of their request was due to the hostility of EU institutions toward Christian interests and values.⁸ Similarly, the ECLJ issued an extensive report asserting that ECHR judges were "agents of Soros" (Puppink 2020). This dual approach toward their formal engagement has even led some scholars to wonder whether Christian-Right actors are not in fact friends of the court but rather *inimici curiae* in engaging in litigation (Relano Pastor 2021) and whether the European Christian Right as a whole can be considered "conservative un-civil society" (Ruzza 2021).

The most ambitious engagement with European institutions has been infiltrating them and eventually trying to coopt them toward anti-gender objectives. The Christian Right has always been a force in politics (see the next section), and these political insider allies are coordinated through the transnational networks mentioned above. These in turn have served as platforms to place key allies inside European institutions, such as through the creation of the new post of Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU ("President Juncker appoints the first Special Envoy" 2016; Datta 2018). The boldest attempt at infiltration came in early 2021, when the founder of Ordo Iuris became one of the Polish Government's candidates for the ECHR (but was swiftly rejected).

7 <https://www.the-case.eu/campaign-list/the-european-slapp-contest>

8 For instance, see <https://oneofus.eu/three-years-ago-we-submitted-about-2-million-signatures/>.

Evolving political traction

Anti-gender activism has passed through several stages. Starting within Catholic thinkers and hierarchs eager to better understand and counter the perceived losses of the 1990s at the United Nations, by the early 2010s, it had become the focus of a range of conservative civil society groups (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Datta 2018). From civil society, anti-gender activism has now migrated to the realm of politics—and from politics to state policies. A similar process has happened at the European level, with increased traction within European institutions.

Anti-gender actors' influence on politics has taken two routes: first via the mainstream current of Christian politicians within the EPP and, more recently, through the emergent alt- and far right.⁹ Across countries such as Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and Slovakia, there are ample examples of leading political figures within national EPP-affiliated parties playing key roles in anti-abortion organizations and wider anti-gender campaigns (Datta 2021). These include Jaime Mayor Oreja, a first-rank Spanish EPP politician with leadership roles in the One of Us Federation and the PNfV; Gudrun Kugler, currently an EPP Austrian parliamentarian who was the co-convener of Agenda Europe; and Ján Figel', a senior Slovak Christian Democrat politician who became the first Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union.

However, this route has proved to be of limited utility: Christian-Right EPP politicians were a minority within the EPP, who could only thwart progressive advances and have failed to initiate policies to advance their objectives. At the same time, alt-, far-, and hard-right political forces across Europe have seized upon the potential of anti-gender campaigning, opening a new route to push forward anti-gender claims. Older established parties such as Italy's Lega, France's Rassemblement National, Hungary's FIDESZ, and Poland's PiS have incorporated some anti-gender claims into their platforms. Newly emergent alt-right parties have also turned anti-gender issues into a key component of the parties' DNA, as in the case of Spain's Vox, Germany's AfD, Portugal's Chega, and the Netherlands' Forum for Democracy. Several of these parties have become key allies of the European Christian Right today. Many of these

9 Without forgetting the ECPM mentioned above, which is officially a political party but acts more like an NGO.

parties have regrouped in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) groups at the European Parliament.

All this has significantly transformed debates at the European Parliament. In some cases, these political parties have also come into power, either leading governments (as in the case of PiS in Poland and FIDESZ in Hungary) or joining coalitions (as in the case of Lega in Italy and Vox at the regional level in Spain), with a major impact on the European Council. From these positions, Christian-Right actors have a new platform to influence EU policies. This has resulted, for instance, in Poland and Hungary attempting to block policy documents between the EU and developing-country partners (Fox 2020) and the EU Child Rights Strategy¹⁰ because of references to EU-agreed language on *gender*.

Comparing the 2013 and 2021 EP reports on SRHR

The shift in anti-gender political support becomes evident when comparing the two main reports of the EP dealing with SRHR. The EP has worked on SRHR on two occasions over the past decade: in 2013 with the Estrela Report and in 2021 with the Matic Report ("European Parliament resolution of 24 June 2021 on the situation of sexual and reproductive health and rights" 2021). In 2013, the Estrela Report met defeat by a narrow margin, with the adoption of the EPP alternative resolution. By contrast, the far-right alternative resolution failed to garner support beyond their immediate political family. By 2021, the situation had reversed. The far-right and conservative groups once again tabled alternative resolutions; however, both failed. When the EP voted on the substance of the Matic Report, the result was a resounding victory of 378 in favor to 255 against, with coordinated support coming from the left, the Greens, and center-left and liberal groups, along with a split conservative group and support from other national parties (such as the Italian Five Star Movement).

Three main reasons explain this result: progressive actors were better prepared, Christian-Right actors used an outdated playbook, and the EP had established a track record of denouncing Christian-Right initiatives (Datta 2021b). First, on the heels of the defeat of the Estrela Report in late 2013 and the presentation of the One of Us ECI in April 2014, progressive MEPs and their civil society allies organized in several coordination mechanisms to neutralize Christian-Right activism in the EP, such as MEPs for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (SRR, a multi-party MEP working group to advance SRR) and the All

10 <https://www.eurochild.org/news/reaction-to-the-veto-on-eu-child-rights-strategy/>

of US coalition (bringing together progressive political parties and SRHR civil society).

Second, Christian-Right actors replayed in 2021 the same strategies they had used in 2013. While the composition of the EP was markedly different (two EP elections had since taken place), there were sufficient MEPs and civil society actors present with an institutional memory of the Estrela Report and One of Us to anticipate Christian-Right activism and sound the alarm bells. In addition, Christian-Right actors suffered a significant setback in 2018 with the appearance of the Arte documentary *IVG: Les croisés contre-attaquent* (Jousset and Rawlins-Gaston 2017) and the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights report *Restoring the Natural Order* (Datta 2018), which led to an avalanche of further research and investigative reporting. As a result, Christian-Right actors suffered a significant loss of credibility.

Finally, by 2021, the EP had become a seasoned protagonist in the *gender ideology* battles, as it had adopted several progressive reports prior to the Matic Report. Such reports included the 2019 report on experiencing a backlash in women's rights and gender equality in the EU ("European Parliament resolution of 13 February" 2019) as well as several reports condemning Poland's and Hungary's anti-gender initiatives (e.g., "European Parliament resolution of 8 July" [2021] and "European Parliament resolution of 11 November" [2021]). In the first semester of 2021, this included the EP organizing two special hearings aimed at understanding Christian-Right activism in the EU with the intention of neutralizing it.¹¹

Conclusion

Scholars and practitioners alike have long overlooked the emergence in Europe of a set of actors that could resemble the US Christian Right. Moreover, most of the literature has focused on the national level, forgetting European institutions, despite their crucial role in the governance of contemporary European

11 The hearing entitled "Abortion rights and rule of law in Poland" on 24 February 2021 (<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/abortion-rights-and-rule-of-law-in-poland/product-details/20210217CHE08342>) and the Joint FEMM-INGE Public Hearing on "Financing of anti-choice organisations" on 25 March 2021 (<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/joint-femm-inge-public-hearing-on-financ/product-details/20210315CHE08502>).

societies. In this chapter, we have tried to address these gaps through a first mapping of European anti-gender politics. We have presented the main civil society and political actors as well as their strategies and modes of action, followed by a comparison of the trajectories of the two main EP reports on SRHR.

Following the purpose of this book, we have also shown that the label *Christian Right*, which is not common in the literature on anti-gender politics, offers interesting insights into the development of ultraconservative actors in the European bubble. Indeed, it allows us to emphasize that most of these actors claim to be inspired by so-called Christian values and a religious understanding of politics and society. At the same time, it would be misleading to equate these actors with specific churches or religious hierarchies. Rather, their emergence reveals the development of a network of NGOs who use secular tools and human rights language to defend an extremely restricted understanding of SRHR that is inspired by their religious values. They may act relatively independently of religious hierarchies and sometimes even in opposition to them (Prearo 2020). Furthermore, while losing traction among mainstream Christian politicians, these actors find increasing support among alt-, far-, and hard-right political actors, who are known to instrumentalize so-called Christian values to advance their civilizational battles. Finally, it is interesting to observe that these actors manage to build ecumenical bridges across Christian denominations that display complex histories of rivalries and conflicts, but they have not been able to attract other religious actors in Europe, namely Jews and Muslims.

All this draws an entirely new landscape for SRHR in European politics, which has profoundly transformed the action of progressive actors in the European bubble. After a moment of surprise and alarm, they were forced to reorganize, study their Christian-Right opponents, and prepare for the likelihood that their opponents would contest progressive policy claims (Peiro Trapero 2021). By 2021, a new phase has emerged, characterized by progressive and Christian-Right actors engaging in two different theaters. Whereas progressive actors have re-captured their ascendancy in the European bubble, Christian-Right actors have retrenched to the safety of national capitals such as Budapest, London, Madrid, and Warsaw. This strategy allows them, from their national bastions, to pose major obstacles to progressive successes at the level of the EU and the Council of Europe, such as the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, block the everyday functioning of EU institutions in domains crucial for SRHR, and launch some of the most ambitious anti-gender initiatives ever seen in Europe, which, in turn, have earned explicit

condemnation from European institutions. In conclusion, this new and fast-changing political landscape has significantly transformed gender and sexual politics at the European level and will do so for many years to come.

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The Russian Christian Right

Kristina Stoeckl

Key facts: State and church

The Russian Federation is a constitutional federal republic with strong presidential powers. Vladimir Putin, the current president, has been in power since 1999, with the exception of his period as prime minister between 2008 and 2012. The post-communist democratic transition of Russia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 remains incomplete, and while the country is a multi-party democracy on paper with regularly held elections, the political system is widely regarded as unfree and authoritarian (McFaul 2021; Horvath 2012). Prominent opposition politicians have either been murdered, like Boris Nemtsov, or sentenced to long prison terms, like Alexey Navalny. Political opposition in the country has been repressed, and critical media, NGOs, and individuals have become the target of laws that curtail freedom of expression in the name of *traditional values* and national security (Lipman 2016; Horvath 2016; Wilkinson 2014).

In terms of international politics, the Russian Federation was recognized as the successor state of the Soviet Union in 1991 and has since occupied positions of power inside the United Nations, where it is a member of the UN Security Council, and in other international bodies. Russia's annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in Ukraine in 2014, as well as the suspected involvement of Russian special forces in disinformation campaigns in Western Europe and the United States, have contributed to the growing isolation of Russia, which escalated into a full-blown military and geopolitical conflict in 2022 with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In full violation of international law, Russia attacked its neighboring country on the pretext of defending ethnic Russians and Orthodox Christians, with the declared goal of *denazifying* and *demilitarizing* Ukraine. Putin also justified this *special military operation* as necessary for protecting Russia from harmful Western influences: "they sought to destroy

our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within" (Putin 2022). The war over Ukrainian territory has led to heavy sanctions being imposed on Russia by Western countries, as well as the almost complete isolation of Russia from political, economic, cultural, and scientific cooperation with the West.

The country's largest religious denomination is Russian Orthodoxy, with 65–70% of the population identifying as Orthodox. Sociological surveys regularly show that a large share of Russians who identify with Orthodoxy do so for cultural and ethnic reasons, while only a much lower percentage (approximately 10%) actively practice religion and follow religious commandments in their personal lives. Other Christian denominations are much smaller and include the Old Believers, who separated from the Russian Orthodox Church in the seventeenth century, and Baptist and Evangelical groups, as well as Catholics and Lutherans (Pew Research Center 2017). Muslims constitute Russia's second largest religious group. Organized religion was repressed by Soviet authorities for most of the 20th century, and despite a revival of religious life after communism (Burgess 2017), the nonreligious still constitute around one-fifth of the population.

Among the religious groups recognized by the Russian state, the Russian Orthodox Church, headed by the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia (currently Patriarch Kirill), enjoys a privileged status in terms of church–state relations. Even though the Russian Federation is a secular state, the Russian Orthodox Church has managed to see its priorities reflected in political decisions and legislative proposals, particularly with regard to restrictions vis-à-vis other religions, the protection of religious feelings, and the curtailing of rights pertaining to family, sexual orientation, and gender identity. This has prompted observers to claim that the relations between the Kremlin and the Patriarch today still follow the *symphonic model* from the times of the Russian and Byzantine empires, when the worldly and spiritual powers acted in close coordination (Knox 2003). However, we must not overlook the fact that—rather than exhibiting a symphonic coordination—the Russian Orthodox Church is mostly dependent on the state, with the Church leadership standing at the receiving end of state policies. The Russian Orthodox Church is a centralized institution structured around the Patriarchate and ecclesiastical decision-making bodies called the Holy Synod and the Bishops' Council (Ponomarev 2017).

Besides this vertical structure, Russian Orthodoxy has a long tradition of charismatic leadership, where individual bishops and priests may exercise authority over believers alongside or even against the Church leadership. In the

post-Soviet Russian context, such charismatic leaders have come from both the liberal–democratic and fundamentalist camps, challenging the statist and traditionalist mainline positions defined by the Patriarch. While the Church remains internally divided between fundamentalist, liberal–democratic, and traditionalist currents (Papkova 2011; Stoeckl 2020b), the range of admissible opinions inside the Church has narrowed due to the Russian war against Ukraine, with the Patriarch of Moscow fully supporting Russia's *special military operation* as a necessary battle against Western influence and evil forces that attack *Holy Russia* (Riccardi-Swartz 2022; Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022b).

The Russian world: Two faces of one coin

The term *Russian world* (russkii mir) has been used by Russian nationalists and conservatives since the end of the Soviet Union to denote the unity of Russians beyond the borders of the Russian Federation (Suslov 2018). The people said to belong to the *Russian world* are variably defined by ethnicity, language, or cultural belonging. What was initially a concept for connecting a post-Soviet and global Russian diaspora to the homeland has become, since around 2008, a term with territorial, military, and religious connotations that lays claim to political and ecclesiastical control over Belarus, Ukraine, and other parts of neighboring countries. The *Russian world* in this latest sense is an imperial concept (Shnirelman 2019), which acquired dramatic topicality with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

From the perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church, the *Russian world* concept is a coin with two faces: conservative groups dominate inside the Church, but a distinction has to be made between those that operate in the tradition of *old-style* Orthodox fundamentalism, anti-Westernism, anti-modernism, and anti-ecumenism and those that project a *modern* face of Orthodox traditionalism to the world. *Fundamentalist* Russian conservatives define the Russian world in terms of history, territory, and ethnicity; *modern* Russian conservatives define the *Russian world* in terms of values. They position Russian Orthodoxy against LGBTIQ+ rights, against liberalism, and in defense of religious freedom and national sovereignty, and they define a special leadership position for Russia as *defender of traditional values* in the global culture wars (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022a). Their *Russian world* can include Mormons, Evangelicals, and Catholics, as long as they are friends of Russia's traditionalist

agenda. It is these last groups, which I have called the *Russian Christian Right* (Stoeckl 2020a), that are of most relevance in the context of this volume.

Fundamentalist groups inside the Church have been critical of the active international agenda of the Patriarch of Moscow (Shishkov 2017). Fundamentalists demanded that the Church abstain from interactions with anything and anyone Western; instead, the *Russian world* was seen as defining Russia's immediate linguistic, cultural, political, and religious spheres of interest (Richters 2013; Knorre and Zygmunt 2019). For several years, Patriarch Kirill tried to keep a balance between nationalism and internationalism—the two faces of Russian conservatism. The *Russian world* concept served both purposes. It created coherence internally, while fueling the outward-oriented Russian Christian Right that represented Russian soft power in the world (Laruelle 2015). The war against Ukraine has truncated the transnational ambitions of the Russian Christian Right and forced the Moscow Patriarchate back on a strict nationalist course. Consequently, the internationalist Russian Christian Right is destined to undergo a transformation and *rapprochement* with Orthodox fundamentalist and nationalist currents. The *Russian world* is bound to contract around a hardened core defined by the Russian language, territory under Russian military control, and Russian political and ecclesiastical power.

Russian Christian-Right actors

The Russian Christian Right consists of actors from the Church, politics, business, academia, and civil society. Rather than forming one coherent social movement, we can speak of a cluster of groups that pursue similar policy goals and strategically interact with one another. Besides clerics from inside the Russian Orthodox Church, such as the influential Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), the movement is made up of Orthodox Christian lay activists, politicians, and entrepreneurs. Two influential clerics who played a central ideological and institutional role for the Russian Christian Right were Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov (1951–2020), Chairman of the Patriarchal Commission for Family, Protection of Motherhood and Childhood, and Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin (1968–2020), long-time chairman of the Synodal Department for the Cooperation of Church and Society. From the sphere of politics, a central position is occupied by Elena Mizulina, chairman of the Duma Committee on Family, Women and Children Affairs. Wealthy entrepreneurs with connections to politics (oligarchs), such as Konstantin Malofeev and Vladimir Yakunin,

have acted as central sponsors of Christian-Right activism both inside Russia and abroad (Datta 2021). These actors were responsible for creating and defining the *modern* face of Russian traditionalism through the re-framing of Orthodox social teaching in terms of human rights and traditional values (Stoeckl 2014). Below, I offer three perspectives on this network of actors, examining its roots, its agenda, and its organizations.

Russian Christian-Right roots

A good point from which to start the study of the Russian Christian Right is the reconstruction of the timeline of the movement and its intellectual roots (Stoeckl 2020a; Uzlaner and Stoeckl 2018). In Russia, traditional family values were first politicized in the 1990s in the context of demographic anxieties over population decline. The initial promoters of the pro-family discourse were not actors from the Russian Orthodox Church but academics and state administrators who were influenced by Christian-Right ideas from the United States. Christian-Right activism in Russia did not really get off the ground until 2010–2012, when—with the election of Patriarch Kirill and the reelection of Vladimir Putin—two men came into positions of power who made *traditional values* a central ideological basis for their office. In the ensuing favorable political climate, Christian-Right activism in Russia and abroad soared: a World Congress of Families was held in Moscow in 2014, two more Congresses were held with Russian participation in Tbilisi (Georgia) and Chisinau (Moldova) in 2016 and 2018, the Global Homeschooling Exchange Conference took place in Saint Petersburg in 2018, the Moscow Patriarchate co-organized the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians with the Billy Graham Evangelical Association in 2017, and the Russian branch of CitizenGo set up its own website for online petitions such as “Let’s stop sex education and abortion at the UN” and “Protect the rights of parents in the new Code of Administrative Offenses of the Russian Federation.”¹ What is particularly evident from this series of events and activities is that the Russian Christian Right has adopted the strategies and discourse of Western Christian-Right groups: online peti-

1 These are just two of a long series of petitions published on the website citizengo.org/ru. CitizenGo is a conservative Spanish NGO with branches in many countries. As of July 2022, the Russian website is no longer online.

tioning, international congresses, and transnational networking (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022a).

The Russian Christian Right builds on—and itself actively constructs—the narrative that Russia is a bulwark of Christian values throughout the world, with a special role in the global struggle for traditional family values. Alexey Komov, the leader of the Russian section of the World Congress of Families, has become an ambassador for this narrative, repeating versions of it on various public occasions.² Bolshevism, the narrative goes, was a Western imposition on the Russian people aimed at destroying family values and national unity by introducing feminism and the right to abortion. The Russian people were saved by Stalin, who repressed the progressive Trotskyists and reinstalled patriarchal authority and patriotic values. “Stalin,” Komov says, “brought down a destructive revolutionary wave. For this reason, the ideologists of Marxism moved to the West” (AVA NEWS 2014). In the West, the narrative continues, the Trotskyists embraced Antonio Gramsci’s program of *a long march through the institutions* and are now attempting to destroy the traditional family through popular culture and the dissemination of progressive ideas, particularly the idea of gender. “This happened,” Komov explains, “largely due to the activities of the so-called Frankfurt School of Neo-Marxism, which operated in the 1920s–1940s. The theorists of this school (Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer, Fromm) combined the ideas of Marx with Freudianism and gave rise to the concept of the sexual revolution of the 1960s” (AVA NEWS 2014). Western democracies, and international bodies such as the United Nations and the European Union, as well as the philanthropists George Soros and Bill and Melinda Gates, are cited by Komov as the agents of this strategy. He cautions his audience against considering the West as an ideological monolith: “In the West, there are liberals and conservatives. Western liberals are socialists and atheists, while conservatives advocate private initiative and Christian and family values” (AVA NEWS 2014). He ends as follows: “Russia has a real historical chance to become the universally recognised leader of this nascent ‘pro-family’ movement and regain ideological and moral leadership in geopolitics” (AVA NEWS 2014).

This highly problematic rewriting of the ideological history of the 20th century combines a series of Christian-Right ideas—elaborated in the context of the American culture wars—with a positive evaluation of Stalin and the post-

2 I reconstruct this narrative based on the following: field notes taken during the World Congress of Families in Tbilisi (2016); AVA NEWS (2014); Komov (2015).

Stalinist period. Joseph Vissiaronovich Stalin (1878–1953), just to be very clear, was the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1922 until his death. He was responsible for the *great purges* of the 1930s that cost the lives of many hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens; he was in charge when the Soviet Union defeated Nazi-Germany; and he brought large parts of Central and Eastern Europe under communist rule after World War II. Stalin was a communist. So how can a Russian conservative of the 21st century be, at one and the same time, anti-communist and pro-Stalin? The *trick* is the identification of communism exclusively with what American conservatives refer to as *cultural Marxism*. In the eyes of radical Russian conservatives, Stalin is, against all odds, *saved* from the charges of atheism and cultural Marxism because he reopened the churches during the war and persecuted internationalist progressive Marxists (Trotskyists). In this way, a Russian conservative like Komov can describe himself as anti-communist and pro-Stalinist at one and the same time.

Vis-à-vis a Russian audience, which is already used to a positive public image of Stalin from the annual *victory celebrations* (celebrated on May 9th and marking the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany), this highly problematic rewriting of the ideological history of the 20th century is a powerful narrative because it presents Russia as the true winner of Cold War history. The Soviet Union may have lost the Cold War, but—just as Russia won the Second World War—it will win the culture wars. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has added a new chapter to this odd narrative: Russia continues to see itself as threatened by *Nazis* (in Ukraine and in the West) and is fighting a war against the *decadent* West that, in the tradition of cultural Marxism, defends LGBTQIA+ rights and secularism (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022b).

Russian Christian-Right Agenda

A second way to approach the Russian Christian Right is to focus on the topics of the conservative agenda: anti-abortion, anti-gender rights, and opposition to legislation on domestic violence and juvenile justice (*juvenile justice* is the term by which Russian conservatives oppose social welfare and child protection services; Höjdestrand 2016). All of these topics are usually subsumed under the concept of *traditional values*. Russian politics are generally interpreted as having taken a conservative turn around 2012 (Stepanova 2015; Horvath 2016; Wilkinson 2014). Several laws that were passed in the name

of safeguarding traditional values (against *gay propaganda*, against offending religious feelings, and against extremism) effectively aimed at limiting freedom of expression (Uzlaner and Stoeckl 2019). In 2020, traditional values were included among the guiding principles of the Russian state in a constitutional amendment. Among the justifications for the invasion of Ukraine, Patriarch Kirill and President Putin cited *traditional values* that needed to be defended against Western liberal influences. Seen from the perspective of the traditional values agenda, the Russian Christian Right appears as a coherent and powerful ideological movement that comprises the Church, the state administration, and large parts of civil society.

Russian Christian-Right organizations

Another way to approach the Russian Christian Right is the analysis of the organizations that make it up. The organizational perspective reveals that the Russian Christian Right is not one coherent movement but is rather made up of different component parts that do not always work together. The Russian Christian Right consists, principally, of NGOs, foundations, and Church structures. The most representative NGOs are the Russian sections of the World Congress of Families and CitizenGo (two transnational Christian-Right organizations that play an influential role in several countries included in this volume), as well as the anti-abortion NGOs Sanctity of Motherhood and Life. Three foundations from the business sector act as sponsors for these organizations: the Saint Basil the Great Foundation (directed by Konstantin Malofeev), the Saint Andrew the First-Called Foundation (directed by Vladimir Yakunin), and the Saint Gregory the Theologian Charitable Foundation.

In Russia, as in other countries, conservative groups engage in *astrourfing*, creating multiple NGOs, think tanks, and foundations, frequently with identical or almost identical boards of directors, in order to enhance their visibility. All the above-mentioned NGOs and foundations are connected to different bodies inside the Moscow Patriarchate: Saint Basil and Saint Andrew have co-sponsored events with the Patriarchal Commission for Family, Konstantin Malofeev, the head of Saint Basil, is the vice-director of the World Russian People's Council, and Saint Andrew provides services to the Department of External Church Relations and the Graduate School of the Moscow Patriarchate. The institutional and organizational perspective on the Russian Christian Right highlights the existence of different factions inside the movement,

some of which are closer to the Kremlin and some closer to the Patriarchate, while others try to keep an academic, scholarly, and therefore apparently more *neutral* image.

The Russo–Ukrainian War has brought the cracks inside the institutional edifice of the Russian Christian Right into the open. The influential Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), the key person for connecting the Moscow Patriarchate with conservative Christian actors in the West, was removed from his position as Head of the External Relations Department. This removal is indicative of a hardened conservatism gaining the upper hand inside the Church, but the fact that he was relocated to the Western European Eparchy of Budapest shows that the Moscow Patriarchate has not given up completely on promoting its traditional values agenda in the West (Kelaidis 2022). As Western public opinion vis-à-vis Russia changes, Western Christian-Right groups have obfuscated their Russian connections. For example, CitizenGo has taken down its Russian website. Inside Russia, the invasion has been supported by the oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, who occupies the position of a hinge between the two faces of the *Russian world*: he has financed both ultra-nationalists in Eastern Ukraine and international Christian-Right activities vis-à-vis the West. The war of 2022 has, in short, changed the conditions for the Russian Christian Right, both vis-à-vis Western partners and inside Russia, and the long-term effects on the institutions that have hitherto made up this ideological movement remain open.

The future of the Russian Christian Right

The final question to be addressed is regarding the future audiences and strategies of the Russian Christian Right inside and outside Russia in the face of the Russo–Ukrainian War. As the reconstruction of the two faces of Russian conservatism has made clear, the target audience of the Russian Christian-Right narrative has been not only Russians but also Christian conservatives outside Russia. Inside Russia, Russian Christian-Right groups have enjoyed political and clerical support. In particular, Konstantin Malofeev has expanded his role inside the ecclesiastical structures as vice-director of the World Russian People's Council. His influence on politics is made evident by the inclusion of his proposal to define marriage as being between a man and a woman in the constitutional amendment of 2020. He has also created various media channels centered on transmitting the conservative agenda (e.g., the internet channel tsargrad.tv and the think tank katehon.com) and supported the

cause of pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine since 2014. The Russian Christian Right has put its stamp on Russian politics over the last 10 years, and the war against Ukraine in 2022 has sealed Russia's political path as an authoritarian and repressive regime internally and an antagonist of the West externally. However, despite the fact that Russian Christian-Right groups have enjoyed political and clerical support during the last decade and despite the fact that *traditional values* have become a kind of state ideology, Christian-Right ideas have not become the societal mainstream in Russia. Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud have recently demonstrated that despite the high nominal adherence to Orthodoxy, the Russian population is not really turning more conservative in their individual moral and everyday life choices (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2021). Russian Christian conservatism is not a bottom-up but rather a top-down phenomenon.

With regard to the Western target of Russian Christian-Right activism, the future of Russia as a transnational *defender of traditional values* is open. For years, the Russian Christian Right invited conservatives in the West to look at their own (Western) history as a form of communism in disguise and subsequently turn to Russia as their savior. The target audience for this particular narrative included politicians and publics in former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in Western Europe and the US. They should be convinced of the fact that the European Union is a new type of *Marxist project*, which, just like communism in the past, threatens their national sovereignty. Chapters in this book, research (e.g., Riccardi-Swartz 2019), and not least our own findings from interviews with American Christian-Right actors (Dreher 2020; Carlson 2020; Reno 2020) confirm that this strategy was quite successful and that Western conservatives and politicians and publics in Central and Eastern Europe had indeed been turning to Russia for inspiration and leadership. Russia under Vladimir Putin had become a major point of reference for the European Christian Right and for conservatives worldwide.

However, the decision to attack Ukraine may have put an end to Russia's soft-power success story. Christian-Right politicians and activists in the West have not gone along with turning the culture wars into a real war and have, with very few exceptions, not supported the Russian position. Russia's position inside the global culture wars has therefore been significantly weakened. However, the overall context of a global ideological polarization between conservatism and liberalism will not disappear, nor will the movements that have been created around this divide in other countries cease to be active. The European Christian Right—the topic of this book—has been shaped by Russian

input for many years. Even if the Russian component loses the central position it has hitherto occupied, the overall ideological agenda and political projects are likely to remain in place.

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The Diverse Catholic Right in Poland

Anja Hennig

Introduction

Many people associate Poland with Catholicism. The cultural relevance of the Catholic tradition seems as undisputed as the *moral authority* of the Polish Catholic Church (Grzymała-Busse 2015). However, as the length of this chapter shows, the diverse Polish Catholic landscape to which the liberal Catholic traditions belong also has a number of ties to illiberal expressions and appropriations of Catholicism. The central reasons for this are the legacy of national Catholicism from Poland's independence after World War I, the legacy of strict Catholic moral conservatism from the teachings of the Polish Pope John Paul II, who at the same time stood for the liberation from the communist regime, and the legacy of EU enlargement based on political, economic, and socio-cultural asymmetries (Ayoub 2016). The first feeds an overall exclusivist and nationalist understanding of Catholic Polish identity. The second is enshrined in the dogmatic pro-life or better anti-abortion and anti-LGBTIQA+ positions of the Church hierarchy and related actors. The latter serves as a source for an anti-colonial frame that sees progressive rights politics, particularly regarding gender-sensitive anti-discrimination and LGBTIQA+ rights, as imposed by a colonizing Brussels (Graff and Korolczuk 2018) and as the *other* of a (desired) Europe based on Christian values. The legacy of the harsh neoliberal transformations after 1989 functions as a demand-side context that can motivate people to vote for the protective social politics of the right-wing Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość; PiS), which has been in government since 2015 (Corman 2019).

This chapter first presents country-specific insights about the political system, the role of national Catholicism, and the religious landscape. The main part is dedicated to a selection of very influential right-wing actors with Catholic affiliations. The main selection criterion has been their attempt to

directly or indirectly influence political decision making for illiberal means. Political actors are only mentioned as relevant allies for these civic actors. While there are several ideological overlaps, especially concerning national Catholicism, the actors differ in regard to their main issues and fields of agency: the Radio Marya network addresses, in particular, the elderly, the pro-life movement focuses on abortion, *Ordo Iuris* targets the legal field, while the ultra-nationalist Catholic camp uses Catholicism in a more utilitarian way.

1. Country-specific background information

1.1. Political landscape

In 1990, Poland gained independence as a democratic republic that replaced the communist Polish People's Republic following the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Poland's political system combines parliamentarianism and presidentialism. The parliament has two chambers: The Sejm is the relevant legislative chamber where bills are elaborated and passed. The Senat can ask the Sejm for amendments before submitting bills to the president (Ziemer 2009). Over the last decades, the Polish party system has become strongly concentrated. For about 15 years, it has been dominated by two opposing camps: the camp around the center-left and economically (neo)liberal Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*; PO) and the camp around the governing right-wing nationalist but socioeconomically left-wing PiS (Niedermeyer 2020). PiS has been governing with a majority for the last two legislative terms. This has enabled this authoritarian-minded party to introduce political and structural changes that have affected the independent functioning of law (e.g., the replacement of lawyers and justices, including in the Constitutional Court), restricted free media, and attacked individual and minority rights (e.g., the harsh restriction of already strict abortion rules and the rejection of LGBTIQ+ rights). Both the judiciary reforms and the so-called LGBT-free zones (see below) have led to EU sanction procedures (De Vries and Herbert 2020). Left-wing NGOs and intellectual journals have become increasingly excluded from public funding, while conservative journals have received support (Mrozek 2020). The current political situation is a highly relevant context for the analysis of how illiberal political and Catholic actors interact and cooperate (Graff and Korolczuk 2021).

It is interesting to note that the radical right has become more diverse over time. Between 2001 and 2007, the League of Polish Families (*Liga Polskich*

Rodziń; LPR), a populist radical right-wing party with conservative values and antisemitic positions, had already gained representation in the Polish Parliament (2006–2007 in coalition with PiS; Downes and Wong 2021). With the parliamentary elections of 2015, Poland faced a new wave of extreme-right parties. Rock star Paweł Kukiz, a right-wing *anti-system* candidate, won one-fifth of the vote in the 2015 presidential election. Later that year, his Kukiz'15 grouping emerged as the third largest in the parliamentary election, securing 9% of the votes (Downes and Wong 2021).

At the beginning of 2019, the radical right-wing Confederation (Konfederacja) grouping was constituted as “a political conglomerate comprising an eclectic mix of economic libertarians clustered around the veteran political eccentric Janusz Korwin-Mikke and radical nationalists from the National Movement (Ruch Narodowy – RN) party” (Szczurbiak 2020). The Confederation first appeared in the 2019 European Parliament elections, announcing that “we don’t want Jews, homosexuals, abortion, taxes and the EU” (Szczurbiak 2020). In 2019, the Confederation won 11 seats in the Sejm. Unlike PiS, the Confederation does not enjoy especially close ties with the hierarchy of Poland’s influential Catholic Church, and it is a strongly socially conservative grouping. Kukiz is also a member of the Confederation, and 24% of Kukiz’15’s 2015 supporters voted for the Confederation in 2019. The Confederation attracted around 20% of younger voters aged under 30, two-thirds of its voters were male, and more than three-fifths lived in smaller towns and rural areas (Szczurbiak 2020). PiS voters, by contrast, are similar to a large number of radical-right voters in Europe in that they are more likely to hold high levels of anti-immigrant attitudes. Moreover, higher levels of religiosity and anti-LGBTIQ+ attitudes make support for PiS more likely (Downes and Wong 2021).

1.2. Religious landscape

The Roman Catholic Church is the biggest church in Poland. The overwhelming majority (around 87%) of the population have been baptized as Roman Catholics. The Catholic Church also includes the Uniate Church (Greek Catholic), with a congregation of approximately 55,000 members. The Orthodox Church has a congregation of 550,000 members (1.4% of the population). There are about 30 Protestant Churches, with a total congregation of more than 150,000 members (0.4% of the population), the biggest of which is the Evangelical Augsburg Church (more than 61,000 members). There also exist

about 20 churches or other religious congregations with from several dozen to more than 5,000 followers, in addition to the Jehovah's Witnesses with 125,000 members (European Commission 2022). The Muslim League counts around 35,000 members (Statistics Poland 2020), while fewer than 10,000 Jews live in Poland, a country once known as the center of European Jewish life. On the eve of the Second World War, Poland was home to over three million Jews, making it the second-largest Jewish community in the world at that time (World Jewish Congress n.d.). Whereas Catholicism still dominates the religious landscape, the moral authority of the Polish Catholic Church is decreasing, especially among the younger generation (Kozłowska 2022).

1.3. Catholic identity and Church-state relations

That Catholicism has been and remains a strong marker of cultural and national identity has to do with the role of the Catholic Church, especially during geopolitical confrontations. Christianization in Poland began in 966. While until today, mythical narrations remember Poland as a Catholic nation, the Polish-Lithuanian Union from the 16th to 18th centuries and divided Poland later on were multi-ethnic, with the largest Jewish communities in Europe, as well as Orthodox and Protestant Christians and Muslim Tartars. The imagination of Poland as a Catholic nation and bastion of European Christianity consolidated when Protestant Prussia, Catholic Austria, and Orthodox Russia divided Poland in 1772, 1792, and 1795 as a result of warfare. The Catholic Church remained the central institution that kept or created a sense of national unity against the external enemies. This is part of the cultural memory that marks the relationship between Church and state up to today (Zubrzycki 2006, 41–44; Martin 1978, 42).

The particular authority of the Catholic Church is also closely linked to its oppositional role during communism, when the Polish Pope John Paul II was a charismatic and internationally recognized authority who supported the anti-communist labor movement *Solidarność* (Casanova 1994). John Paul II, however, fought not only for democracy but also against what he coined, in the light of the increasing acceptance of female self-determination and the use of contraception measures, a “civilization of death” (Hennig 2012; Ayoub 2016). For today's Catholic moral conservatism, the Polish pope is still a major point of reference and, among parts of the Church hierarchy and the government, a greater authority than the current Pope Francis (Hennig and Meyer Resende 2021).

According to the Polish Constitution, all religious communities are equally treated by the constitution, and no one enjoys privileges (Art. 25). Religious education can be offered at schools by every religious community, if demanded. The majority of children, however, still take part in Catholic education lessons. A privileged position vis-à-vis other religious communities also created the Concordat between Poland and the Vatican in 1993, as well as a joint commission between Church and state. This legacy from communist times provides the Church hierarchy with privileged access to political power. In sum, we can say that the relationship between Church and state is marked by a culture of cooperation that allows for informal contacts across the major parties (Hennig 2012, 220–221). Political anticlericalism has been institutionalized only recently, with the foundation of leftist parties such as the former Palikot Movement and the now merged young parties Together (Razem) and Spring (Wiosna) (Chwedoruk 2019).

1.4. The polarized Catholic landscape

The Polish Catholic landscape has become more diverse since 1989 (Narkowicz 2018) and more polarized since PiS came to power in 2015. We can speak of three major factions. First, there is the small group of liberal priests and bishops who stand in the tradition of the liberal intellectual Catholics who opposed communism. They are militant about liberal values and democracy and are critical of the blurring of the lines of separation between Church and state. The majority of the bishops belong to the second faction, which is comprised of the centrist conservative milieu, ranging from the very conservative Stanisław Gądecki, head of the Polish Bishops' Conference, to more moderate members such as Wojciech Polak, head of the Polish Catholic Church (Hennig and Meyer Resende 2021). When still in office, the liberal conservative bishop Tadeusz Pieronek, for instance, accused the alliance between the Church and PiS of being the “greatest danger for the Church” (Matern 2017). The third group, a powerful and visible minority of nationalist and fundamentalist Catholics, is at the center of this chapter. It includes priests, some members of the hierarchy, and prominent Catholic actors such as the Radio Maryja movement, the Institute for Legal Culture *Ordo Iuris*, and the pro-life movement.

The ideological divisions cut across all levels of the Church, including the ecclesiastic elite, the Catholic organizations, and priests in local communities. At the local level, priests preach their own, sometimes illiberal, visions on moral issues and migration (Scisłowska 2017). Moreover, the boundaries

between the three groups vary according to policy issues. In moral–political questions regarding private and family civil law, such as abortion and LGB-TIQA+ rights, the differences are less sharp than those regarding asylum policies (Hennig 2016).

1.5. National Catholicism and party politics

National Catholicism is a central source for Catholic right-wing and extreme-right organizations (Meyer Resende 2014). Similar to Catholic fundamentalism, this closed, nationalist interpretation of Catholicism rejects cultural diversity, the idea that religion is a private matter, freedom and equality rights, and individual autonomy as features associated with liberal modernity. A major ideological point of reference is Roman Dmowski, the leading politician of the Polish National Democratic Party (Endecja), which was active from the end of the 19th century to the 1920s. Advocating an expansive Polish politics toward the West, Dmowski claimed with the formula “Polak to Katolik” that only a Catholic made a good Pole (Minkenberg 2018). In the 1990s, the small but influential Christian National Union (ZChN) party insisted that Catholic dogma must be the foundation of Poland and of all ethnic Poles. This proclamation of an exclusivist Catholic Polishness chimed with the recurrent metaphor of Poland as the *Christ of Nations*, a romantic conception of national identity that emphasizes Poland’s suffering at the hands of other countries and its “redemptive rebirth in 1918” (Stanley 2016, 119).

National Catholicism is also present in the rhetoric of the governing PiS party. Founded at the end of 2001, PiS at first seemed to take a neutral stance on the politics of religion. Only in 2005 did the party issue a document entitled “A Catholic Poland in a Christian Europe,” which committed the party to religious values and the defense of Poland’s Catholic identity. Catholic values, accordingly, should determine the party’s activities in all dimensions (Stanley 2016, 119). After the 2007 elections, PiS was also able to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the LPR as the representative of alienated religious traditionalists (Stanley 2016, 111).

The national Catholicism of PiS finds expression only in the public utterances of PiS politicians and in symbolic contexts such as the national celebrations at the sanctuary of Jasna Góra. In this vein, PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński considers the Christian value system as the only contemporary ethical system acceptable in Poland (Hall 2017). Notwithstanding its apparently secular outlook, PiS’s election programs contain several sections acknowl-

edging the teachings of the Catholic Church as a central element of Polish tradition, Polish patriotism, and Polish political identity (PiS 2019, 14). The Church and its moral teachings are also considered and expected to be the most relevant and undisputed moral voice. Therefore, PiS wants to keep the “specific status of the Catholic Church within our national and state life” and to defend it “against unjust attacks.” The program emphasizes Christianity as a basic historical and cultural experience and a core element of the universal value system (PiS 2014, 10).

2. The Catholic right in Poland: Actors and issues

2.1. Church members

The Church hierarchy, represented by the Polish Bishops’ Conference (CEP), does not consider itself as an actor with political ambitions. Before elections, however, the CEP and single congregations publish indirect voting recommendations promoting those who, for example, respect the right to life (Hennig 2017). Regarding abortion and LGBTIQ+ rights, the CEP positions itself in public communiqués against any relaxation of the restrictive abortion rules. The bishops, for instance, immediately thanked the Constitutional Court for ruling the current abortion law as unconstitutional (Polish Bishops’ Conference 2020b), whereby the lawyers opened the door for its *de facto* total ban (see below). Another recent example was the morally–theologically grounded opposition to a Warsaw LGBTIQ+ Rights and Diversity Charter (Polish Bishops’ Conference 2020a).

Some clerics are known for their particular radical positions. The most prominent of the bishops of national Catholic persuasion are bishop Edward Frankowski, the archbishop of Kraków Marek Jędraszewski, and the archbishop of Gdańsk Sławoj Leszek Głódz. During the asylum political crisis, these prelates “adapted the fear of Islam to the historically constructed notion of Poland as a bulwark of Christianity” (Pędziwiatr 2018, 471). While, with the exception of Głódz, they remained in office, the radical young priest Fr. Jacek Międlar, who supported the extreme right during demonstrations with nationalist and xenophobic sermons, was suspended (*Dziennik* 2016). No public condemnation by the Church hierarchy was faced by archbishop Marek Jędraszewski, who in 2019 publicly called the LGBTIQ+ community organizing a Pride demonstration a plague worse than the Red Army, right

after the unprecedented violence against the first LGBTIQA+ Pride (in Polish “Equality Parade”, *parada równości*) in Białystok. The only outraged Catholic reaction to the sermon came from the lay Catholic activist Ignacy Dudkiewicz (Dudkiewicz 2019).

Another Representative of the nationalist and illiberal branch of closed Catholicism is the Radio Maryja movement around the broadcast station centering on the business-minded priest Pater Rydzyk. In 1991, Rydzyk founded Radio Maryja in Toruń. In 1997–1998, the Catholic nationalist daily newspaper *Nasz Dziennik* appeared, followed in 2003 by the TV station Trwam and the College for Social and Media Culture. Within this socially and politically influential communication network, Radio Maryja regularly broadcasts prayers, catechisms, and masses (Krzemiński 2017). The Radio Maryja movement has enjoyed substantial support from within the Church hierarchy, even if the controversial nature of the movement dissuaded some more moderate clerics from voicing their approval openly (Stanley 2016, 116).

In the political realm, the media outlets actively support the current right-wing government, helping it advance a religiously based national ideology. PiS, in turn, has, according to OKO Press, been subsidizing the network with “several hundred million of Złoty” (Mikolajewska 2019), and cabinet ministers, even Jarosław Kaszyński, often appear on the Radio Maryja station. There is probably no other Catholic actor so close to political power, as it is seen as a suitable medium for addressing potential voters (Narkowicz 2018, 362). In the realm of the Church hierarchy, despite clear ideological differences, only some liberal priests and a minority among the mainstream conservative bishops have so far openly opposed Rydzyk (Wiśniewski 2018).

The constant tone of Radio Maryja is Catholic nationalist, with a changing emphasis on controversial issues over time. In the 1990s, the station was known for its antisemitic conspiracy narratives and Euroscepticism. Polish EU membership was partly associated with a new German threat (Germans buying out Polish land) and a political *dictatorship*. The opening of negotiation talks in 2005 for EU-candidate Turkey joining the EU allowed Radio Maryja to talk about *Eurabia* (Minkenberg and Hennig 2011, 49). After Poland became an EU member, the contributions loudly defended John Paul II’s fight against a *culture of death* and of *value pluralism*. In these years, Radio Maryja successfully mobilized and financed bus shuttles for pro-life demonstrations (Hennig 2012, 137).

With the spread of the *gender-ideology narrative* since about 2012, Radio Maryja has also been inviting guests who, as representatives of *Ordo Iuris*, warn parents about the early sexualization of their children and lobby for re-

jecting the Istanbul Convention with its “Marxist gender-ideological doctrine” (Radio Maryja 2021). The asylum political crisis also pushed Islamophobia onto the agenda. The station, for instance, mobilized for and broadcast directly from the so-called rosary prayer event along the Polish border, which was internationally seen as a symbolic action against Muslim migration (Hennig and Meyer Resende 2021). A feeling of unity and mental support in times of rapid changes helps the electronic Church successfully mobilize for nationalism and against gender and Islam, while its support for the governing PiS party creates a win–win-situation for both sides (Mechtenberg 2018).

Radio Maryja presents itself as the “Catholic voice in your house” (see the Radio Maryja website) and extensively applies, unlike other right-wing Christian organizations in Europe, religious language. It broadcasts Marian prayers, masses, and relevant religious celebrations, aiming at an older and rural audience that feels left behind (Hinz 2021). People can have the feeling of being part of a huge Catholic community without even going to Church. The audience in mind is especially the older rural generation that experienced the breakdown of communism more often as a loss than as a release (Rautenberg 2005, 294). This generation, however, is rapidly shrinking, and Radio Maryja is trying to attract a younger audience. This explains the apparently less ideological and more business-oriented College of Social and Media Studies in Toruń, which addresses young people seeking a media career (see the Radio Maryja website).

2.2. Catholic-associated anti-abortion and anti-gender networks

It was the Polish Catholic Church that, at the end of the 1980s, used the political transformations to lobby for restricting the Polish permissive abortion law implemented in 1956. In accordance with the anti-abortion agenda and following the teachings of John Paul II, these activities led to the establishment of a vivid web of life-protecting organizations (Hennig 2012). Today, the web of partly interlinked foundations, organizations, and websites is broad. The following section depicts two partly interconnected major networks with explicit political ambitions and Catholic connections.

One of the oldest pro-life networks, founded in 1992 by Alina Grzeskowiak, the former president of the Polish Senat, is the Polish Federation of Life-Protecting Movements (Polska Federacja Ruchów Obrony Życia; PFROŻ). The organization was created to defend the position of the Catholic Church within debates on the abortion law. In addition, it aimed from the beginning to strengthen the position of women in pro-life and family issues (Staśkiewicz

2018, 74–75). PFROŻ follows the rhetoric of Pope John Paul II in claiming to build “the civilization of life and love.” They have offers for pregnant women and educate regarding “responsible parenthood” and “pro-family policy.” By contrast, they oppose attempts to introduce what they call “irresponsible sexual education” and “pornography flooding Polish society” (see the PFROŻ website, run by the One of Us [Jeden z Nas] foundation, which in 2014 was a founding member of the transnational pro-life network One of Us, located in Brussels).

According to its self-description, PFROŻ embraces 136 pro-life and family movements and organizations. These include prayer movements, movements offering direct help to pregnant mothers, single mothers, and large families, and movements focusing on education. The official press organ of PFROŻ is the magazine *Service to Life and Family*, published by the Voice for Life (Głos dla Życia) foundation in Poznań. The central aims include “persuading and influencing undecided politicians to speak up for life” and transforming “social awareness towards the recognition of a state-guaranteed right to life” (see the PFROŻ website). The president of PFROŻ, Paweł Wosicki, is also a member of the council of the major umbrella organization, the Christian Social Congress.

Founded in 2015, the Christian Social Congress (CSC) is a network of relevant organizations led by its founder Marek Jurek (Sejm president 2005–2007 and MEP 2014–2019). The CSC thus has direct links to political actors, such as right-wing politicians from PiS and the extreme-right Kukiz'15 party. Its members include a number of foundations and NGOs, such as One of Us, Ordo Iuris, and the above-mentioned Polish Federation of Life-Protecting Movements, as well as parliamentarians from the radical right. A yearly congress invites various pro-life organizations and politicians to “discuss forms of political and social representation of the Catholic agenda in our country” (see the CSC website). The CSC is primarily known for organizing the annual Polish March for Life, an anti-abortion demonstration also existing in other parts of the world. This event has support from the political right and the Polish episcopate, which, in 2021, took over the patronage of the event and blessed the march in Warsaw (see the CSC website).

Just before the parliamentary elections of 2019, Jurek founded the Christian Social Congress Electoral Action Committee, primarily aimed at setting their rejection of the *gender-based* Istanbul Convention on the public agenda. Support came from Marek Kubiak, who in 2020 was the candidate for mayor of Warsaw of the small radical right-wing Federacja (merged with Konfederacja in 2020; see the Marek Kubiak website). Together with two other orga-

nizations (including Family and Life, which is presented below), they recommended for the parliamentary elections about 100 regional politicians, including some from PiS, a party that would “emotionally and financially support Catholics” (*Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* 2018).

A politically very influential member of the Christian Social Congress with direct access to political power is Kaja Godek, a devoted Catholic and mother of a daughter with Down syndrome, who founded in 2012 the pro-life and pro-family NGO Life and Family (*Życie i Rodzina*). Godek spoke to the Polish Parliament three times to promote her pro-life and anti-gender initiatives: In 2013, she presented her first initiative for a total ban of abortion. The 400,000 collected signatures in favor obliged the Parliament to consider the citizens’ bill, but it was rejected by the ruling center-left PO government. In 2016, Godek’s new attempt to ban and punish abortion by law was supported by PiS and initially adopted in the Parliament. But after nationwide protests by more than 100,000 Polish women, the Parliament again rejected the already adopted law (Hassel 2021). Her third attempt, the 2017 civic project Stop Abortion, was supported by parliamentarians from PiS, *Konfederacja*, and the Polish Peasant Party (PSL)—Kukiz alliance, who in December 2019 asked the Constitutional Court—then under the PiS-controlled presidency of Julia Przyłębska—to prove the constitutionality of the current abortion law. In October 2020, the Court ruled (and then confirmed in January 2021) that the abortion law, which had been in force since 1993, was unconstitutional. On the day of the decision, Godek invited the public to a prayer in front of the Court building. Abortion is now restricted even under the conditions of rape and malformation of the embryo. It is only allowed if the woman is in physical danger (Krawczyk 2020).

Only a month later, Godek presented her civic project Stop LGBT in the Sejm, seeking to ban gay Pride marches on Polish streets, halt the introduction of same-sex marriage and adoption rights for same-sex couples, and prevent the involvement of sex education activists in Polish schools. In the first round of the vote, the Sejm voted against the bill, but with only a tiny minority. A commission is now deciding about further steps (RP online 2021b). In November 2022, the Warsaw-Downtown District Court has ordered the prosecutor’s office to investigate whether the “Stop LGBT” project promotes values and actions typical of totalitarian regimes (RP online 2022). To campaign against abortion and LGBTIQ+ rights in the European Parliament, in 2019, Godek also formed an electoral alliance with the camp of the right-wing nationalist confederation in Poland, which she has since left (Hassel 2021).

Marek Jurek's Christian Social Congress's agenda is framed more broadly, placing the fight against abortion and gender-based politics within the idea of a mission for Europe. To that end, the reference to Christianity is used more in an identity, political, or civilizational (Brubaker 2017) sense than in a spiritual–religious sense, as the main CSC slogan “For Poland and a Christian Civilization” reveals. According to Jurek, Poland will not survive as an independent and sovereign state if Europe rejects “our values.” Liberal abortion rules would be a central example of such a rejection. Another core issue for Jurek is “the Istanbul Gender Convention” mentioned earlier, which would strike “at the foundations of society” (Jurek 2018). Opponents of this international treaty against domestic violence toward women particularly criticize the document because it defines gender as a sociocultural category, which they frame as an expression of *gender ideology* that would deny the difference between biological sexes (Kováts 2020). With the narrative of defending Christian values, Jurek and the CSC, together with Ordo Iuris, started in July 2020 to collect signatures for a civic project aiming at replacing the international treaty with an International Convention on Family Rights (Wysokie Obczasy 2020). They submitted the civic project Yes to Family, No to Gender to the Sejm, where it was controversially debated in spring 2021 and sent to a commission (see below; Chrzczonowicz 2021a). On the initiative of MEP Marek Jurek, a draft of the Convention on the Rights of the Family was also presented in the European Parliament on July 27, 2020 (Kriszán and Roggeband 2021). Already in 2007, when Jurek was president of the Polish Sejm, he had tried with partners from the LPR and PiS to enshrine a total ban of abortion into the Polish Constitution. This was at a time when the Polish bishops still remained silent. Given their uncompromising anti-abortion position, some PiS members consider Jurek and Godek as problematic allies (RP Online 2018).

The Poznań Charter of the Christian Social Congress from 2016, published on the occasion of the 1,050th anniversary of the *Polish baptism*, resembles the interconnection between a strong European and national Catholic identity based on a strict pro-life and anti-gender position. Close to ethnopluralism, it identifies a crisis in Europe that will disintegrate the “Christian nations of Europe” and lead to an “uncontrolled mass immigration” and a “progressive Islamization of many western European countries” (Christian Social Congress n.d.). The Euro-Christian frame is thus a way to create a political representation of Catholic voices in Poland and the EU against non-Christians, justifying the “protection of life” and the traditional heterosexual as part of a civilizational project and Poland's mission in Europe (Biskupski 2017).

The above-mentioned organizations PFROŻ and the CSC are linked to the European pro-life/pro-family movement One of Us (Jeden z Nas). They are also particularly well connected to supporters of the counter-project to the Istanbul Convention and, through Marek Jurek and his marginal party Prawica Rzeczypospolitej (see the Prawica Rzeczypospolitej website), to the traditionalist European Christian Movement at the EU level (see the European Christian Political Movement website).

2.3. Legal Litigation: Ordo Iuris

A relatively new and politically very powerful Catholic player is the Institute for Legal Culture Ordo Iuris. In response to the diffusion of norms based on liberal freedom principles, the think tank defends the idea of a morality stemming from a *natural law* in order to fight against reproductive and sexual rights and for a traditional and exclusionary understanding of the family, as well as in support of the conscience clause (Anonymous 2020, 10).

Klementyna Suchanow describes in her 2020 book *To jest wojna* (This Is War) how Ordo Iuris was founded in 2013 with the participation of individuals from the Piotr Skarga Foundation (on behalf of the associated Institute for Societal and Religious Education Father Piotr Skarga), the Polish representative of the Brazil-originating fundamentalist Catholic network Tradition, Family, Property (TFP), which is considered a religious sect in several countries (Suchanow 2019). Ordo Iuris has been a driving force for those illiberal civic actors who focus on the legal dimensions of litigation and policy making. The think tank has been able to expand a web of similar TFP-linked organizations in, for example, Hungary, Croatia, Estonia, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and Switzerland. This new generation of TFP organizations has been able to take “to a higher level what had been the signature of TFP methodologies corresponding to the professionalization of conservative actors” (Datta 2020, 15).

Ordo Iuris is well connected to the PiS government. Close ties with the Ministry of Justice, in particular, are revealed by the funding of joint projects (Mierzyńska 2020). PiS has even made room for people from Ordo Iuris in government structures. Aleksander Stępkowski, one of the founders of Ordo Iuris and its first president, was an undersecretary of state in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the first PiS government. He is currently a judge in the Polish Supreme Court and its spokesman. Other individuals closely cooperating with Ordo Iuris have positions in the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Family and Social Policy (Ciobanu 2021).

Ordo Iuris is also an economically powerful institution. Investigative journalists from Poland and abroad have discovered how through the Piotr Skarga Foundation, Ordo Iuris transferred during 2009 and 2019 about 10 million euros to ultra-Catholic organizations in France and Brazil (Dauksza et al. 2020). The annual income for 2019 was over 6 million Polish zloty (over 1.3 million euros), having almost doubled since 2016 (Ciobanu 2021). A lot of money is generated by selling devotionals and Fatima prayers free of taxes, which are announced in newspapers and personalized letters addressing, in particular, the elderly (Gielewska and Szczygiel 2021; Wielowieyska 2020). Other sources include Russian funds (Bunda 2020; Suchanow 2020).

Ordo Iuris only gained visibility after the electoral victory of PiS in 2015, engaging with an illiberal approach to abortion, gender, and Islam that even for PiS has been too radical (Hennig and Meyer Resende 2021). The activities of Ordo Iuris's internationally well-educated lawyers concentrate on three levels: on processes, including monitoring, publishing analyses, and litigation; on participation in legislative processes in the Polish Parliament, proposing draft laws and supporting projects close to their environment; and on the international level (Anonymous 2020, 13).

During the 2015 election campaign, which extremely politicized the conflict over granting asylum to Muslim applicants, Ordo Iuris argued that the Polish state should restrict its asylum grants to Christian applicants (Hennig and Meyer-Resende 2021, 445). In 2016, Ordo Iuris pushed on behalf of Kaja Godek's above-mentioned civic project Stop Abortion for a draconian anti-abortion law, from which PiS withdrew only after massive protests arose. Since 2018, its long-term project concerns the building of an international alliance against the Istanbul Convention. To the end of withdrawing from this international treaty ratified in 2015, legal experts drafted in 2018 the above-mentioned Convention on the Rights of the Family (for the document in English, see Kielmans-Ratyńska, Walinowicz, and Żych 2018). On July 30, 2020, the Polish government decided to follow Ordo Iuris's initiative of submitting a request to the Constitutional Court to examine the compatibility of the Istanbul Convention with the Polish Constitution (Kucharczyk and Mojak 2021). Simultaneously, Ordo Iuris co-initiated the transnational civic petition Yes for the Family, No for Gender in support of the Convention on the Rights of the Family (see the Yes for the Family, No for Gender website)—with success. The Polish government was the first to submit the Convention on the Rights of the Family bill to the Sejm. On April 30, 2021, a majority of parliamentarians, mostly from PiS, the PSL, and Konfederacja, voted in favor of the bill. It

was then submitted to a committee, where it is (summer 2022) still pending (Chrzczonowicz 2021b).

Ordo Iuris has also played a decisive role in the spread of so-called LGBT-free zones. Between 2018 and 2020, almost 90 communes, especially in south-east Poland, declared themselves free of *LGBTIQA+ ideology*. The point of departure was a critical response by Ordo Iuris to the progressive LGBTIQA+ Charter of 2018, initiated by Warsaw's mayor Rafał Trzaskowski. Through a web of local PiS members and like-minded decision makers (Mierzyńska 2020), Ordo Iuris was able to lobby for its *Family Charter* in defense of children's and parents' rights against any external interference, which many communes used as a template for declaring themselves free of *LGBTIQA+ ideology* (Bachmann 2020).

A Polish in-depth analysis of Ordo Iuris identified six rhetorical strategies, of which most are related to a non-neutral legal language that basically aims at delegitimizing opponents and legitimizing their own approaches and like-minded partners (Anonymous 2020, 11–13). Besides its reference to TFP in the logo, the religious origin of Ordo Iuris remains invisible (Dziubka 2020). Instead, it is the name—Ordo Iuris is a Latin term meaning “order of law”—that sets the agenda. In this vein, its *takeover strategy* is to define its own conservative agenda in terms of *rights*. Religiously inspired views on sexuality and parenthood, accordingly, resemble the classic language of human rights, with the rights of the unborn child as a classic example. Anti-gender initiatives are accompanied by transnational narratives that construct gender-sensitive anti-discrimination measures and related policies as threats. There are appeals to safeguarding the rights of parents to educate their children according to their convictions and the rights of children not to get harmed, while the constitutional religious freedom clause is used against abortion rights and civic partnerships (Hennig 2018). The targeted audience is primarily academic and holds (ideally) a political office, thus being able to initiate legal changes toward a pro-life and anti-gender *pro-family* policy.

Ordo Iuris is interconnected not only with TFP but also with relevant members of transnational anti-gender and pro-family networks, such as Agenda Europe and the World Congress of Families. A recent project with transnational scope was the foundation in 2021 of the Collegium Intermarium, a private university for law studies in Central and Eastern Europe. Cooperation initiatives are planned to include non-EU members such as Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia. Courses are taught in English by an international staff with traditionalist views (see the Collegium Intermarium website). Particularly strong ties exist with the Hungarian government, which is the co-founder of the univer-

sity. Its proximity to the Polish government is revealed by the opening speeches in May 2021 by the Polish Minister of Culture Piotr Gliński and the Polish Minister of Education Przemysław Czarnek. Besides private donations, some financial support comes from a state fund (Ciobanu 2021).

The Collegium Intermarium offers master's degrees and postgraduate courses, including scholarships for legal studies. It focuses on family politics, NGO politics, and human rights *disputes*. Its mission is defined as a response to the "crisis of academia" through an education based on the traditional values of European civilization: Roman legal culture, Greek philosophy, and Christian ethics (see the Collegium Intermarium website). Moreover, a civilizational understanding of Christianity is interpreted as the foundation for an essentialist, homogenous conception of Europe: "Christianity brought the world awareness of human dignity" (see the Collegium Intermarium website). It is worth mentioning that the approach to legal studies reflects a moral conservative human rights interpretation typical of (religious) defenders of traditionalist values by which universalistic terms are used not to secure but to limit minority rights (Mourão Permoser and Stöckl 2020). Another element is the Catholic idea of a God-given natural law as a legitimate rebuttal against reproductive rights and same-sex marriage (Ciobanu 2021). The overall scientific mission is to defend "freedom and truth," which, in today's academic education and debates, are seen as threatened by "censorship" and "aggressive ideologies"—most probably a reference to what is constructed as *gender ideology* (Collegium Intermarium 2021).

2.5. National Radical Nationalists

The Catholic nationalist ideology of the pre-war politician Roman Dmowski is represented in its most radical interpretation by two very profiled extreme-right organizations: the National Radical Camp (Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny; ONR,) and the youth organization All Polish Youth (Młodzież Wszechpolska). Other nationalist movements include Ruch Narodowy (National Movement), Polska Liga Obrony (Polish Defense League), and the Movement for the Reconstruction of Poland. All of these are traditionally associated with the Roman Catholic Church (Hennig and Meyer Resende 2021). This anti-democratic milieu is not large, but it is able to mobilize across Polish borders, especially for the annual celebration of Polish Independence Day on November 11. The following section focuses on the ONR and its former leader Robert Bąkiewicz.

The left-liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza* identifies a symbiotic relationship between PiS and the leader of the ONR, as Bąkiewicz mobilizes for issues that for PiS would be too radical but that are still attractive for voters from the radical right. An example is the active *defense* of church buildings during the mass protests against the restricted abortion law of 2021 (Karpińczuk 2021). PiS would seem to want to *buy* the organization and its leader, given that, according to OKO Press, Bąkiewicz's Independence March Foundation received 1.3 Million Zloty from the state's Patriotic Fund (Mikolajewska 2021).

The overarching aim or frame is ultra-nationalist (Minkenberg 2018). Moreover, constructing the Polish nation and Polish civilization as being under attack by the West and the EU becomes a way of justifying the use of violence. Even the support for PiS is limited, given that, combined with its Catholic ultra-nationalist and white supremacy thinking, the ONR, as part of the nationalist movement, is anti-democratic (Karpińczuk 2021).

Representatives of Dmowski's national Catholicism share a vision of national renewal that rejects all alien influences, especially Jewish ones, as well as a violent rejection of pluralism and democratic values. They are hostile toward communism and liberal capitalism and understand "the nation as an unchanging and eternal entity" (Pankowski and Kornak 2013, 160–161).

A longtime activist and ideological mind of the ONR is Robert Bąkiewicz, who left the organization in 2018 but remained the president of the board of the March for Independence Association, which organizes the most visible nationalist event: the annual Polish Independence Day. Bąkiewicz's Manichean black-and-white vision includes a strong cultural-civilizational and martyrological idea of national Catholicism. He would compare today's nationalists to Christ, seeing them as "persecuted" by the liberal media, all left-wing parties, the European Union, and even the Polish police and the current government, which are seen as too sensitive to street pressure. In civilizational terms, the political left would "advise us to hate the Church because it would take away our freedom," a freedom that for Bąkiewicz implies corruption, the disintegration of Polish families, and a materialistic lifestyle (Karpińczuk 2021). Such a perspective also includes a proximity to Catholic traditionalist organizations such as the Pius Brethren.

In a similar vein, All Polish Youth, which operates under the slogan of "Great Catholic Poland," constructs a historical connection between religion and nationalism, espousing common causes such as opposition to abortion and gay marriage. Whereas many may not really follow Christian teachings, they still "feel empowered and emboldened by the authority that the Church

enjoys in Polish society” (Pankowski, quoted in Ojewska 2018). The Independence March in 2017, for instance, had the slogan “We want God!” (Gądek 2017). As the mainline Church rejected the celebration of masses in that and the following year, the organizers resorted to an Independence Day Mass in the ultra-traditionalist congregation of the Pius Brothers. While the Church hierarchy neither took part in nor condemned this appropriation of Christianity, some priests publicly supported the rally (Hennig and Meyer Resende 2021, 451). In 2019, the logo of the far-right organizers was a clenched fist with a rosary around the fingers, a cross hanging along the arm, and the slogan “Bless the whole nation” (*Miej w opiece naród cały*; Hennig and Meyer Resende 2021, 453).

These two marches occurred in the context of the previously mentioned new harsh political attacks on LGBTIQ+ and reproductive rights (i.e., the so-called *LGBT ideology-free zones* as a response to the pro-LGBTIQ+ Warsaw Diversity Charter and the ban on abortion). In the 2020 slogan “Our civilization, our principles,” “civilization” apparently replaced a religious reference, implying a fight against “anti-civilization and anti-culture, which would attack Poland and the whole of Europe” (Karpieczuk 2020). In 2021, Warsaw’s mayor Rafał Trzaskowski appeared on a billboard that showed him as a German Nazi mayor.

The increasing distance of the Church hierarchy—in 2019, the president of the Episcopal Conference, Archbishop Gadecki, disapproved of the government’s tolerance for the radical nationalist movements organizing the Independence Marches (Hennig and Meyer Resende 2021, 451)—may also have contributed to a rejection of mainline Catholicism. Pankowski even notes a change toward more authority for Father Rydzek and his *Radio Maryja* movement, which profits from the support of the extreme right (Pankowski, quoted in Ojewska 2018). The comparatively small radical nationalist camp particularly attracts young men from rural and culturally less diverse areas where Catholicism still remains an important element of daily life.

The Independence March, in particular, is a meeting point for the European—especially Central European—extreme right. On a transnational level, the reference to Catholicism is of minor importance and remains an indicator of Polishness. This fits well with the idea of ethnopluralism (Minkenberg 2018).

3. Opposition to COVID-19 politics

The Catholic Church in Poland has supported, although not always decisively, the pro-vaccination activities of state institutions, often invoking the example of Pope Francis I in expressing their readiness to accept the vaccine. In 2021, however, a communiqué by the Polish Bishops' Conference suggested not using the Johnson & Johnson vaccination from an anti-abortion position (RP online 2021a), a view that can be traced back to the US Catholic Bishops' Conference, which saw the development of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine as based on cell lines of embryos aborted in the 1970s (Peiser 2021). In general, however, among the Catholic right, opposition to COVID-19 crisis management and vaccination has not been a great issue. One reason may be that the Polish government over time neither introduced nor controlled such measures very strictly.

However, some actions and reactions entered the public arena. Radio Maryja has supported a petition against obligatory vaccination initiated by the Catholic, anti-LGBTIQA+, and pro-life Center for Life and Family. This petition was mobilized with a well-known threat construction that can be linked to the anti-gender/pro-family movement: It was said that thousands of fathers financing their families would lose their jobs if they refused the mandatory vaccination. This would lead to depression, alcoholism, and eventually divorce. The prime minister was asked to leave vaccination as an individual decision and a matter of conscience (for the Radio Maryja campaign, see Radio Maryja 2022). In January 2022, during a debate in the Sejm, Kaja Godek opposed vaccination in general on the grounds that the production of the AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines was said to use the material of aborted embryos (RP online, 2022). Some priests preached from the pulpit that nothing would help against Corona other than praying. The pandemic was also seen as a punishment from God for human sins such as homosexuality and cohabitation without marriage (Dzikowska 2020).

Conclusions

This chapter has revealed how special legacies from recent and early history, as well as the Catholic moral teaching of Pope John Paul II, provide ideological sources for an exclusivist and illiberal interpretation of Catholicism in Poland. To what extent, however, does Catholic nationalism and moral conservatism create a distinct Polish Catholic political agenda? Summarizing the main is-

sues of concern for right-wing Catholic actors, we can observe transnationally convergent rather than distinct issues and ideologies. This implies opposition to any relaxation of reproductive rights, opposition to LGBTIQ+ rights, and opposition to gender-sensitive politics and the concept of gender as a socio-cultural category; thus, there is support for idealist traditional family conceptions. Shared right-wing populist discursive strategies (Wodak 2015) include the danger of *gender ideology*, its harmfulness for *our* children, the defense of children's and parents' rights (e.g., against *early sexualization*), and the primacy of the constitutional protection of religious freedom.

To the particular Polish phenomena belong the success of the Radio Maryja movement and media empire of Pater Rydzyk, which emerged during the difficult times of socioeconomic transformation. This is now losing relevance. While observers predict a decline in its attractiveness due to generational change, its financial and social media competence may in times of crisis also be able to attract younger people. A second example of particularity is Ordo Iuris. This internationally well-connected institute stands at the forefront of a transnational anti-feminist *pro-family* agenda that is gaining support. Its centrality for the anti-gender movement, especially in Eastern and Central Europe, may even be strengthened through the Collegium Intermarium. A third specific though not unique element is the civilizational conception of a white Christian Europe that is connected to the historical founding myth of Poland defending Christianity for Europe. This connects to two transnational trends: invoking Christianity as a source of traditional values in Europe against an EU-guided liberal culture based on freedom principles that introduce value plurality and defending an ethnopluralist conception of Europe (vs. the asymmetrical and multicultural EU) that speaks of a union of European nations. Here, a civilizational approach to Christianity functions as *othering*, especially against Muslim migrants (Hennig and Hidalgo 2021). This is what the radical national camp connects to, and the reference to Catholicism is also here instrumental, as it helps construct an exclusive collective identity.

This chapter has revealed the particular role of Catholicism and the legacy of national Catholicism. Moreover, since 2015, the PiS party has ruled the country in a way that is dismantling liberal political institutions and strengthening the voices of the most radical Catholics and nationalists—or national Catholics. In this regard, one conclusion is that PiS provides a political opportunity for those voices by not condemning the most nationalist and illiberal utterances. The Church hierarchy, instead, has been reluctant to publicly

distance itself from the governing party and its illiberal politics (Hennig and Meyer Resende 2021).

The actors belonging to the Catholic radical right are influential to the extent that they are because they are not only able to shape the political agenda, such as the discourse on withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention (Marek Jurek and Ordo Iuris) and the discourse on creating illiberal central European and international alliances in the name of a Christian Europe (all the actors discussed), but they also have an impact on political output. The most striking examples are the initiatives for a total ban of abortion (Kaja Godek and Ordo Iuris) and the so-called *LGBT-free zones* (Ordo Iuris). The facilitating factors are both national interconnectivity, with the (silent) support of the Catholic Church and the PiS government, and transnational links to anti-gender and pro-life movements, institutions, and resources. The narrative of a civilizationist Christianity (instead of a national Catholicism) seems to resonate well on a transnational level. Together with its Hungarian counterparts, the political Catholic right in Poland is the intellectual engine for a clearly illiberal politics (Kriszán and Roggeband 2021). Nationally, however, generational change and more acceptance of value plurality will feed resistance and most probably diminish the authority of not only the Catholic Church but also, sooner or later, the governing PiS party (Neumeyer 2021).

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Religion and Authoritarian Legitimacy

The Hungarian Pentecostal Faith Church

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Introduction: Faith Church and the Orbán regime

In recent years, Hungarian politics has gained international attention. Since 2010, when Viktor Orbán's national-conservative Fidesz party was elected to a parliamentary supermajority, the country has gone through a significant political transformation. The Orbán regime has gradually curtailed press and academic freedoms, eroded judicial independence, undermined a multiparty democratic system, and violated human rights. Researchers have described this process as *autocratization* (Boese et al. 2020; Maerz et al. 2020) and *democratic backsliding* (Enyedi 2018). This process has resulted in Hungary becoming “the EU's first ever authoritarian member state” (Maerz et al. 2020). At the same time, populists in Europe and beyond have applauded Orbán for these developments: Dutch and French populist leaders Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen have praised the Hungarian strongman for his “courage” in having “the strength to face the European Union” (Szakacs and Than 2018). Florida Republicans have admitted that Hungarian anti-LGBTIQA+ legislation inspired their own “Don't Say Gay” bill, banning sexual education involving LGBTIQA+ topics in public schools (Marantz 2022). Orbán enjoys the support of Donald Trump and was the opening speaker at the influential 2022 Conservative Political Action Conference in Texas (Smith 2022).

The Hungarian government has politically sold all these changes by employing a Christian-nationalistic narrative. It depicts the country as the last bastion of *Christian Europe* against *Western liberal cosmopolitanism*. Even though almost half of the Hungarian population identifies as non-religious, churches have played a key role in promoting this ideology and maintaining the Orbán regime. This article uses the fairly new Pentecostal Faith Church, which gained

prominence and much influence in the 2010s, as a case study. Investigating the role of Faith Church in the Orbán regime is key to understanding the new Christian–nationalist entanglements in Hungary and, in essence, the nature of the political system that Orbán has created.

Faith Church (in Hungarian, *Hit Gyülekezete*) is an Evangelical charismatic Pentecostal Christian denomination in Hungary. The community was established illegally in communist Hungary in 1979 and grew rapidly after the fall of communism. Today, based on the tax designation for churches, Faith Church is the fourth most supported church in the country. Before 2010, when Prime Minister Viktor Orbán rose to power, Faith Church was widely associated with liberal politicians in Hungary. This was not accidental, as liberals were considered the leading anti-communist force before the regime change of 1989. Faith Church aimed for recognition, and some of its prominent members were even part of the parliamentary faction of SZDSZ, the liberal party of the time. However, with Orbán's right-wing populist landslide victory in 2010, Faith Church shifted its loyalties to Orbán and his party, Fidesz.¹ In the following elections, senior pastor Sándor Németh openly endorsed Orbán. Furthermore, the church has reproduced Orbán's Islamophobic and anti-immigration rhetoric. Today, somewhat surprisingly but politically rationally, Faith Church has become one of the staunchest religious supporters of the Orbán regime.

There is a growing literature on the relationship between populism and the churches in the Orbán regime (Ádám and Bozóki 2016a; Gábor 2017). However, despite Faith Church's considerable influence in Hungary, there is hardly any academic work available on it. This chapter intends to fill this gap. Our study puts the activity of Faith Church into the context of the Orbán regime, and it analyzes the church's political role since Orbán's rise to power in 2010. It focuses on Islamophobia and other populist topics in Németh's communication and investigates the pastor's sermons and public statements on Orbán and his regime. Faith Church thus functions as an apt case study for the entanglement between the Christian Right and nationalist–populist movements in Europe, particularly in a context characterized by the financial and political subordination of large, historically established Christian churches to the government. First, to create a better understanding of Faith Church and its social and cultural context, we provide a summary of the political and religious landscape

1 The party's official name is Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance. Originally, Fidesz was an acronym of *Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége* (Federation of Young Democrats).

of Hungary, followed by a brief description of the political role and status of large Christian denominations in Orbán's Hungary. Second, we turn to Faith Church, presenting its history and rise in the past decade and analyzing its political role as an increasingly vocal supporter of the regime.

The religious and political landscape of Hungary

According to the 2011 census, most Hungarians were Christians. Most identified as Roman Catholic (39% of the total population), Calvinist (11.6%), or Lutheran (2.2%). However, 45.4% of the population did not declare a religious affiliation or declared themselves to be explicitly irreligious or atheist (Vékony 2021, 103). Historically, religion in Hungary has been dominated by Catholic Christianity since King Stephen I's ascension to the throne in 1000. In the 16th century, Protestant streams gained much influence, especially in the eastern parts of the state (Dreiszigler 2016). During the decades of communist dictatorship, some religious organizations were banned. Those churches that were tolerated—such as the above-mentioned three *historical* Christian denominations—had to cooperate with the regime (Baer 2006; Dreiszigler 2016).

With the fall of the communist system in 1989, Hungary became open for freedom of religious practice. Between 1990 and 2012, Article 60 of the new republic's constitution guaranteed free public and private exercise of religion. The same article confirmed the separation of religion and state. The constitution referred to religious establishments as *churches* (*egyház*), whether Christian or non-Christian. For instance, the largest Muslim community in the country bears the name Church of Hungarian Muslims (*Magyarországi Muszlimok Egyháza*). Registered churches had the right to offer optional religious instruction in public schools and establish denominational schools financed by the state. Hungarian legislation allows taxpayers to give 1% of their income tax to a registered church of their choice. A two-thirds majority in Parliament was required to make changes to this legal framework (Durham and Ferrari 2004, 153–162; Črnič 2007, 529–530; Rosta 2016; Schanda 2003).

In the 1990s and the 2000s, practicing religion in democratic Hungary was fully free by any liberal standards, as the state and the church were constitutionally separated, and the state declared neutrality toward churches and religions. However, after 20 years of liberal democracy, Hungarian politics took a different turn (Lendvai 2012; Kornai 2015). In 2010, Viktor Orbán's right-wing

populist Fidesz party won two-thirds of the seats in the Hungarian Parliament. Following this landslide victory, the populist regime passed a series of new legislation. It soon became clear that what had happened was not only a government change but also an autocratic turn. Previous democratization processes were reversed by policies of de-democratization (Lendvai 2018). These significant changes in the political landscape influenced state–church relations in a major way.

On January 1, 2012, the Fidesz-led government introduced Hungary's new constitution, the Fundamental Law of Hungary (*Magyarország Alaptörvénye*). While the new constitution continues to guarantee religious freedom, it is problematic on various levels: First, it makes use of discriminatory language. Its preamble implies that Hungarian nationality is exclusively Christian, even though Hungary has a substantial Jewish minority, one of the largest in Europe (Kovács and Barna 2017). Moreover, a high proportion of Hungarians are openly non-religious, with a national identity that is presumably not based on religion. The Fundamental Law's wording also reduces the agency of Hungarian officials in the final year of World War II when hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews were murdered (Kingsley 2018).

Apart from the discursive discrimination, the new constitution added provisions on the legal status of religious communities (Uitz 2012, 931). The Fundamental Law stripped hundreds of congregations of their legal status. It deprived them of state resources to which they had previously been entitled, including their income from the 1% offerings of taxpayers. This 1% tax is a major income for churches, especially smaller congregations. According to Orbán's government, this was a legitimate reform of an abused subsidy system. However, critics said that it punished religious organizations and leaders who criticized the Fidesz government. At the same time, it ensured the loyalty of the 32 religious organizations that were allowed to keep their legal status (Kingsley 2018).

The Venice Commission (officially the European Commission for Democracy through Law), an advisory body of the Council of Europe composed of independent experts in the field of constitutional law, expressed serious reservations about this legislation. The Commission stated that retroactive de-registration of religious bodies violated international human rights standards (Hendon and Hines 2012, 483–484). Legal scholar Renáta Uitz (2012) observed that “Hungary with its new Constitution and new cardinal law on freedom of religion and churches is on the track of straying far away from the European standard and building a unique, if unusual, regime of its own” (965).

However, the legislation took effect and, with certain modifications, remains in effect up to today.

The limited political appeal of the established historical churches

Nominally separated from the state and enjoying full religious freedoms since the fall of the communist regime, large religious denominations have remained dependent on government finances in the past decades. This has forced churches to cooperate with governments, and the large, historically established churches—most prominently, the Catholic and Calvinist Churches—have politically always leaned to the right, playing an active role in providing religious hinterlands and spiritual support for right-wing political groups (Enyedi 2000). For example, some parts of the Calvinist Church supported Jobbik in its far-right, antisemitic period during the early 2010s. In 2013, Pastor Lóránt Hegedűs, the religious leader of a downtown Budapest Calvinist denomination, erected a bust of Admiral Horthy, the governor of inter-war Hungary who imposed harsh anti-Jewish legislation and fought as an ally of Nazi Germany in World War II. Meanwhile, Pastor Hegedűs's wife was a Jobbik MP during 2010–2019 (Ádám and Bozóki 2016b, 112). In turn, both the Catholic and Calvinist Churches have supported the government's anti-refugee political campaigns since the 2015 European migrant and refugee crisis, in which hundreds of thousands of mostly Muslim refugees travelled through Hungary. At the peak of the crisis, Cardinal Péter Erdő, the leader of the Hungarian Catholic Church, infamously said that taking in refugees would be equal to human trafficking, while Bishop László Kiss-Rigó, the Catholic bishop of southeast Hungary, where most refugees entered the country, was one of the leading religious voices supporting the government's anti-refugee policies (Frayer 2015).

Viktor Orbán's governments themselves have included several Christian leaders, such as Calvinist pastor Zoltán Balogh, who served as Minister for Human Resources between 2012 and 2018 and became the president of Hungary's Reformed Church in 2021 (*Hungary Today* 2021). Former Family Minister Katalin Novák, who has been President of Hungary since 2022, has said that she has been driven by her Christian faith. Novák has propagated a conservative family worldview and promoted the abolishment of gender studies at universities (Brugge 2022; Lázár 2018). She is also involved with the work

of the World Congress of Families, a US-based Christian nationalist group (Casanova 2020, 43).

The rise of Fidesz as a dominating right-wing political force conquering and restructuring civil society through the Civic Circle Movement network in the 2000s was also partly based on religious affiliations, endorsements by large Christian denominations, and the mobilization of what was historically called the *Christian national middle class* (Greskovits 2020). When Fidesz came to power in 2010, the historically established Christian churches—besides the Catholics and Calvinists, also the much smaller Lutheran Church—saw their public standing rise. Their government-allocated budgetary transfers rose, and their role in running quasi-public schools, hospitals, and other institutions was extended. By implication, these churches have been cooperating ever more closely with the state under the Orbán regime (Gábor 2017).

Nevertheless, the large historically established churches were never powerful enough to exert decisive political influence in post-1990 Hungary. During the decades of the pre-1990 communist dictatorship, Hungary became one of the most atheist countries in the world, and large Christian churches lost their spiritual autonomy and credibility (Ádám and Bozóki 2016b). Although the democratic regime change ensured religious freedoms and liberated churches from direct state controls in post-1990 Hungary, due to their limited financial means and the relatively small size of their actual denominations, they always remained dependent on government support. While churches have seen their social and political status rise in the post-2010 Orbán era, during which they have become quasi-official religious entities, the historically established Christian churches, in general, have never regained an autonomous spiritual appeal, particularly in the eyes of younger generations and the better educated. By implication, when the Orbán regime decided to radicalize ideologically, taking increasingly radical policy measures framed as politics as usual (Sata and Karolewski 2020), it found the mobilizing capacity of the large Christian denominations limited.

Hence, the ideological radicalization of the Orbán regime was not carried out at the request of radical Christian groups. Unlike in Poland (Szelewa 2021), the large, historically established churches were not in a position to claim dominance for political Christianity. Instead of these churches exerting a decisive impact on right-wing politics in Hungary (as the conservative wing of the Polish Catholic Church has done in Poland), right-wing governments have financially controlled and politically used them, particularly in the post-2010 pe-

riod.² This is the context in which Faith Church, as a relatively new, charismatic religious movement, gained political prominence alongside the ideological radicalization and autocratization of the Orbán regime.

The history of Faith Church

The post-2010 restrictions on religious freedoms mostly affected the so-called new religious organizations, that is, religious movements established or popularized after the fall of communism. In the years following the establishment of the post-1990 democratic system, the number of new religious movements in Hungary increased significantly. Some of these new religious movements draw inspiration from Hungary's pre-Christian history and embrace a form of ancient Hungarian shamanism (Szilágyi 2015). Other popular new religious organizations include the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and various Buddhist groups. The new openness toward *the West* also brought US-style Protestant churches to the country, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, and Pentecostals (Črnič 2007, 538–539). The most influential among these groups has been, without doubt, Faith Church. Significantly, this Pentecostal church was not affected by the 2012 legislative reform and could keep its privileged status (Folk 2017).

Faith Church's origins date back to the days of communism in Hungary. Its founder and senior pastor, Sándor Németh, was born into a practicing Catholic family. According to Németh's narrative, his coming to belief was connected to oppression in the communist system: At the age of 19, Németh tried to escape from Hungary, but the Yugoslav police caught him. After spending six days in jail, he became a diligent reader of the Bible and had a personal encounter with Jesus in 1976 (Balogh 2020b). He started Faith Church together with his wife, Judit, in 1979. The couple held the services initially in a private home in Budapest. They received theological support and ordination—according to some sources, anointing (Balogh 2020b)—through Good News Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. This church was led by Derek Prince, a leading figure of US Pentecostalism. For the first 10 years of the church, the couple and their

2 One indication of the radically different positions of Polish and Hungarian churches in their autonomous organizational capacity and political appeal is the fact that, unlike in Poland, restricting the right to abortion has never been on the agenda of mainstream Hungarian right-wing politics since 1990.

prayer circle conducted their activities underground. However, Faith Church soon became a major success, especially after the fall of communism and the liberalization of public religious practices (Balogh 2020b; Folk 2017).

The Némeths adapted the Pentecostals' *prosperity theology*, which was probably one of the main reasons why the church became so popular after the Hungarian economy's transition to the model of a liberal market economy (Folk 2017, 102). *Prosperity theology*, also known as the *gospel of prosperity*, teaches that congregants should actively engage in consumerism and aim at achieving financial affluence (Roberts and Yamane 2012, 227). Historian Holly Folk (2017, 102) suggested that this theology appealed especially to the economically up-and-coming middle and upper classes, following the establishment of the liberal market order in Hungary.

Within just four decades, Faith Church grew from a small underground congregation that met in private apartments to be the country's fourth-largest religious community (Folk 2017, 105). In the 1990s, Faith Church held regular worship services, including mass baptism ceremonies, in the Budapest Sports Hall, with an approximate attendance of 10,000 worshippers (Tenkely 2011, 247). Between 2002 and 2008, Faith Church increased its 1% tax offerings by more than 70% (Rosta 2016, 193). In 2016, the organization claimed to have 70,000 members and 300 branches in Hungary (Balogh 2020b). The church even established communities for Hungarian immigrant communities in Western Europe and the United States. Faith Church's Budapest meeting point continues to be the largest megachurch in Europe, with a weekly attendance of 8,000 (Folk 2017, 103).

Preaching Islamophobia

As mentioned before, in its earlier years, Faith Church was associated with SZDSZ (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége [Alliance of Free Democrats]), a liberal party that is now defunct (Enyedi 2003, 163). Members of Faith Church even appeared among SZDSZ's representatives (Körösenyi 1999, 40). We assume that this closeness of Faith Church to this liberal party was mostly based on the two groups' shared commitment to economic liberalism and civil liberties, most prominently religious freedoms. After the 2012 constitutional reform and SZDSZ's dissolution in 2013, the church found its new ally in Orbán and his party Fidesz, a party that is *hyper-nationalist* and socially conservative in most ideological issues (Geva 2021).

Gradually, Németh became a staunch supporter of Orbán and his anti-immigration policies that limit Muslim migrants and protect the *native* people of Faith Church. Németh took as his mission the protection of “Christian Europe” and the preservation of “Hungarian values” (Jones-Gailani and Góbl 2019, 399–400). In 2018, with just three weeks to go until Hungary’s general election, Németh urged his followers from the pulpit to support Orbán and Fidesz. Németh warned them during Sunday services that a vote for Orbán’s opposition was “a vote for allowing into Hungary 10,000 Muslims a year.” The pastor stated that Muslims were “first terrorists and second human beings.” Németh also reinforced his homophobic views and warned of the opposition wanting to introduce gay marriage (Adam 2018).

But Németh also reproduced Islamophobic conspiracy myths outside of his sermons. In an interview with the pro-government internet portal Mandiner.hu, Németh suggested that “no-go zones” existed in the UK, France, Belgium, Germany, and Sweden and that “Europe is being conquered” by Islam:

In Western Europe, there are islands of the modern caliphate. Newspapers are referring to these as “no-go zones.” They have succeeded in creating ethnic melting pots in which Moroccan, Afghan, Iraqi and Syrian immigrants who follow the teachings of Islam no longer consider their ethnic belonging to be important, instead it is their religious affiliation that will take precedence.” (Cited in Novak 2016)

Németh linked this so-called Islamic takeover of Western European cities to globalization and a *left-liberal* plot to undermine national sovereignty. This is an argument that Orbán has also repeatedly made (Visnovitz and Jenne 2021). Németh suggested that “there is a point at which globalization and the caliphate meet because globalization also calls for the elimination of national identity” (cited in Novak 2016). He even envisioned an alliance between left-liberals and Muslims and warned that such an alliance in Hungary would mean the end of democracy in the country (cited in Novak 2016). It should be noted that the Muslim population of Hungary is marginal and represents a few thousand people (about 0.3% of the total population). Before the 2015 so-called refugee crisis, Muslims and Islam were not a topic in Hungarian mainstream public discourse (Csiszár 2016, 303). Islamophobic agitation became dominant after 2015, strengthened by a series of targeted anti-Muslim

and anti-immigration government campaigns (Krekó, Hunyadi, and Szicherle 2019; Langer 2021, 174–175; Sereghy 2018).

Arguably, Németh has been one of the loudest proponents of anti-Islam sentiments in the country (Zolnay 2015). In his agitation against Muslim immigrants, Németh also builds on his subjective experiences with oppression in communist Hungary:

We must defend Christianity because Marxism also caused great damage to Christianity, communism caused great damage to Christianity. Now, I'm referring to cultural Marxism, which is not the same as socialism. We lived under socialism, we know what damage it did to Christianity. I think that if they allow for the Islamization of Hungary, then Hungarian Christianity will never be able to stand up from that. (Cited in Novak 2018b)

As we can see, Németh has also made use of the term *Islamization*, which is a common slogan among the European far right (Vorländer, Herold, and Schäller 2018). Conspiracy myths such as *Islamization*, *great exchange*, and *fall of the West* postulate the existence of a secret plan to exchange white Europeans for Muslim and/or non-white immigrants. Often, behind such plans stand the *liberal elite* or *the Jews* (Önnerfors 2021). It is not only right-wing populists that spread these conspiracy myths but also far-right terrorists (Ware 2020, 5). In the case of Németh, the mysterious enemy pulling the strings of migration in Europe is Hungarian-born American Jewish philanthropist and businessman George Soros.

Preaching Zionism and Soros conspiracy myths

Like other Pentecostal movements, Faith Church is unconditionally pro-Israel and cooperates with like-minded US preachers and organizations. Sándor Németh made Christian Zionism a “central pillar of his ministry” (Hummel 2017). Christian Zionism is a belief among various neo-Protestant groups, postulating that the return of the Jews to the Holy Land and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 were in accordance with Biblical prophecy. Some Christian Zionists believe that the gathering of the Jews in Israel is a prerequisite for the so-called Second Coming of Jesus. For this reason, various neo-Protestant churches, including Pentecostal ones, are among the most unconditional supporters of Israel around the world (Ariel 2006; Langer 2017).

Faith Church, too, is involved in Christian Zionist activities. The church is affiliated with the International Christian Embassy, a Christian Zionist organization based in Jerusalem that promotes Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Németh has forged alliances with the Israeli Knesset's Christian Allies Caucus and the Israel Allies Foundation, an organization promoting Israeli interests in the United States Congress. Németh also coordinates with Pat Robertson, founder and chairman of the Christian Broadcasting Network, who, like Németh, intertwines the domains of religion, politics, and media (Folk 2017, 103–104).

Historian Eva S. Balogh (2020a) suggested that Faith Church's strong pro-Israel stance may also have strengthened its relationship with Fidesz. When the Fidesz government began its anti-refugee and anti-immigration campaign in 2015, anti-Islam voices dominated the public discourse to an extent never before seen in Hungary. The government's antagonism toward refugees, most of whom were Muslims, forged an alliance with Israeli right-wing leader Benjamin Netanyahu. This new alliance between the Israeli and the Hungarian right-wing leadership may have pushed Németh and Faith Church closer to Orbán.

"Would you like for anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, and hate of Christians to grow in Hungary?" asked Németh in a speech against Muslim immigration, suggesting that these sentiments would increase with an increase of the Muslim population (Novak 2018b). Depicting antisemitism as a new problem imported to Europe by Muslim immigrant communities has been a popular tool among European politicians across the political spectrum to promote Islamophobia and anti-immigration restrictions (Özyürek 2016). Fidesz politicians, too, act as if they would protect the local Jewish community by restricting Muslim immigration and emphasizing their close relationship with Netanyahu and his party, Likud (Langer 2021, 177–178).

However, having close ties to the Israeli right wing is no guarantee of not reproducing antisemitic canards. Despite Németh's alleged criticism of antisemitism, he and his church have repeatedly employed antisemitic code words, for instance, around the figure of George Soros. Such conspiracy myths allege that Soros manipulates political developments in Europe and around the world. These conspiracy myths have been amplified by the Hungarian government, which claims that Soros was behind the 2015 *refugee crisis*. In this narrative, Soros's plan was to de-Christianize Europe by bringing in Muslim immigrants. Following a series of countrywide government campaigns—on billboards and various media channels alike—the Fidesz government filed a pack-

age of bills called “Stop Soros.” The legislation limits the scope for action by non-governmental organizations, making their employees and activists liable for jail terms for helping refugees (Langer 2021, 167; 2022, 160–161).

Németh, too, has taken an active part in demonizing Soros. After a visit to Faith Church in Budapest, US pastor Rodney Howard-Browne claimed that the Hungarian Pentecostals “single-handedly kicked George Soros out of Hungary.” The pastor recalled that Németh asked for his prior help “because Soros is trying to work to shut my [Németh’s] money down and is attacking tithing and everything” (Strang 2019). Németh also reproduced antisemitic canards about Soros and an alleged international elite in a letter to “international Evangelical–Charismatic leaders,” in which Németh (2018) stated that “Soros and other influential individuals involved in clandestine activities are doing everything in their power to stop the strengthening of anti-globalist, anti-immigration, nationalist and Christian political forces in Europe.”

It is, of course, not antisemitic *per se* to criticize Soros. However, the suggestion that Soros and a secretive international elite would try to undermine Christianity in Europe by promoting migration operates with traditional antisemitic codes (Berend 2022). This belief is based on the myth that Jews as a collective would be conspiring against Christians and manipulating political happenings in the world (Langer 2021; 2022, 162–165). This conspiracy theory fits well into fifth-column politics, which consists of accusing certain groups in society of conspiring with hostile outside actors to subvert the interests of the national in-group. It includes the conviction that there is a powerful foreign actor with hostile intentions toward the nation. It is based on the belief that this actor motivates domestic agents to execute their agenda of dividing and weakening the nation. Next, there is also a widespread belief that the details of the relationship and the agenda it serves are hidden from public view. Finally, the need to counter the threat of the foreign power requires unmasking, constraining, and possibly expelling these domestic agents from the body politic (Jenne, Bozóki, and Visnovitz 2022, 48–49). As Stephen J. Whitfield (2018) noted, if “one were looking to update the fantasy of a surreptitious Jewish stranglehold on the international economy, no candidate would fit better than the creator of the most adroit and prosperous hedge fund in the world, the canniest investor on the planet. More than anyone else, Soros can be held as inadvertently responsible for the sinister economic power of international Jewry” (417).

In light of the alleged international threat to Hungarian Christianity, Németh (2018) warned that “[i]t is our moral obligation to do everything in our power to hinder the establishment of a government in the European Union

that wishes to force its member states to the acceptance of homosexual marriages, pseudo-scientific gender-ideologies, the liberalization of abortion and drugs, obligatory migrant quotas and anything else in opposition to our Judeo-Christian worldview.” The pastor’s solution to all these “problems” is Orbán: “The prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orban has taken a stand against such policies... Hopefully, he will continue on the hard and narrow road, which can lead Hungary into the coming new era” (Németh 2018). However, Németh’s and his church’s promotion of anti-immigration and pro-Orbán sentiments is not restricted to the walls of the churches. In the past years, Németh has built up a media empire and managed to reach masses of people beyond Faith Church.

Beyond Islamophobia, Faith Church generally disseminates the values of social conservatism, as a result of which it backs the Orbán government’s cultural agenda. Not only does it preach family values and promote anti-abortion commitments, but it also appears to be a strong opponent of the concept of gender as social construction. The government and the churches firmly believe that humans are divided by their biological differences (i.e., the two sexes) from their birth. Those biological characteristics are supposed to define people’s identity over their lifetime. The tenth amendment of the Fundamental Law stated that the father is man and the mother is woman. Accordingly, the government introduced further policies to discriminate against same-sex couples’ adoption of and raising of children. These couples cannot have this right automatically; instead, they need to apply to the government to get permission. In the meantime, the government repeatedly claims that it treats gay and lesbian people equally, and pro-regime officials even add that their anti-Muslim migration policy is the best guarantee for gays and lesbians to avoid any harassment.

Since 2010, the Orbán government has initiated referendums on two occasions. In 2016, it organized a referendum against the European quota system for managing migration. Although the campaign was accompanied with intensive Islamophobic propaganda by connecting Islam with terrorism, the referendum turned out to be unsuccessful due to the low turnout. As a result, the government could not legally displace the quota system; nonetheless, the Orbán regime still refused the admission of refugees from the Middle East.

Five years later, the government initiated another referendum, this time against *gender ideology*. The goal of this referendum was to gain popular support for a previous piece of legislation by which Orbán consciously confounded homosexuality with pedophilia. To raise the level of participation, the referen-

dum was held on the day of the 2022 nationwide elections. The four referendum questions, a bit softer than the previous homophobic legislation, were as follows:

- Do you support the teaching of sexual orientation to minors in public education institutions without parental consent?
- Do you support the promotion of sex reassignment therapy for underage children?
- Do you support the unrestricted exposure of underage children to sexually explicit media content that may affect their development?
- Do you support the showing of sex-change media content to minors?

The referendum turned out to be unsuccessful because most voters could not interpret the questions within the framework of their everyday lives. The topic turned out to be too sophisticated for the pro-government voters. Fidesz won the general elections but lost the referendum on the same day.

In general, authoritarian regimes dislike ambiguity, fluidity, perplexity, and contextualization; therefore, they are against the liberal ideas of chosen identity and social constructivism. They prefer simplified binary oppositions and predefined, unquestionable, fixed identities. Authoritarian governments promise security over freedom to the people, so they believe that propagating fixed identities makes their ruling easier. In the final analysis, it is power politics that defines Orbán's policies on Muslim migrants and *gender ideology*. The regime tends to use the Pentecostal Faith Church to help reinforcing traditional social roles and identities.

Németh's role in the media landscape

Today, the media landscape in Hungary is characterized by the overwhelming dominance of government-controlled media. This results in anti-migrant and anti-Muslim narratives "largely incontestable in today's political and media environment" (Sereghy 2018, 269). As Zsuzsanna Vidra (2019, 134–135) has observed, almost all media in Hungary express some degree of Islamophobia. Their reports reduce Islam and Muslims to Islamist terrorism and anti-immigrant messages. This is true for state-owned and most private media alike. The depiction of Muslim refugees and migrants as part of the "invasion of Europe"

has been continual since 2015, the year of the “refugee crisis” (Jones-Gailani and Góbl 2019, 399).

Some of the channels regularly promoting Islamophobic anti-immigrant messages are connected to Faith Church. Investigative reporters from the internet portal *Átlátszó* and the weekly *Magyar Hang* found that Németh took over majority ownership of the TV channel ATV, assisted by an offshore company registered in Liechtenstein (Bodoky 2020). ATV had been an important source of information for left-liberal voters for decades, even after the crushing defeat of SZDSZ. While Sándor Németh and Faith Church were pariahs during the first Orbán government (1998 to 2002), after 2010, he changed his position and started to come closer to the Orbán regime. No wonder Faith Church had achieved its anticipated legal and political status by 2012.

Once known as Hungary’s last oppositional TV station, following Németh’s pro-government maneuverings in the 2010s, ATV began promoting selectively pro-government messages while keeping a general oppositional profile. Since 2014, Faith Church has received significant subsidies, and ATV has received orders and advertisements from the government. Meanwhile, Németh started to propagate pro-government messages. He has stood with the government on important ideological issues, particularly Islamophobia, family values, and law and order. As Németh strengthened his pro-government political position, he was able to increase his share at ATV as well.

Staff working at ATV have complained about strong editorial bias at the television station and what they perceive to be a marked departure from the commercial television station’s previous oppositional editorial approach (Balogh 2020a; Bódis 2021). Miklós Haraszti (2020, 219) hinted at the church’s role in building out “Viktor Orbán’s propaganda state.” Even though Németh denied accusations of shifting ATV toward the interests of Fidesz, he admitted that the “state advertisements are very important to the finances of [ATV]” (Novak 2018a). While Orbán’s government has made the work of independent media channels difficult—in some cases, impossible (Haraszti 2020)—it has never threatened the stations associated with Faith Church.

These developments make us question Holly Folk’s thesis. Folk (2017) suggested that Faith Church is not a copy of US Pentecostal churches, as this community “advocates strongly for religious freedom and other civil rights, such as freedom of the press and of association, and it strongly opposes fascism” (108). While this was certainly true before 2010, since Orbán’s authoritarian populist regime change, Faith Church has been playing an active part in compromising press freedoms and legitimizing the regime. While we do not con-

sider Orbán and Fidesz per se fascists, their rhetoric and political argumentation have been described as essentially fascistic by various observers, including philosopher Jason Stanley (2020) and author Rudolf Ungváry (2014). Faith Church, of course, opposes fascism per se. Yet, it is bothered by neither the aggressive nationalistic and systematically stigmatizing rhetoric nor the increasingly authoritarian policies that Orbán and Fidesz pursue. On the contrary, it contributes to the stigmatization of immigrants, Muslims, and pro-choice activists, just as it perpetuates antisemitic conspiracy myths. This is comparable to the far-right groups within the Republican Party, which also tend to stigmatize members of these groups (Langer 2022, 175–176; MacLean 2017).

Faith Church, and Sándor Németh himself, not only owns ATV, where his son, Szilárd Németh, works as CEO, but he also has considerable influence on the Spirit FM radio station, which is owned by his son's association. All Spirit FM broadcasters are registered at the ATV headquarters, and there is a huge overlap among the presenters of these two media outlets. Spirit FM regularly repeats certain ATV programs. In 2022, the media authority of the Orbán regime took away the frequency scale following its expiration from the liberal Klubrádió (Club Radio) and awarded it to Spirit FM. This was an example of an unlawful, direct governmental intervention to the frequency dissemination procedure, enabling Faith Church to receive the frequency for 10 years (Rényi 2022). This demonstrated the government's intention to control the remaining semi-autonomous institutions in order to broaden the space for maneuvering between direct propaganda and indirect manipulation.

Németh denied "being in cahoots with Fidesz" (Novak 2018a). Nonetheless, as this article has shown, the reverend has expressed his support for Orbán on various occasions. Németh's and his church's loyalty to Orbán seems to have paid off. Apart from not experiencing deregistration after the 2012 religious law reform, as all the other Pentecostal churches did, in 2018, the Fidesz-led government allocated HUF 758 million (USD 2.9 million) to Faith Church. HUF 394 million was to be used to build a conference center within Hit Park, the church's central space in Budapest. The other HUF 364 million was awarded to the Saint Paul Academy (Szent Pál Akadémia), a Pentecostal theological school founded by Németh (Német 2017).

In 2020, the Hungarian government signed an agreement with Faith Church. According to the Pentecostal community's press release, "[t]he government has recognized the activities of the largest Hungarian evangelical church as valuable for society. It is unique in Europe that a government not only grants full religious freedom to a charismatic Evangelical church but

grants the same legal and financial support for them as for the other mainstream denominations” (Faith Church 2020). It is to be assumed that the good relationship between Németh, his church, and Fidesz will continue in the coming years.

Conclusions

The history of Faith Church after the fall of communism is the story of a formerly repressed, anti-communist congregation, whose leader, Pastor Sándor Németh, did his best to make the Pentecostal Christian community an accepted church in Hungary. To achieve this, Németh sought to forge alliances with influential political forces, first with the most radical representative of the regime change, the liberal party SZDSZ. As Faith Church’s membership grew dynamically in the 1990s and 2000s, political parties increasingly embraced its grassroots community to win the nearly 100,000 voters that it could reach. Although Faith Church was nowhere near as influential as the Hungarian Catholic Church or the Calvinist and Jewish communities, the committed and disciplined political activity of its members proved attractive to the parties.

We have shown that Németh’s efforts were successful overall because after the change of power in 2010, Viktor Orbán, with a two-thirds majority in Parliament, elevated Faith Church to the status of an established church. At the same time, however, not only the social influence of Faith Church increased, but also the political system of the country fundamentally changed (Krasztov and Van Til 2015; Kovács and Trencsényi 2020). Liberal democracy was replaced first by an illiberal hybrid regime and then by a personalized authoritarian system. In this highly centralized political regime, Faith Church attained considerable political influence, largely through its growing media empire.

The rise of Faith Church can be understood as a political experiment by the authoritarian populist regime. Although nominally independent from the state, large established churches in Hungary remained dependent on government financing and were practically forced to cooperate with any incumbent government. As the political right, including Orbán’s Fidesz, traditionally gains legitimacy from endorsements by large Christian denominations, state–church relations have been particularly tight during the tenure of right-wing governments. In consequence, controlling large established churches has carried strategic importance for the Orbán regime, creating a particularly close cooperation with the two largest denominations, the Catholics and the

Calvinists. Subordinating them politically, however, reduced their autonomy, as well as their spiritual independence and credibility.

As a Pentecostal charismatic church controlling a considerable media empire, Faith Church has offered additional spiritual resources and political mobilizing capacity for the radicalizing political agenda of the regime, which the larger, historically established churches have been unable—and, to be fair, in some parts also unwilling—to create. Hence, unlike in some democratic countries with a strong tradition of separation between church and state, it was not the case in Hungary that a charismatic Christian community had become politically influential on its own. On the contrary, the authoritarian state used a congregation struggling for established church status for its own political ends.

Paradoxically, however, the rise of Faith Church was accompanied by a loss of its political autonomy. Today, Faith Church is not only a religious community; it is also a business venture of the family of the pastor who leads the congregation. The charismatic congregation has been corrupted and co-opted by the government, making the formerly autonomous community one of the politically most devoted legitimizing institutions of the ethno-populist Orbán regime. The developments around Faith Church illustrate the trajectory of Christian nationalism in Hungary, in which an ideologically radicalized version of Christianity is being instrumentally used by an increasingly authoritarian, yet popularly elected political regime.

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The Christian Right in Europe: Austria

Katharina Limacher, Astrid Mattes, and Barbara Urbanic

Introduction

Austria is defined by the dominant position of the Roman Catholic Church and a traditionally inclusive approach toward religious minorities. Previously often perceived as a model for religious inclusiveness, the success of right-wing populism and power shifts within the Austrian religious landscape have clouded this positive image. In recent years, Christian-Right activism in Austria has increased significantly and has become more vocal. The networks and political ties of conservative Christian actors are well-established and nothing new. What is new is the outspokenness of their political activities, as well as the alliances among very conservative and sometimes fundamentalist Christian groups of different denominations and their appearance in mainstream politics.

Christian-Right actors have experienced a strong upswing as part of the overall politicization of religion as a result of migration issues. As in other European countries, the problematization of Islam has made the invocation of Christian values a popular practice among right-wing populists. Here, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) has increasingly adopted populist positions known from the for many years highly successful far-right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). While the moderate Christian mainstream has voiced concerns over this utilization of religion, actors on the fringes of the conservative Christian spectrum have capitalized on this development. They have been able to push their agenda, which includes the idea of Christian supremacy and fundamentalist views on gender relations, reproductive rights, and concepts of the family, toward the political center. At the same time, the ÖVP, after its takeover by Sebastian Kurz, has partly abandoned its historic orientation in the Catholic mainstream and reoriented in the direction of becoming a more fundamentalist group (Mattes 2021). In 2017, when he was about to become

ÖVP leader, Kurz set an ultimatum for his party, demanding extensive powers for this position and threatening to refuse to take over otherwise. Until his resignation in 2021 following large-scale corruption scandals, the federal party structures were bypassed, and a closed circle of Kurz's intimates became the steering group. Among the people within this circle was Bernhard Bonelli, who is reportedly affiliated with Opus Dei, along with other Christian-Right actors (Knittelfelder 2020). In the course of these developments, old alliances between political and religious actors were deployed and new ones formed. It remains to be seen what religion politics after the political episodes dominated by Kurz and his affiliates will look like.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, most protagonists of Austria's Christian Right do not openly support Russia. Actors who once spoke alongside Russian Orthodox figures at international ultraconservative gatherings (e.g., ÖVP politician Gudrun Kugler; OTS 2022) have clearly voiced their support for Ukraine, as do most Christian-Right institutions (e.g., the International Theological Institute, Trumau; ITI 2022). Rather isolated individuals, such as the former FPÖ politician and very outspoken Catholic Christian Ewald Stadler, have attracted attention in the past through their support for the annexation of the Crimea by the Russian Federation and for the secession of Donbas from Ukraine. However, Austria's renowned close ties to Putin's regime are political (driven by the FPÖ's quest for fraternization; Thalhammer 2019) or economic (fostered by well-connected businessmen such as Sigi Wolf and Rainer Seele; Marchart and Strobl 2022) rather than religiously motivated.

In this article, we discuss the religious protagonists of the Christian Right, aspects of their narratives and ideology, and the effects on their targeted political audiences in two areas central to Christian-Right activities in Austria: *anti-genderism/anti-abortion activism* and *Christian nationalism*. Following an overview of the Austrian political and religious landscape, we conclude with a summary of the development, successes, and setbacks of Austria's Christian Right.

Church and state in Austria

The Austrian political system is characterized by a consensus orientation and corporatist structures. The Social Democratic Party of Austria (Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs; SPÖ) and the Austrian People's Party were historically aligned along the cleavage between the secular urban labor force

and the rural Catholic owners, which defined the political system after World War II. In addition, the Austrian Freedom Party (formerly the Federation of Independents), with its anti-clerical German nationalist orientation and more liberal branches, was present from the beginning of the Second Republic. However, this party only gained momentum when populist Jörg Haider became the party leader in 1986, the same year that the Green Party entered parliament. Following Haider's new course, the party eventually split into a liberal party (Liberales Forum, now merged with NEOS–Das Neue Österreich) and the much more successful far-right FPÖ. The success of these left- and right-wing niche parties happened at the expense of the now catch-all parties, the SPÖ and the ÖVP, which had built the corporatist structures that are still decisive for Austrian politics, namely the inclusion of social partners and a very inclusive *system of shared tasks* in terms of religion politics (Minkenberg 2003; Gresch et al. 2008; Nautz, Stöckl, and Siebenrock 2013). This seeking of consensus as a guiding principle is often described as a takeaway from the historical experience of societal polarization that paved the way for two fascist regimes: the Austrofascist dictatorship based on Catholic teachings (1933/34–1938) and Nazism (1938–1945) (Rathkolb 2015).

Sixteen religious groups, among them Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Alevis, hold the legal status of a *recognized religious community* (Staatlich anerkannte Religionsgemeinschaft), which grants them a broad set of privileges (oesterreich.gv.at 2020). This constitutional setting provides for an institutionalized dialogue of religious communities and state actors on religious matters (Kalb, Potz, and Schinkele 2003). However, inclusiveness toward religion is not limited to legally granted rights but extends to the broader treatment of religious communities as important public stakeholders.

More recently, breaches with this inclusive tradition have become observable, particularly concerning the symbolic and non-constitutional forms of inclusion of religious minorities. The discursive exclusion of Islam since the mid-2000s was followed by a series of legal restrictions on Islamic clothing from 2016 onwards. A larger controversy concerned the change in regulations regarding Good Friday as a holiday for members of the Lutheran and Reformed Protestant Churches (Niksova 2019). In some cases, the ÖVP-led government's measures were even in conflict with the interests of the Catholic Church, and the tone between party and Church became increasingly unfriendly. In a WhatsApp chat conversation that became public in 2021, Kurz cheered on a member of his inner circle who reported on threatening a Catholic repre-

sentative with cutting the Church's tax privileges (Nikbakhsh and Melichar 2021).

The FPÖ, Kurz's former coalition partner, also has an ambivalent relation to religion. It emerged out of the anticlerical Third Lager as a gathering point for Nazi sympathizers, but it changed its religious course and claimed to embrace a *Christian identity* in the late 1990s. This claim is very superficial and frequently criticized by Christian churches (Hadj-Abdou 2016). When last in government (2017–2019), leading figures of the party sought open confrontation with Christian welfare organizations (e.g., Caritas and Diakonie) on matters relating to refugee protection, thereby contributing to the widening gap between government and churches (Krb 2019).

Overall, these developments constitute a turning away from inclusive traditions in the politics of religion. Despite the provocative role of its junior partner, the FPÖ, during its last short-lasting coalition government, this turn can be primarily linked to the reorientation of the ÖVP following the takeover by Sebastian Kurz and his supporters (Mattes 2021). The FPÖ traditionally had a small group of ultraconservative Christian members, but due to internal quarrels, this group, based around MEP Ewald Stadler, left the party and campaigned independently without any success (Zaunbauer 2014). Hence, most party-politically engaged Christian-Right actors are found within the Austrian People's Party rather than the FPÖ.

Concerning religious affiliation, Austria is still a very Catholic country. Although membership is declining steadily, between 50% and 60% of the Austrian population are members of the Roman Catholic Church. In 2021, Statistics Austria conducted a voluntary survey on "Religious affiliation of the population in private households". These most recent numbers show the following affiliations: 55,2% Catholic, 8,3% Islamic, 4,9% Christian Orthodox, 3,8% Protestant, 5,5% affiliated with other religious traditions (e.g. Buddhism, Judaism, other Christian Churches, etc.) and 22,4% not affiliated. Smaller Christian groups (e.g., Charismatic and Evangelical Churches) are emerging throughout Austria; according to calculations by the Statistics Austria, 0,3–0,5 % of the Austrian population are members of the umbrella organization "Free Churches in Austria" (Statistics Austria 2022).

Anti-genderism: New and old political alliances against abortion, reproductive rights, and non-traditional families

When analyzing the Christian Right as “a particular brand of politically engaged religious fundamentalism,” the centrality of sexual morality/reproductive rights and “the patriarchal family based on binary gender essentialism” (Mattes, Urbanic, and Limacher 2020, 243) is unsurprising. Within the Religious Right, this focus is often subsumed under *family values* (Dowland 2009), though in recent academic discourse, the term *anti-genderism* is being established (Strube et al. 2021).

Austria used to have conservative regulations on most issues relevant to anti-genderists. Same-sex marriage was only legalized following a constitutional court decision in 2017 (Verfassungsgerichtshof Österreich 2017). Regarding bio-ethical issues, the country still has some of the strictest regulations in Europe. Austrian abortion legislation poses an exception to this conservative orientation and fits into the larger European context: the decriminalization by the socially progressive Social Democrats (SPÖ) in 1975 happened in parallel to other European countries (Obinger-Gindulis 2015, 195–199). The *Fristenlösung* (term solution) is on the liberal end of the international spectrum and exempts from punishment abortions in the first trimester of pregnancy based on the sole choice of the pregnant person and, beyond that, if certain indications are met (i.e., risk to the psychological or physical health of the pregnant person, expectation of the child’s serious psychological or physical disability, or under 14 years of age at the time of conception). The cost of the procedure is only covered by public healthcare in cases of a medical indication (oesterreich.gv.at 2021). The politicization of reproductive rights in recent decades has parallels in other EU countries (Mancini and Stoeckl 2018, 225). The following examples of Austrian activism against abortion and for traditionalist models of family serve to introduce some of the actors and networks, their aims, and their degree of public involvement. These actors, although not new per se, have recently become more vocal and gained the endorsement of prominent public figures from political parties and Christian churches.

The demonstration *Marsch für die Familie* (March for the Family) has been held annually since 2012 on the day of Vienna’s Gay Pride Parade. In 2021, the speakers included former Slovak prime minister Ján Čarnogurský (billed as a “hero of anti-communist resistance”), the notoriously conservative former auxiliary bishop of Salzburg Andreas Laun, clergy from the Syrian Orthodox Church, and activists from the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Pius X and organi-

zations associated with the event. The agenda covered a whole range of anti-genderism motivations, opposing abortion, gay marriage and adoption rights, sex education in schools, and *Gender-Wahn* (*gender insanity*) and calling for a *salary for mothers* instead of out-of-home childcare. While this event is small in numbers, its radicalness is outstanding.

Among its supporters are the Österreichische Gesellschaft für Tradition, Familie und Privateigentum (the Austrian branch of Tradition, Family and Property; TFP), Human Life International Österreich, Plattform Ärzte für das Leben (Doctors for Life), and the proprietor of the homepage of Marsch für die Familie, PRO VITA. This association also organized a Rally for a Free and Strong Christian Europe in Vienna on September 12, 2020.¹ Its most recent publications are almost entirely dedicated to opposition to and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 measures and the vaccination.

Though very close in name, Marsch fürs Leben (March for Life), which also organizes an annual *pro-life* march in Vienna, is much more compatible with both the religious and political conservative establishments, including Church officials and ÖVP politicians (Wölfl 2021). Unlike the Marsch für die Familie, actors in this event use a more moderate wording to communicate their claims and seek broader alliances rather than provocation. For 2021, the organizers reported 2,500 participants at the event, among them ÖVP Member of Parliament Gudrun Kugler, auxiliary bishop Franz Scharl, and evangelical pastor Raimund Harta. The homepage and campaign materials appear to be designed for wider public appeal. Similarly named protests are held across German-speaking regions (i.e., Germany, Switzerland, and Italy). In June 2021, an impromptu demonstration against the European Parliament's ratification of the Matić-Report on sexual and reproductive health and rights was held in Vienna (Sutter 2021). While originally a Catholic endeavor, Marsch fürs Leben increasingly accommodates other Christian actors and, in conjunction with the rally, now offers a service by the Evangelical Alliance (Evangelische Allianz) and an Orthodox liturgy in addition to a Catholic Mass (Katholische Kirche 2021).

1 Actors of the far right have been trying to establish this date and location as a commemoration of the battle that broke the Osman Empire's siege of Vienna in 1683, stylized as Christian Europe's victory over Islam. The mixture of far-right activists has been summed up as "ultraconservative Christians, monarchists, fraternities, and right-wing extremist identitarians," thereby showing linkages to the Austrian Freedom Party (Auer 2020).

These transdenominational alliances have been an observable development in Austrian antiabortion activism of recent years.

In 2018, the parliamentary citizens' initiative (Parlamentarische Bürgerinitiative) #fairändern began to gather signatures and was subsequently submitted to the Austrian Parliament. While the wording of the campaign was decidedly secular and framed the issue in terms of fairness to families and disability rights, it was deeply embedded in Austria's Christian antiabortion movement. It called for national abortion statistics regarding the number of and motives for procedures, obligatory consultations prior to abortions specifically highlighting alternatives (e.g., adoption), a mandatory period for consideration between consultation and surgical procedure, an end to legal provisions for late-term abortions due to embryopathic indications, and unspecified support for women potentially giving birth to a disabled child (Parlament der Republik Österreich 2021a).

The #fairändern initiative intended to limit women's access to non-indictable abortions, claiming that women are often pressured to terminate their pregnancy by doctors who do not inform patients about alternatives and due to a lack of support for mothers of disabled children. It did so using a strategy of the Christian Right: framing opposition to abortion in secular language (Bailey 2002). Rather than calling for a ban on abortion, the initiative made more cautious claims, aimed at the reopening of political debate on the subject. The affiliations of those involved, however, suggest a deep involvement with Christian antiabortion activism. Chairperson Carina Marie Eder had been a spokesperson for Jugend für das Leben (Youth for Life) and was reported to have stated in 2015 that "the resistance will not end until everything is done to make abortions unthinkable" (Mittelstaedt, Gaigg, and Schmid 2019). *Erstunterzeichnerin* (first signee) Petra Plonner, who was the de facto voice of #fairändern, is both a pastor in a congregation of the Pentecostal LIFE Church and deputy chairperson of Österreichische Lebensbewegung (Austrian Life Movement), which offers pre- and post-abortion counselling for women and their partners.

There were prominent testimonials by politicians from the ÖVP and the FPÖ, which was remarkable given that these parties formed the Austrian government at the time. The initiative also had the support of the Austrian Catholic Church, including the endorsement of Cardinal Christoph Schönborn and the archbishop of Salzburg Franz Lackner, who promoted it through various channels, although the welfare association Caritas seems to have remained silent on the matter. On the Protestant side, support came from Evangelical organi-

zations, including LIFE Church and Evangelische Allianz, but noticeably not from the Lutheran and Reformed Protestant Churches.²

In parallel with #fairändern, a second citizens' initiative, Fakten helfen! (Facts Help!), initiated by the *pro-life* organization Aktion Leben and limited to a call for national abortion statistics, was under review in Parliament (Parlament der Republik Österreich 2021b). The fact that two ÖVP ministers, Susanne Raab and Christine Aschbacher, submitted official statements of support for the initiative caused some public discussion (*Kurier* 2022). Both efforts were ultimately "noted" ("zur Kenntnis genommen"), without further action by Parliament, but they were supported by several MPs from the ÖVP and the FPÖ in the plenary discussion (Parlament der Republik Österreich 2021a).

While this in itself cannot be considered as a triumph for Austrian anti-abortion activists, it has brought the issue into the political arena and showcased their influence among politicians (Hausbichler 2019). According to Mancini and Stoeckl (2018), "antiabortion movements pursue an incremental agenda, whereby each accommodation is a step further toward the ultimate victory over reproductive rights" (255). When ÖVP and FPÖ formed the state government in the federal state of Salzburg in 2023, they stated their intention to invest in awareness campaigns to prevent unwanted pregnancies and promote adoption and foster care explicitly as alternatives to abortion and to conduct a survey of motives for abortions (Ruep 2023) – a central talking point of Austrian anti-abortion activists.

Austria as a Christian nation

While abortion activism has always been central to the activities of the Christian Right in Europe, we observe a growing number of both religious and political actors who claim Christianity as an essential part of national political identity. Internationally, the concept of the *Christian nation* has gained prominence through political developments in the US, especially following the interference of the well-connected Christian Right, such as the *Moral Majority*, in a wide range of issues (e.g., sexuality, health care, gun ownership, and public

2 For official support statements by further church and other organizations, see Parlament der Republik Österreich 2019a. (NB: Because the initiative was considered in two consecutive legislative periods in the Austrian Parliament, it has two file numbers depicting the process and containing different related documents from 2019 and 2021.)

education) since the 1980s (Ben Barka 2011). In Austria, the concept of a *Christian nation* is closely linked to the re-politicization of religion and the rise and strengthening of the populist radical right over the past 30 years. As Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy (2016) have shown, populists *hijack* religion as an identity marker, especially to fuel anti-Muslim sentiments or xenophobic sentiments in general. However, the populist radical right often faces the challenge of reconciling its newfound Christian identity with long-standing anticlerical positions that bring it into conflict with established institutions such as Christian churches (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 177). Mancini and Rosenfeld define religious populism as “projecting a part as the whole when circumscribing ‘the people’” based on a particular religious affiliation (2020, 2). The authors also provide a helpful distinction between religious populism and religious nationalism, the latter understood not so much as an identity marker of *the people* but as a form of religious affiliation that shapes national identity. Therefore, it is not only the populist radical right that uses Christianity as an identity marker. Conservative political parties—in Austria, primarily the ÖVP—also seem to be recalling a Christian identity in view of the electoral success of the populist radical right, and not necessarily only through its traditional alliance with the Catholic Church.³

The following examples serve to introduce some of the actors and events that have helped shape the Christian-Right project of *Austria as a Christian nation* in recent years.⁴ We discuss former chancellor Sebastian Kurz’s appearance at the 2019 evangelical event *Awakening Austria* and a much-noticed parliamentary prayer from 2020, the organization of which was financed with taxpayers’ money. Consequently, the lack of separation between Church and state was criticized. The parliamentary prayer was also criticized for providing a stage for the conservative Loretto Community, a Catholic association with a strong missionary orientation, while excluding non-Christian religions other than Judaism.

3 There has been discord between the ÖVP and the more liberal parts of the Church regarding migration and social policies. In the course of the investigation surrounding the *chat affair* that led to the resignation of ex-Chancellor Sebastian Kurz in the fall of 2021, chats have come to light indicating that the ÖVP was threatening to withdraw tax privileges of churches in 2019 (ORF 2021).

4 We focus on the alliances of party political actors with various Christian actors. For far-right actors in Austria who join forces with ultraconservative Christian groups, see the aforementioned Rally for a Free and Strong Christian Europe on September 12, 2020, in Kahlenberg.

Awakening Europe is a series of Christian missionary events organized by GODfest Ministries, an evangelical association affiliated with the charismatic Bethel Church in California (Mattes, Urbanic, and Limacher 2020, 261–262). This initiative organizes events throughout Europe and claims to focus on their “national impact” by “leading many people to salvation in Jesus” since “the continent is in great need of Jesus again” (GODfest Ministries 2022), thus following the idea of *reclaiming* Europe (Mittelstaedt und Schmid 2019). Ben Fitzgerald, lead organizer of the Awakening Europe event series, also led the much-discussed event Awakening Austria in 2019, with stakeholders from local Christian churches of various denominations. Local actors included the evangelical pastor Chris Pöschl and the archbishop of Vienna Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, who gave a speech. The participation of Austrian politicians from the ÖVP culminated in an appearance and brief blessing in favor of Sebastian Kurz, the former federal chancellor, who was campaigning for re-election at the time.⁵ Kurz’s presence triggered a great deal of criticism from both political and religious actors, as religious organizations in Austria generally refrain from directly supporting a political candidate (Mattes, Urbanic, and Limacher 2020, 260). With its clear missionary agenda and its special design as a series of decidedly national events with the aim of “transforming nations,” as well as its unusual intermingling with aspects of current national politics, Awakening Europe, an “imported actor of the New Christian Right” (Mattes, Urbanic, and Limacher 2020, 264), contributes to the shaping of Austria as a Christian nation.

The Parliamentary Prayer of 2020,⁶ by contrast, can be understood as a homegrown attempt to strengthen the concept of Austria as a Christian nation. Originally born out of an initiative of the 1980s (Kühne 2020) and based on the American tradition of the National Prayer Breakfast (Peterson 2017), a so-called National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast has been held in the Austrian parliament since 2017. The event sees itself as part of a network of similar events that “exist in many other cities around the world” (Parlament der Republik Österreich 2019b). It describes itself as organized on a non-partisan and interdenominational basis by the Committee of the National Parliamen-

5 For Ben Fitzgerald’s prayer for Kurz, see KATH.NET (2019).

6 Excerpts from the program can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpJZ6zxIP_Q (accessed January 18, 2022).

tary Prayer Breakfast, an association of members of the Austrian Parliament.⁷ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 event was downsized and broadcast online on December 8.

While the Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast had been criticized in previous years against the backdrop of the historically painful separation of Church and state in Austria, it was particularly its staging in 2020 that received much publicity. The invitation was extended by the president of the Austrian National Council, Wolfgang Sobotka (ÖVP), together with the president of the Federal Council, Andrea Eder-Gitschthaler (ÖVP), and the corresponding committee. The prayer was moderated by Gudrun Kugler (ÖVP), who has been a Member of Parliament for the ÖVP since 2017. She is an alumna of the International Theological Institute, Trumau, as well as a trained lawyer and a nationally and internationally well-connected activist who works to spread conservative Christian values. Her numerous engagements and activities demonstrating her commitment against abortion include appearances as a regular speaker at Austrian anti-abortion rallies, such as the March for Life (Wölfl 2020), and as a member of the Europe-wide network Agenda Europe (Datta 2018), which aims to restrict human rights regarding sexual and reproductive health. She has participated in transnational Christian-Right activities, such as the World Congress of Family, alongside US Evangelicals and actors from the Russian Orthodox Church and the Vatican (Janik 2019). Together with her husband Martin Kugler, a former spokesman for Opus Dei, she founded a PR company that promotes conservative Christian projects, as well as a Catholic online dating platform (Mattes, Urbanic, and Limacher 2020, 261).

This event consisted of a series of prayers from religious representatives and politicians (Parlament der Republik Österreich 2020). After it became known that, in addition to Jewish and several Christian representatives, members of the Charismatic and Loretto communities would also be participating, while at the same time no Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist religious representatives had been invited, many of the invited parliamentarians pulled out, leaving only politicians from the ÖVP and the FPÖ to speak at the event (Gaigg and Schmid 2020; Gaigg and Müller 2020). The fact that the Loretto Community, an explicitly missionary, conservative Catholic group, was offered a stage reinforced the existing criticism of the mixing of Church and state. Furthermore, it showed the close relation of some parts of the ÖVP and FPÖ

7 A list of committee members can be found in the invitation to the third parliamentary breakfast in 2019 (Parlament der Republik Österreich 2019b).

with actors of the Christian Right who are actively trying to shape and/or regain Austria and Europe as a Christian territory.

Conclusion: Mobilization of the Christian Right in Austria

We would like to summarize how recent developments point to the mobilization of a Christian Right in Austria. A look at the *protagonists* that we have described reveals that the Christian Right in Austria presents itself as a heterogeneous field of new and old alliances between political and religious actors. Particularly in more recent constellations, confessional boundaries seem to be losing importance in the face of common issues.

The defining *narratives* of the Austrian Christian Right can be summarized in two key aspects: Firstly, there is an increasing importance of Austria as a Christian nation. Secondly, there is a growing emphasis on an anti-genderism agenda that promotes an essentialist understanding of gender through various policies and opposes policies based on a non-essentialist understanding of gender (Hark and Villa 2015, 19). Consequently, we see that opposition to abortion in Austria is now a stepping stone from which gay marriage and adoption rights, sex education in schools, and other issues are under attack. This is particularly evident in the three federal states where ÖVP-FPÖ coalitions currently hold (co-)government positions. In addition to the previously mentioned awareness campaigns against unwanted pregnancies in Salzburg, there has been a much-discussed ban on using gender-inclusive language in public administration of Lower Austria in summer 2023 (Stepan 2023). In addition, Lower Austria and Salzburg are currently discussing the introduction of a childcare allowance (commonly referred to as the "hearth bonus"). Under this system, which already exists in Upper Austria, families receive financial support for the care of their children at home – at the expense of access to institutional childcare facilities and further restricting women's participation in the labor market.

Due to the numerous actors involved, both political and religious, it is difficult to identify a clear-cut *target audience* for the Christian Right in Austria. While there are continuities, such as in the context of anti-abortion activism, we also see innovations, such as the *conversion* of the formerly anti-clerical FPÖ into a party that defines itself as Christian (Hadj-Abdou 2016). Another important recent development is the targeting of the political mainstream as an audience. The increasingly interdenominational nature of anti-abortion activism,

together with the cooperation between religious and political actors, as in the case of the parliamentary prayer, helps in addressing audiences at the center of society.

Finally, regarding the *effects* of the mobilization of the Christian Right in Austria, we would like to highlight two aspects. First, despite the ongoing secularization processes, a discursive shift in politics is underway in which Christian values and a Christian identity are particularly emphasized. However, this development is more due to the increasing success of populist positions and their adoption within the political mainstream over recent years. It is not surprising that, in this context, actors of the Christian Right are also increasingly appearing. Their increased appearance repeatedly causes irritation, but it has also heightened the awareness of parts of the public regarding their narratives. Second, the religious activism that we have described takes place along issues rather than along denominational lines. It remains to be seen whether this *generically Christian* activism of the Christian Right is a development that progressive religious groups will eventually adopt, thereby increasingly challenging established religion–state relations.

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Is There a Christian Right in Belarus?

Regina Elsner

Belarus seemed to fall off the analytical agenda for quite a long time, with everything that happened there being attributed to its status as the *last European dictatorship*. Only a few studies address social developments within the country in a more nuanced way; however, they primarily refer to either historical developments or the socio-political upheavals around falsified elections since independence. This is especially true in the case of social and religious currents on both the spectrum from liberal to illiberal ideas and the spectrum from conservative to progressive ideas. While the surrounding post-socialist countries such as Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states all went through different stages of national revival with the appearance of nationalistic groups and parties often coupled with a particular religious component, Belarus remained a seemingly homogenous country with no strong ideological or policy-oriented actors beyond the dictatorship of Lukashenka and his political elite (Bekus 2010). What is more, from the perspective of religious international conservative movements such as the World Congress of Families, Agenda Europe, Ordo Iuris, and the Interparliamentary Orthodox Assembly, Belarusian actors are either missing or take a back seat to Russia.

However, conservative issues such as traditional family values, abortion, and reproductive and LGBTIQ+ rights are prominent topics in Belarusian public discourse, and religious actors actively participate in these social and legal debates. Although the agenda of Catholic and Orthodox actors in Belarus seems to be the same as in neighboring Russia, Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine or in Hungary and Slovakia, there is a lack of a systematic policy agenda and organized structures in Belarus. In this article, I examine the background to and reasons for these differences.

The political and religious landscape

According to official documents, Belarus is a presidential republic. Elected in the first and so far only free elections since Belarus gained independence in 1994, President Aliaksandr Lukashenka has eroded the political system, established an autocratic rule completely dependent on his person, and fostered a revival of Soviet symbols and ideas. He has changed the constitution in order to secure his—by now 29-year—autocratic presidency via falsified elections and the repression of all oppositional parties and actors. Civil protest against electoral fraud has been met with severe state violence as well as mass detentions and torture of political opponents and civil protesters, especially around the presidential elections of 2010 and 2020.

Since 1990, Belarus has had a multi-party system representing the whole spectrum of political ideologies from left to right. However, the parties have no real influence since all political decisions depend directly on the president, who is not tied to any party. Parties are thus unable to conduct an effective political campaign and are usually divided into the so-called *systemic opposition*, which is tolerated by Lukashenka and legitimizes his elections, and other opposition parties, most of which are not officially registered.

Most of the latter opposition parties lack a clear ideological program. Yet, two of them are of particular interest for the purposes of this article. The Belarusian Christian Democracy Party (BCD) was founded in 2005 and is still not officially registered. It has a conservative–centralist focus, with a strong orientation to Europe, and it is critical of Russian influence in Belarus. According to the party's leadership, the BCD aims for a Belarus built on biblical teachings in politics and public morals (Radyo Svoboda 2007; Dyn'ko 2016). Another movement connected to this party is the Youth Front founded by the Christian activist Paval Sieviaryniec and known for its conservative Christian agenda.

The Conservative Christian Party–Belarusian People's Front (CChP-BPF) was founded in 1999 after a split in the Belarusian People's Front, one of the major opposition parties, and officially registered in 2000. The party has a right-wing and nationalistic orientation, and it is openly critical of Lukashenka's rule. Apart from a general reference to traditional family values and the defense of Belarusian culture, the party's program lacks more thoroughgoing positions on the Christian component (BNF 1999). The party leader, Zianon Pazniak, fled Belarus in 1996 and has since been leading the party from the USA. However, the party has boycotted all parliamentary elections since 2000.

Belarus is a multi-religious state with a constitutional separation of church and state. Following the atheistic repression of religion during Soviet times, religious freedom was declared, and religious communities were able to establish new structures. President Lukashenka follows a pragmatic and utilitarian religious policy, granting religious freedom in exchange for loyalty to the state leadership (Vasilevich 2019).

The major religious community in Belarus is the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC), which is a dependent sub-structure—a so-called exarchate—outside of the national territory of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and subordinated to the Patriarchate of Moscow. According to recent surveys, about 70% of the Belarusian population identify as Orthodox, while public trust in the Orthodox Church is at about 36%, having dramatically fallen as a result of the official loyalty of the Church leadership to Lukashenka following the protests in 2020 (Astapenia 2021). Like Orthodoxy in Russia and Ukraine, the BOC has its historical roots in the Baptism of Rus' in 988, and it shares its dogmatic and social teaching with the ROC. In this common social teaching, it is assumed that decisions on societal matters can only be influenced via direct communication between the Church hierarchs and the political elite, with a conceptual ignorance of civil society as an autonomous public actor (Elsner 2020).

The second-largest religious community is the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), with about 10% of the population identifying as Roman Catholic. Historically, the RCC is closely linked to the Polish Catholic Church, and, as a result of different historical border shifts, it has more parishes in the west of the country. Especially during the first decades after the end of the Soviet Union, the RCC was shaped by bishops, priests, nuns, monks, and social workers of Polish origin. As a consequence, the Church was latently perceived as a Polish church and had to contend with some political pressure in the form of entry visa refusals and bureaucratic persecution. Since Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, a Belarusian citizen born near Hrodno, was appointed Metropolitan Archbishop of Minsk–Mohilev in 2007, this pressure has eased. Thus, while the rootedness of Belarusian Catholics in Polish spirituality remains strong, the Church also supports a Belarusian civil consciousness and the Belarusian language as the main language of the liturgy (on the language policy, see Lastouski and Zakharov 2022).

Various protestant churches represent the third-largest religious group, with around 5% of the population identifying as members of a protestant community. Yet even though the protestant churches conduct visible public chari-

table activities, public trust in them is rather low due to their widespread perception as *sects* as a result of Soviet and Orthodox propaganda. The Jewish and Islamic communities are very small and of minor public relevance.

Christian conservative actors: Partners of the state

Given the strong affiliation of the two major religious groups in Belarus—the Belarusian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church—with two of the most important conservative actors in the Christian world—the Russian Orthodox Church and the Polish Roman Catholic Church—a basic conservative orientation of the churches in Belarus is only to be expected. Liberal or progressive Christian ideas in the field of values or policy have no visible lobby in either church. However, there are also no ultra-conservative or radical right-wing actors with a measureable impact on public debates.

The politicization of non-political actors such as religious groups is almost impossible in the context of the authoritarian rule of long-term dictator Lukashenka. While it has existed since the very start of his rule, the pressure to keep out of politics has increased, particularly since the protests following the 2020 presidential elections, when Lukashenka told the churches to “remain in the temples and pray” (Lukashenka 2020). This pressure has resulted in an increasing degree of control within the religious communities. Thus, the BOC and the RCC only allow their names to be associated with activities that have been approved in advance by the respective hierarchies, and they restrict the public activism of their flocks.

At the same time, the politics of Lukashenka himself follow a conservative paradigm, occupying the discourse associated with typical conservative questions such as family values, migration, and nationalism, as well as taking a critical stance in relation to scientific knowledge. Thus, the religious communities are, by default, partners of the state. As the only sphere in which the churches are allowed to take public action, the discourse on conservative and patriarchal values provides fertile ground for conservative alliances across all the religious communities and leaves no place for more progressive voices.

The conservative agenda: Public action with limited outreach

The general context of authoritarian rule significantly limits the scope for religious activities. Activism and lobbying are only possible on certain issues and through the channels that the state provides. Three topics on the Christian-Right agenda fit into this narrow political framework: anti-abortion discourse, anti-LGBTIQA+ discourse, and anti-migration discourse. A more recent topic would be the anti-vaccination debate. However, Christians face significant problems when their participation in these discourses is tied to aspirations for political relevance in Belarus.

Natallia Vasilevich has studied the anti-abortion movement in depth (Vasilevich 2021a). Similar to the situation in Russia and Ukraine, reproductive rights in Belarus are shaped by the Soviet legacy. There is thus a very liberal legal approach to abortion and medical reproductive measures, as well as a very critical attitude among the population regarding any restrictions in this sphere. Therefore, until the early 2000s, the churches and religious actors tended to treat pro-life questions as pastoral issues in the individual relationship between a woman and her spiritual leader. With the emergence of the concept of *demographic security* in 2005, the churches, with their pro-life agenda, became strategic partners of the state (Vasilevich 2021a, 205–213) and politicized their own pro-life discourse in accordance with the state's demands. Since then, the mainstream religious discourse has merged with arguments about national values and demographic survival, while activists interested in the spiritual, psychological, and structural support of women in need remain at the margins (see the case of Elena Zenkevich [Zenkevich 2020]). Remarkably, as Vasilevich underlines, in spite of this strategic partnership, the churches distance themselves from the campaigns of Christian conservative parties for anti-abortion legislation in order to avoid any accusation of political interference (Vasilevich 2021a, 215–216).

Belarus is still a country with one of the highest abortion rates worldwide; however, abortion numbers have decreased significantly since the end of the Soviet Union. Due to the non-transparent political processes, the reasons for the decrease may include not only anti-abortion lobbying by religious and conservative actors but also better access to contraceptives. Restrictive adaptations of the law on abortion were agreed in 2013 and 2014 after major public statements by the leaders of the Belarusian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in October 2012 (Belarusian Orthodox Church 2012) as well as a public debate on social indicators for abortion (e.g., a pregnancy as

a result of sexual abuse) and the right to conscientious objection. Thus, the social indicators for abortion until the 22nd week have been limited to a few, women are obliged to undergo special consultations before abortion, and medical staff are given the right to refuse abortion for moral or religious reasons. The churches have access to schools and women's consultations in order to provide anti-abortion information.

The Belarusian anti-abortion lobby has two platforms, pro-life.by and Pro-Life Belarus (prolife-belarus.org), as well as the Open Hearts Foundation, where information on events, analyses, resources, and news are collected. The actors behind these platforms, their religious affiliations, and the financial sources of the initiatives are not mentioned explicitly. The movement thus poses as a civil initiative that is not affiliated with any church or party. As the former editor-in-chief of pro-life.by Tatiana Tarasevich coined it, it represents a "certain life strategy" (Tarasevich 2013). However, the contributions of pro-life.by mostly refer to the positions of the Belarusian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church, while Pro-Life Belarus and the Open Hearts Foundation are linked to the Catholic Church in Belarus. Conferences organized by the Open Hearts Foundation and Pro-Life Belarus feature specialists and clerics from Russia and Belarus as well as speakers from the European movement for so-called traditional family values (e.g., Gabriele Kuby, René Ecochard, Francesco Giordano, and Levan Vasadze), thus pointing to possible financial support from international organizations such as the World Congress of Families and Church in Need. The anti-abortion actors also organize various public actions, such as the International Prayer Congress for Life (organized by the Catholic Church in 2022), the Ladoshka Festival (organized every year since 2013 by the Belarusian Orthodox Church with support from the Russian Agency for Culture), and the annual Week without Abortion in cooperation with hospitals and clinics.

The anti-abortion discourse makes strong links to issues of gender, homosexuality, sexual education, juvenile justice, and euthanasia. This mix of issues is fostered by the above-mentioned national platforms, which mark these topics as *threats to the family*, as well as by major religious public actors such as Tatiana Tarasevich, Archbishop Tadeuzs Kondrusievicz, and the Christian politician Pavel Sieviaryniec. The analyses of and material on questions of so-called traditional family values are very much shaped by two discourses: the teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church in this area (mainly published by the Patriarchal Commission on Questions of Family and the Defence of Motherhood and Childhood) and the anti-genderist movement in Poland and Western Eu-

rope. While a strong Belarusian rationale or ideology is lacking in these documents, Belarusian demographics and the Christian roots of Belarusian civilization play a key role in, for example, the arguments of Tatiana Tarasevich. In an interview from 2012, Tarasevich directly linked the need for pro-life policies with the need to save Belarus as a Belarusian nation: “The existence of Belarus and the Belarusian nation is the preservation of children, the maintenance of the birth rate and large families. This is our path of development—the path of demographic dynamics as an increase in the population, but by no means the path of contraception, abortion, sterilization—which international programs impose on us” (Tarasevich 2013).

Tarasevich also referred to the threat of migration, stating that it endangered the survival of the Belarusian people and their traditions and faith. Given the rather weak nationalistic currents in Belarus in general, these Christian arguments against migration are remarkable. The same applies for the Christian lobbying against LGBTIQ+ inclusion, which is a taboo issue in public discourse. In 2019, the Christian activist and politician Pavel Sieviaryniec, known as a radical opponent of LGBTIQ+ rights, was excluded from the Belarusian PEN after he refused to pay the annual fee because of the LGBTIQ+-affirmative position of the PEN. In reaction, Sieviaryniec accused “Marxist and leftist actors” of persecution of Christians (Dyńko 2016).

In general, the pro-choice and gender equality agendas are portrayed as both a threat to Belarus from Western liberal Europe and a (leftist) threat to European Christian values. Christian actors from both the churches and civic groups frame their conservative agenda accordingly, linking it to Belarusian national survival and a special mission to defend European Christian values. In both directions, the outreach of these Christian activists deeply depends on whether the political strategy of the dictatorship is taking on a pro-European or nationalistic key, which makes them less reliable for international networks.

Ambivalences in the conservative position

However, and rather surprisingly, the arguments of the global right-wing movement on two major recent issues—migration and vaccination—have not taken hold in Belarus. Until recently, both issues were of minor relevance in the country. The country has never been an attractive destination for migrants and refugees due to its political system and poor performance in terms of human security and social welfare (Alshanskaya 2020). Xenophobic ideas are

integral to Lukashenka's political program, so right-wing populism could have been expected to fall on fertile ground. Yet nationalism in Belarus is, first and foremost, a movement for emancipation from Russia and the Soviet heritage, which promotes the Belarusian language and culture and often opposes the politics of Lukashenka (Bekus 2010). Lukashenka's alignment with Russia's war against Ukraine particularly strengthened these currents of a liberating national conscience in contrast to the autocratic one. Accordingly, the accusation of nationalism is often used to denounce opposition activists and politicians or Catholic activists who support the Belarusian language and the national spiritual history, as the case of a cartoon about catholic priests with Nazi symbols in a newspaper from September 2021 illustrates (Christian Vision Group 2021). At the same time, Christian currents are unlikely to join in or be part of the nationalistic discourse due to the historically complex and ambivalent position of the major religious communities in relation to Belarusian national identity (Alshanskaya 2020; Ioffe 2020). As for vaccination, Belarusian society is still shaped by the Soviet legacy with its strong trust in the natural sciences and medical surgery. Thus, a critical attitude to vaccination is less likely and remains the domain of fundamentalist minority groups within the churches, whose arguments are based on a spiritual understanding of illness. In this situation, radical anti-migrant and anti-vaccination positions have not been able to take root.

Both issues became more relevant in 2021. The arrival of the first COVID-19 vaccines prompted a global outcry among anti-vaccination actors, many of them right-wing populists, which was partly fueled by Christian arguments. However, the discussion in Belarus did not fit this pattern. Here, the social contract had already been massively undermined by the political failure to take measures against the pandemic in 2020. The electoral fraud and the violent crackdown on the ensuing protests and on civil society in general since the summer of 2020 have only widened the gap between society and the political elite. However, surveys show that the low vaccine acceptance rate in society is more linked to mistrust in the government's health policies (Krawatzek and Sasse 2021) than to conspiracy theories or anti-vax paradigms. In 2021, Lukashenka himself agitated against vaccination against COVID-19, thus occupying the space that might otherwise have been filled by an anti-vax campaign by civil actors. Although some ultra-conservative Christian groups, mainly from Orthodox monasteries, opposed vaccination with reference to the spiritual benefits of illness, they did so only in the context of giving spiritual advice to their flock and never criticized the state or the wider population.

The situation with regard to the question of migration is similar. When Lukashenka cynically used migrants from the Middle East to blackmail and divide Europe in 2021, the obvious violation of basic human rights and Christian values led to a wave of solidarity with the migrants among Belarusian Christian actors. However, in most of their statements, they called on European countries to help the refugees, thus avoiding any confrontation with Lukashenka's regime and any engagement with the topic of migration in general (Vasilevich 2021b).

Apart from the state-owned media channels, there has been almost no public support in Belarus for the positions and activities of Lukashenka in the context of COVID-19 and the refugee crisis at the EU borders, even though these were consistent with certain sentiments expressed in the conservative discourse of Christian groups. While Belarusian religious actors do not risk confrontation with the authoritarian leadership on other core issues from the conservative script—abortion, gender, and LGBTIQ+ rights—on the questions of vaccination and refugees, Christian actors have acted contrary to the political line and sometimes even voiced protest. Without a doubt, this situation has to be understood in the context of the serious political crisis after 2020, where open compliance with the inhumane activities of the dictator is no longer an acceptable option for Christian groups.

Conclusion: Limited space for populism in a dictatorship

The case of Belarus illustrates that in a dictatorship, there is almost no space for independent civil actors, even if they support the conservative and patriarchal agenda of the state. In Belarus, the political elite simultaneously occupies the conservative agenda and limits the activity of conservative actors. The Christian churches serve as a moral cushion for the conservative policies of the state and, at the same time, have no scope to voice dissent or demand concrete legal measures. This situation was enforced when the political leadership in 2022 decided to support Russia's war against Ukraine and again intensified the pressure on all social spheres. Accordingly, the political parties, which are part of the Christian conservative block, lack any visible support from the churches even when they advocate the Christian conservative agenda. Under these circumstances, it would appear to be impossible to form any visible ideological coalition. The conservative agenda of the Christian churches thus remains within the church walls, with any public expressions of it limited to the

subject of traditional family roles and statements by more radical groups, especially in Orthodox monasteries. However, such statements have no significant effects in political terms.

This explains why Belarusian conservative groups are not attractive to the international Christian right-wing movement, as they have no prospect of gaining a real, sustainable influence on political decisions. The Belarusian political leadership, which advocates conservative values, is also no ally for the international Christian right-wing coalition, as Lukashenka is not a reliable or respected partner in international politics and only substantiates his conservative agenda with Christian values by default. This constellation is the reason why Belarus is not part of the general European Christian right-wing mobilization. Nevertheless, the existing pro-life actors and Christian conservative parties, with their connections to both the European Catholic alliance for the traditional family and the Russian Orthodox conservative ideology, are potential allies for the global Christian Right once the dictatorship has ceased to exist. They therefore deserve further attention from scholars of the Christian Right.

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From Catholic Church to Religious-Political Movements

Religious Populism's Coming of Age in Croatia

Zoran Grozdanov and Nebojša Zelič

Croatia gained its independence in 1991, which, along with the independence of Slovenia, marked the collapse of communist Yugoslavia, which had existed between 1945 and 1991. If we exclude the period between 1941 and 1945 when it was a satellite Nazi state, Croatia gained its independence for the first time in its history. Croatia constituted itself as a nation state, with a prevalent percentage of ethnically Croatian people. According to the census of 1991, 78% of Croatian people declared themselves to be Croats, of whom 76.64% were Catholics. In addition, in 1991, there was still a large population of Serbian people (12%, of whom 11% were Orthodox). However, as the consequence of the wars of the 1990s, the Croat population grew to 90.42% (of whom 86.28% were Catholics) in the 2011 census. As huge numbers of Serbs had left the country, in this census, only 4.34% of the population were Serbs, a number that has remained stable up to today (the overall number of Orthodox Christians was 4.44%, along with Bulgarian, Macedonian, and other ethnic minorities affiliated with Orthodoxy). Among other religious communities, there was a very small number of Protestants (0.34%), Muslims (1.5%), and members of the Jewish community (0.1%).

At the 1991 elections, the majority of people (41%) voted for the Croatian Democratic Party (HDZ), alongside 35% for the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which was the successor of the Communist Party of Croatia. For the past 30 years, the HDZ has ruled most of the time, except for two periods following elections won by the SDP (2000–2004 and 2011–2015).

During the period following 1991, Croatia went through a very swift process of desecularization. During the communist regime, the Catholic Church in Croatia (or, as it calls itself, the *Catholic Church among Croats*, which marks

the very strong ethnic component of the local church) had a marked presence in people's lives, and the regime was "repressive but more in the public than in everyday lives" (Šarčević 2013, 176). However, after the fall of communism, religion became the main marker not only of religious but also of national identity. In presenting the role of the Catholic Church in Croatian society, we should also keep in mind that Croatia is one of the most religious countries in Central and Southeastern Europe (along with Poland, Romania, and Moldova) (Ančić and Zrinščak 2012, 26). The Church strongly stood together with the HDZ in its demands for state independence, advocated for the right of Croatian people to have their own state, and has, with a few exceptions, followed HDZ nationalistic politics during the past decades (Ramet 2008, 350). The emergence of NGO religious–political movements¹ after 2005 caused the alliance between the HDZ and the Church to break up around issues of sexual and gender rights and policies. In these processes, the Croatian Bishops' Conference, as a body of individual bishops, expressed strong support for the values promoted by the new religious–political movements.

These religious–political movements have marked a huge change in the Croatian political landscape. Although they emerged from NGO movements and initiatives, they have provided an impetus for the formation of political parties of the right, including MOST (the Bridge), which began in 2012 as an alliance of municipal leaders, and, very recently, Domovinski pokret (the Homeland Movement).

Church and state in Croatia in the 1990s

The analysis of the relationship between Church and state in Croatia requires special consideration of three essential features:² first, the special role that the Catholic Church has had in Croatian history, particularly in socialist Yugoslavia; second, the impact that the war had on the development of society, particularly the relation between national identity and religious affiliation;

1 In defining religious–political movements, we rely on the description of Petričušić, Čehulić, and Čepo (2017), who state that these movements are manifested "through multiple attempts to scrap the legislation and practices of both state and private institutions that are contradicting the value system of the Christian (Catholic) majority" (61).

2 On the problem of comparing the Croatian context within the European framework, see Zrinščak (1998), 15–26.

third, Croatia had a period of economic transition from a collective economy to privatized market economics, which introduced many new areas of affiliation in addition to those associated with nation and religion (Zrinščak 1998, 15–26; Vrcan 2001). In this chapter, we provide a glimpse of the first two features.

The Catholic Church has played an important role in strengthening the link between nation and religion since the 1970s, especially following the breakdown of Yugoslavia, and this factor has made possible the high politicization of religion. For example, on the eve of the multiparty elections in 1990, Catholic bishops issued a statement that made clear the Church's preference for parties on the right, stating that "it matters whether the Church will finally gain public legal status or whether a more or less skillfully formulated law on the legal position of religious communities and of the same community, i.e. citizens who are believers, will be kept under surveillance, controlling their development and activity as if they were a potential social danger" (Ramet 2008, 346).

Four agreements that were signed between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia in 1997 and 1998 (known as the Vatican agreements) are important in regard to the formal status of the Catholic Church in Croatia.³ These agreements certainly gave some privileges to Catholic over other religious communities who also signed agreements with the government (Marinović and Marinović Jerolimov 2012).

Thus, even if we may question the *de jure* privilege of the Catholic Church, as this is subject to various interpretations, it is unquestionable that it has *de facto* privilege in society and politics, while at the same time supporting the conservative and nationalistic politics of the ruling HDZ. This is particularly obvious if we look at the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, before the religious–political movements occurred in Croatia. During this period, cooperation between the Catholic Church and the HDZ really gave the impression of an alliance between throne and altar. The Catholic Church gave legitimacy to the HDZ's politics of national revival, not only historical legitimacy as the guardian of national identity but also transcendent legitimacy in its striving toward national sovereignty. As one sociologist of religion stated, "the religious resources of Catholicism in Croatia were the bases for political mobilization on the side of a precise political orientation, primarily an HDZ orientation" (Vrcan, 2001; see also Karabeg 2004).

3 Agreement on Spiritual Care in the Military and Police Forces; Agreement on Cooperation in the Fields of Education and Culture; Agreement on Legal Issues; Agreement on Economic Issues.

Even though there is a strong connection between the Church and the HDZ, according to some surveys, there is no expectation among religious citizens that the Church should deal with the politics of government. On the other hand, there is much expectation that the Church should deal with questions of abortion and same-sex relations (Ančić and Zrinščak 2012, 29). In their activities and political engagement since 2010, the new religious–political movements in Croatia have been relying heavily on exactly these expectations.

Religious–political movements taking the floor

From 2015 onwards, the Croatian political arena experienced a kind of new feature: the emergence of political parties that profiled themselves as more right wing than the HDZ, thus taking over the HDZ's rhetoric of being guardians of Croatian identity and Catholic values. We are primarily speaking here of the parties MOST (the Bridge), Domovinski pokret (Homeland Movement), and Hrvatski suverenisti (Croatian Sovereignists). Although we may specify pragmatic and ideological differences between these three parties, with MOST belonging more to the center-right spectrum and the other two to the far-right spectrum, their core ideology consists of supporting conservative and ultra-conservative values whereby religious belonging gives a framework for defining national belonging.

The short history of these parties dates to the years after 2005, when NGO religious–political movements started to rise. The great new feature was that the key actors of the political parties that were established after 2010 were very active in the social movements that were mobilizing at the level of civil society rather than through the organized institutions of the Catholic Church, as in the previous two decades. Moreover, it is easier to notice their connections with international organizations of the Christian Right than with the Catholic Church hierarchy, although they also enjoyed its support in their initiatives.⁴ Even though they started as initiatives against a left-wing government, they are not connected with the HDZ, as the Catholic Church was, and they have even been critical of the HDZ when the government tried to pursue policies in line with EU directives (e.g., the ratification of the Istanbul Convention). These

4 On the international connections of ultra-conservative movements in the EU, which include organizations in Croatia, see Data (2018), 69–105.

new social movements were instead making alliances in the Croatian political landscape that can be described as *right-wing populist* or *conservative sovereignist*.

It is worth mentioning the iconography of these initiatives and movements. In the center of their religious (but also political) aspirations stands the figure of John Paul II, who is praised for his attention to keeping traditional values, his focus on evangelization of culture, and his strong emphasis on ethnic belonging (Grozdanov 2012, 149–163). Pope John Paul II is “our pope,” so the iconography tells us, unlike Pope Francis, who in these religious–political movements is often described as the one who doesn’t understand or support the clear path from religious convictions to political decisions or, even worse, as the Antichrist (R.I. 2019).

The influence of these movements in the social and political arena, with the support of the highest authorities of the Catholic Church in Croatia, started in 2005, with the question of introducing health education in primary and secondary schools in Croatia. This influence continued with the constitutional referendum of 2013 on defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman, which had the aim of prohibiting same-sex marriage. It had its peak in 2018, with the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, which is widely known as the Istanbul Convention.

2006: Introducing health education in schools

Two major keywords appeared during these *cultural wars*, as the then prime minister of the Social Democratic Party, Zoran Milanović, named this political activism (Krasnec 2013): tradition and family values.

In 2006, the conservative NGO GROZD (Glas roditelja za djecu/Parents’ Voice for Children) started to openly object to introducing sexual education in schools, which was part of the curriculum for health education in the school system. The leader of GROZD was Ladislav Ilčić, who is now an MEP (for the conservative party Hrast) and president of the European Christian Political Movement, an alliance of marginal right-wing Christian parties. Their public actions—press conferences, public protests, and lawsuits in the Constitutional Court—in the following years caused one of the first secular/liberal polarizations in Croatian society. However, GROZD’s program had strong overtones of Catholic moral theology. In it, “GROZD promotes a particular value system that is in accordance with the Catholic doctrine and not with the socially accepted values of the Republic of Croatia, such as freedom and gender equality”

(Bijelić 2008, 332). Within just a few years, controversies around sex education (which was just one module within the health education program) became the focal point of contention between not only secular and religious convictions but also the Government of Croatia and the Croatian Bishops' Conference.

One of the loudest voices rejecting governmental sex education was Vice Batarelo, the then Chief of Staff for Pastoral Care of the Family in the Zagreb Archdiocese and leader of the ultra-conservative NGO Vigilare. Vigilare is part of a transnational socially conservative network of around 50 organizations in 10 European countries, based on the teachings of Tradition, Family, Property (TFP). Within the TFP network, it is strongly connected with Poland's *Ordo Iuris* Institute for Legal Culture (Datta 2018, 81–82). Prominent bishops, such as Croatian Cardinal Josip Bozanić and Deputy Bishop of Zagreb Valentin Požaić, used an even harsher rhetoric, with the latter claiming that “the Nazis came to power through democratic elections, then abused the legitimacy of their mandate and imposed a dictatorship,” adding that a governmental sex education program indoctrinates children “with the ideology of homosexuality and eroticism” and “destroys human beings” (Hedl 2013). The struggle for health education began in 2005 as a social movement, but in 2012, it became a major political issue. The campaign by GROZD was a huge success. The Ministry of Science and Education abandoned the introduction of health education, including the *controversial* module on sex education, in schools.

2013: The referendum to change the definition of marriage

The success of the campaign against sex education in public schools corresponded chronologically with the constitutional referendum that was organized in 2013 with the aim of constitutional change regarding the definition of marriage. The referendum came as the continuation of NGO pressure on political decision makers to promote conservative values in the public and political arena. At that time, the only strong political partner of the NGOs that started the campaign was the HDZ, which supported their claims. The referendum was initiated by the newly founded organization In the Name of the Family, led by Željka Markić, who was also active in the previous campaign against introducing sex education in schools. The main burden of opposing them was placed on those liberal NGOs that were most active in disclaiming the demands of the referendum organizers.

In addition to the broad definition that “marriage and legal relations in marriage, common-law marriage and families shall be regulated by law,” the

referendum aimed to constitutionalize the definition of marriage as a “union between a man and a woman” (Art. 61). This campaign, along with the previous one, was organized during the rule of the Social Democratic Party. The relationship between the SDP and the Church in Croatia has had a very harsh history, as the SDP is the legal successor to the Communist Party of Croatia. This fact is especially important, as all of the opposition to governmental politics regarding same-sex marriage and sex education was politically organized around the HDZ.

In 2013, their campaign succeeded, with the collection of more than 700,000 signatures calling for the referendum. A crucial factor that helped initiate the referendum was the initiative In the Name of Family, led by Željka Markić, which was connected with, among other organizations, the Spanish ultra-Catholic organization Hazte Oir and its platform CitizenGo, which uses online petitions as a form of internet activism for the promotion of conservative values.⁵ The referendum was strongly backed by the Croatian bishops (almost without exception), the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the majority of protestant churches. The only two religious communities that were against the referendum were the Lutheran Church in Croatia and one of the two Jewish communities in Croatia, whose leader said that “although we don’t support same-sex marriages in our religious community, we respect the right of the individual and minority group for their self-determination” (Tportal 2013).

The referendum led by In the Name of the Family demanded that “traditional values of Croatian society must be protected through enshrining the traditional, heteronormative definition of family” (Petričušić, Čehulić, and Čepo 2017, 61). Moreover, they framed their claims around the idea of the necessity of preserving traditional family and religious liberty (Petričušić, Čehulić, and Čepo 2017, 67), which was complemented by their future efforts to sustain the *right to life* and criminalize abortion. Again, even more than in the sex education campaign, they were supported by the Croatian Bishops’ Conference, which issued a statement “In Defense of the Marriage and the Family” (Košić 2013), in which it “invited all of the believers, as well as people of good will, to join the referendum and mark the answer Yes at the referendum question: Are you in

5 According to WikiLeaks, Croatia’s funding was prioritised in 2013 (the year when U ime obitelji initiated the referendum against same-sex marriage). See Šimičević (2021). For more on U ime obitelji, see Šljivić and Mlinarić (2016) and Petričušić, Čehulić, and Čepo (2017), 61–84.

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?” adding that such a vote would be “in accordance with the humanistic and gospel values, as well as with millennial tradition and culture of the Croatian people and majority of the Croatian citizens” (T.V. 2013).

The referendum was successful, with 66% of the voters approving the amendment to the Croatian Constitution. This not only showed that “citizens can be successfully mobilized on their social conservative value orientations” (Petričušić 2017, 62); it also created a huge cultural gap between secular and liberal citizens, on the one hand, and conservative, right-wing, and religious actors, on the other.

2018: The ratification of the Istanbul Convention

The third case study of the influence of ultraconservative religious actors and right-wing NGOs relates to opposition to the so-called Istanbul Convention. As a member of the EU, Croatia had to put the ratification (or rejection of ratification) of this convention on the parliamentary table. This ratification process, which was postponed by the Social Democrats who ruled up to 2015, was started in 2017 and completed in spring 2018, during the rule of the conservative HDZ.

The main rhetoric used in the official statements of the Catholic Church against the ratification concerned *gender ideology*. The opponents of the ratification claimed that the Convention, although needed for regulating and decreasing violence against women, contains a definition of gender “as a social construct and variable that is independent of sex, of biological reality” (Džeba 2017). Furthermore, they claimed, the consequences of this definition of gender included “creating the belief that the human being is born as a neutral being that can later on decide whether he/she will be a man or a woman, or some other among many genders (homo, gay, lesbian, queer, trans)” (Istina o Istanbulskoj n.d.). Warnings against the introduction of gender ideology in the Convention were not new among the NGOs and Church leaders who were campaigning against the Convention. Already in 2012, Croatian Cardinal Josip Bozanić, speaking against health education in schools, emphasized in his Christmas sermon that in this education plan, “gender ideology is saliently introduced” (Živković 2017).

The actors who were campaigning against ratification were gathered around the initiative Truth about the Istanbul Convention. This initiative

gathered many NGOs, mostly (Catholic) religious organizations that were previously unknown in the Croatian public sphere.⁶ In addition, organizations that were very active in the referendum on marriage and the campaign against sex education, although not officially part of this initiative, stepped into the public arena with the same arguments as this initiative.

On the eve of the ratification of the Convention in the Croatian Parliament, the Croatian Bishops' Conference issued a public letter to the parliamentarians in which it stated that it was their duty "to mention to all the members of the Catholic Church, belonging to various political organizations, and who must say Yes or No to the ratification of the Convention, that it consists of ideological elements that correspond to 'gender theory' and which is also in contrast to fundamental values of Christian faith and culture" (Biskupi HBK 2018). The Convention was finally ratified in the Croatian Parliament in 2018 by the HDZ. The campaign against the Convention clearly revealed an alliance of the movements against ratification with new right-wing populist parties, particularly MOST, which claimed to be defenders of Catholic culture and traditional family values, as well as with minor parties that later joined the political parties Domovinski pokret and Hrvatski suverenisti.

Conclusion: Populism fueled with religious identities

All these initiatives that were led by more or less the same actors have left huge traces in Croatian political as well as religious life. As the aforementioned processes suggest, the alliance between the major political party (the HDZ), the NGOs, and the initiatives that strongly advocated for politically and religiously oriented conservative values was broken on the eve of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. However, despite this broken alliance, the influence of these actors and their ideas has not diminished. Their rhetoric and the values that they advocate resemble those of the ultra-conservative initiatives described above: the struggle for the criminalization of abortion and the fight against same-sex unions. However, they have also developed new agendas in recent years, particularly hardline politics against immigrants, in which they have great resemblances to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and anti-EU souverainism. We are witnessing old wine in new bottles, with a renewal

6 A full list of the members can be found at <http://istinaoistanbulskoj.info/gradanska-inicijativa>.

of the inseparable connection between religious conservative values and chauvinistic nationalism. In the 1990s, this was monopolized by the HDZ and the Catholic Church, but it has now been taken over by internationally connected religious–political movements and a group of right-wing populist parties.

These processes have also affected the religious scene in Croatia. At the beginning of the activities of the initiatives and NGOs, the highest Church authorities uncritically accepted their rhetoric and positioned themselves not only as a religious player but also as a politically influential body that gave a blank check to the rise and establishment of conservative values in the already conservative Croatian society.

This uncritical support lasted up to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, but somehow this happy marriage between lay movements and the official Church has started to dissolve regarding issues of politics toward immigrants and, very recently, attitudes toward epidemiological measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lay religious–political movements, along with some political parties (MOST and Domovinski pokret), have taken a strong stand against immigrants as well as against vaccination, while the official Church in Croatia, with the very minor exception of an individual bishop, has followed the line of Pope Francis on these two issues.

All these processes that have here been briefly described pose a great challenge for the political future, in which populist movements may experience a huge rise and pose serious challenges to liberal democratic arrangements.

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The Conservative (Catholic) Christian Right in Central Europe and the Illiberal Backlash

The Czech Republic and Slovakia in Comparative Perspective

Marián Sekerák and Přemysl Rosůlek

Introduction

In 1989, Czechoslovakia liberated itself from communism. Political pluralism and religious freedom were reestablished, while the country was dissolved into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993. In this chapter, we introduce and compare the manifestations of the Christian (Catholic) Right broadening into the public sphere. This involves discussion of the agents who are more or less affiliated with the Catholic Church and its hierarchy. First, we briefly introduce the political systems of both countries. Second, attention is paid to the religious landscapes, depicting the relationships between the state and the church, as well as providing statistics related to the number of believers in the most relevant churches. Consequently, this chapter analyzes religious agents: insiders within the highest ranks of the Catholic clergy itself, *Christian* political parties, religious organizations and initiatives, and related media networks. When it comes to the internal structure, each subchapter is divided into two sections aimed at the Czech Republic and Slovakia, respectively.

1. The political and party system

Czech Republic

The Czech Republic was established in 1993 as a parliamentary democracy (Brunclík and Kubát 2016) and a unitary state. The Czech Parliament is made

up of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, to which members are elected for four and six years, respectively. The Czech prime minister (PM), commonly the chairman of the major political party winning the most recent general election, is the head of government and represents executive power dependent on the majoritarian support of the lower chamber. The president, elected for a five-year term, is the head of state and commander-in-chief. He lacks many executive competencies *de iure*. Nevertheless, due to the interwar tradition of the strong center of power represented by the president, this has become a highly influential office, and its role has even strengthened following a 2012 constitutional amendment. Thanks to this, the president is elected no longer by both parliamentary chambers at their joint session but by the direct vote of the citizens (Brunclík and Kubát 2016, 12–13). This change and its consequences have encouraged scholarly discussion on whether the country is heading toward semi-presidentialism (e.g., Hloušek 2014).

The Czech party system could be described as stable during the period between 1992 and 2010 when coalition governments were usually formed by either the left-oriented Czech Social Democratic Party or the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (Balík and Hloušek 2016, 108). The era of limited pluralism ended when 10 parties entered the lower chamber in 2013 (Balík and Hloušek 2016, 107). This new period was marked by the advent and rise of the populist and originally center-right wing ANO 2011 party (*ano* means *yes* in Czech; initially, the meaning of ANO was Action of Dissatisfied Citizens), established and headed by billionaire Andrej Babiš (prime minister 2017–2021). However, ANO 2011 soon shifted to the center-left, attracting significantly higher electoral support from those who traditionally voted for the Social Democrats and the Communists. In recent months, the movement has been trying to appeal to conservative voters and has become skeptical towards the EU. Finally, in the 2021 general election, a wide range of right-wing and centrist parties banded together (including the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party, KDU–ČSL) in order to defeat ANO 2011. They succeeded in gaining a parliamentary majority and have formed a coalition government of five centrist and right-wing oriented parties headed by PM Petr Fiala.

Slovakia

Like the Czech Republic, Slovakia is a unitary parliamentary republic with a directly elected head of state with a five-year term. The Parliament (National Council of the Slovak Republic, elected for a four-year term) is unicameral. Al-

though the Slovak political system is not usually considered semi-presidential (Spáč 2013), it is sometimes characterized in this way (Protsyk 2011). Considerations of this type intensified after the institutionalization of the direct election of the president in 1999 and even more so after 2011, when the constitution was significantly amended, giving the president the power to entrust the dismissed government with the temporary exercise of its powers (limited by the constitution) until a new government is appointed.

As in the case of the Czech Republic, the Slovak Prime Minister is appointed by the President. The PM-led government must gain support for its program statement in Parliament. The influence of two strong personalities in the position of PM, namely Vladimír Mečiar and Robert Fico (Kováčik and Klučiarovský 2015), was decisive for the formation of the Slovak political system. Usually, the PM is the chairman of the strongest governmental party, although there have been some exceptions.

As can be seen from this brief overview, Slovakia has a quite fragmented and unstable multiparty system without a dominant party. Quite typical is “the overall weak institutionalization of political parties,” as well as, “on the other hand, [the strong] personification of politics, [the] short life of existing” entities and the “frequent emergence of new entities, partially filling the vacancy after the existing ones or, in some other cases, responding to new situations” (Hynčica and Šárovec 2018, 11). A major challenge for the party system has recently been the rise of Euroscepticism (Ušiak and Jankovská 2021) and growing voter support for anti-establishment, especially far-right parties (Voda, Klučnovská, and Spáč 2021), represented by Kotleba—People’s Party Our Slovakia and The Republic (the latter emerging after splitting off from the former after the 2020 general election).

2. The religious landscape

Czech Republic

After the fall of communism, freedom of belief and religion and the rights of all churches and religious orders began to be constitutionally guaranteed. They have also become a lived reality in public life, without any state interference. However, the question of the Catholic Church’s property restitution, following its previous seizure during the communist regime, became a contested and unpopular issue in the Czech Republic. The approval of the Church’s property

restitution in 2012 by one of the center-right governments was only narrowly approved by the legislature. In 2017, the center-leftist coalition government backed by the communist party controversially taxed these compensations, but this was subsequently cancelled by the Czech Constitutional Court (ČTK 2019).

At the diplomatic level, in 1990, right after the fall of the communist regime, the then Czechoslovakia reestablished its diplomatic relationships with the Holy See. In 2002, the international agreement between the Czech Republic and the Holy See was signed by the government. However, its ratification was later turned down by the Chamber of Deputies, as the communists, some Social Democrats, and even secular right-wing MPs from the Civic Democratic Party opposed ratifying the treaty, arguing the need to protect national sovereignty and the importance of the equality of all churches (Enyedi and O'Mahony 2006, 174–175). Thus, the Czech Republic became the only post-communist country not to have such an agreement with the Holy See (“Vatican and Czech relations” 2003).

The Czech Republic, sometimes referred to as an *atheist* or *non-believing* country (Hamplová and Nešpor 2009), recorded 43.9% of believers in the 1991 census. The majority of them (89%) declared their affiliation to the Roman Catholic Church, followed by the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (4.5%) and the Czechoslovakian Hussite Church (3.9%). The radical decline of believers and of those affiliated to registered churches has further continued in later censuses. In the 2021 census, a voluntary question on religious affiliation was answered by 69.9% of people (compared to 55.3% in 2011 and 91.2% in 2001), of whom 48.7% were self-declared non-believers, while 13.1% belonged to a church or religious society. Of these, 741,000 declared their affiliation to the Roman Catholic Church, which represented a decrease in those affiliated to this church of approximately two million people over 20 years (CZSO 2022).

Interestingly, when focusing on the 2021 census figures, the then archbishop of Prague, Cardinal Dominik Duka, denoted media reports pointing to the declining numbers of Roman Catholics in the country as *fake news*. Duka sharply rejected the methodology chosen by the Czech Statistical Office and argued that the COVID-19 circumstances, the non-obligatory question on religious affiliation in the questionnaire, and the strong sense of ecumenism among many Roman Catholics identifying themselves simply as *believers*, together with their fear of openly declaring their religious affiliation, artificially diminished the number of Roman Catholics in the official figures (Duka 2022).

Slovakia

In terms of the relevance of Christianity, Slovakia is often contrasted with the Czech Republic as a country that still has a relatively high degree of religiosity. This is represented by a *traditional* type of believer/churchgoer, the significant representation of self-declared Christians in Parliament, and the relatively strong voice of the (Catholic) clergy in society. It should be noted that until the mid-1950s, Slovakia was a predominantly rural country with a strong Christian religiosity. As mentioned earlier, believers of almost all confessions underwent structural persecution during the communist regime of 1948–1989.

In sharp contrast to the Czech Republic, the Catholic Church's position in Slovakia is relatively strong due to historical reasons. This is also reflected in its relationship with the state. It should be remarked that in 2000, the Basic Agreement between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See was signed. In 2002, the treaty regarding the operation of the churches in the army, police, and prisons was concluded. Two years later, the treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See on Catholic education was also concluded. Regarding the issue of restitution, this was resolved in Slovakia sooner than in the Czech Republic. In March 2005, the Parliament passed a law on the return of the ownership of real estate to churches and religious societies, as well as the transfer of ownership of some real estate.

There was a significant religious revival connected with democratization processes after 1989. For the most dominant church, the Roman Catholic Church, this was associated with the building of new churches, the development of religious life, an increase in the number of priestly vocations, and the strengthening of the social position of the Church and its hierarchical representatives (Matlovič, Vlčková, and Matlovičová 2015). According to data from the latest census from 2021, Slovakia is still predominantly a Catholic country, with 55.76% of the population declaring themselves Roman Catholics (3,038,511; a 6% decrease compared to the 2011 census), 4% declaring themselves Greek Catholics (218,235), and 5.27% declaring themselves Augsburg Evangelicals (286,907). Those who declared that they were without any religious affiliation were 23.79% (1,296,142; ŠÚSR 2022). This slightly growing secularization trend and the changing dynamics of Slovak (Catholic) religiosity (Sekerák and Rončáková 2017; Moravčíková 2019) have led, quite paradoxically, to the desecularization of the state and public life, where various political agents verbally invoke Christianity and its values (Tížik 2017).

In their reactions to the results of the census, both leading representatives of the Catholic Church in Slovakia, the Archbishop of Bratislava and the then chairman of the Slovak Episcopal Conference, Msgr. Stanislav Zvolenský, and the then Greek Catholic Archbishop of Prešov, Msgr. Ján Babjak, thanked the believers for professing their faith. According to the latter, “I deem the results of the census very positively. It is proof that our Church is alive, even though it is struggling with various problems” (TK KBS 2022).

3. The religious protagonists

3.1. The clergy

Czech Republic

Since 1989, the Catholic Church has become the most influential institutional actor in the Czech Republic, together with the representative standing body of the Czech Catholic bishops (the Czech Bishops' Conference) and the Archbishops of Prague: František Tomášek (1977–1991), Miloslav Vlk (1991–2010), Dominik Duka (2011–2022) and Jan Graubner since 2022. Moreover, there is the umbrella association entitled the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Czech Republic.

František Tomášek, a symbol of resistance against communism, was succeeded as archbishop of Prague by Miroslav Vlk in 1991 (Cardinal from 1994). Msgr. Vlk systematically fought against xenophobia, racism, antisemitism (Allen 2009), and neo-Nazism during the 1990s and throughout the first decade of the new millennium. In face of the deeply rooted Germanophobia in Czech society, he aimed to improve the relations between Czechs and Germans. In 2006, Vlk strongly criticized the activities of the circles associated with the Society of St. Pius X, known as the Lefebvrists, accusing them of “sympathies for anti-Semitism and neo-Nazism,” while Lefebvrists replied that Vlk was socially ostracizing “Catholics who point to the negative consequences of liberalization processes in the church” (Allen 2009). The Lefebvrists are traditional Catholics who are constantly appealing for a return to pre-Vatican II Catholicism in liturgy and denounce the post-Council Catholic Church for becoming too open to modernism and liberalism. Cardinal Vlk further openly criticized the emerging Islamophobia and expressed his sympathy with angry Muslims during the Prophet Muhammad cartoon crisis (Vaughan 2006). He acted similarly during the recent *migration crisis*.

Cardinal Vlk wanted the Communist Party to be banned and had a series of clashes with Czech politicians, mainly over delays related to the return of Church properties from the state. However, his successor in the office, Archbishop (since 2012 a Cardinal) Dominik Duka, quickly became politically and ideologically closely tied to the “illiberal national–populist” (Hanley and Vachudová 2018, 280) President Miloš Zeman. They both shared “a populist approach and anti-immigrant rhetoric, islamophobia and disrespect for the Czech Prague intellectuals, political activists, NGOs, and human rights movements” (Šipka 2019, 95).

The approach of Cardinal Duka and the majority of the Catholic Church to the issue of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (still not ratified) serves as another example of the intolerant and illiberal approach of recent years. Conservative groups, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Czech Bishops’ Conference, and its head (Cardinal Duka), have strongly opposed its ratification, associating it with “gender ideology” and the “attack on traditional family” and arguing the need to preserve the “status quo” and the traditional role of men and women (Guasti 2021, 196–197). It should be noted that the document itself is primarily aimed “against violence against women and domestic violence” (Council of Europe 2021). In this regard, perhaps the most severe accusation, publicly supported by Cardinal Duka, was proclaimed by Msgr. Petr Pitha, one of Duka’s closest collaborators, during mass in 2018: “This is to be enacted under the Istanbul Convention in the name of a powerful pressure group of genderists and homosexuals. Your families will be torn and dispersed. They will take your children and keep you from where they went, where they sold them, where they are imprisoned” (cited in Guasti 2021, 197).

Slovakia

Unsurprisingly, given the relatively high proportion of the Catholic population, the most important religious actor is the Slovak Episcopal Conference (SEC), the Slovak counterpart of the Czech Bishops’ Conference. When compared with the Czech Republic, the Slovak Catholic bishops represent a much larger part of the population. Moreover, in Slovakia, there is no primate (in contrast to the Archbishop of Prague in the Czech Roman Catholic Church), so there is no distinctive speaker who is first among equals among the hierarchs. The episcopate, together as a whole and also individually, regularly express their views on social and political issues. Let us briefly mention some of the most significant instances from recent years.

In 2009, shortly before the presidential elections, the Slovak media extensively reported on a homily broadcast on the radio, which was delivered by the then diocesan bishop of Banská Bystrica, Msgr. Rudolf Baláž, a former chairman of the SEC. In his homily, Baláž criticized the then presidential candidate Iveta Radičová (later PM) for her liberal attitude to the issue of abortion. She had publicly commented on the issue that what is moral or immoral in society is a matter of social agreement. “Does this sentence mean that if society agrees that murder is not a sin and a violation of the law, then we can kill? This is for fools,” Baláž remarked (bes 2009).

A decade later, in 2019, once again before the presidential elections, the Archbishop of Trnava, Msgr. Ján Orosch, commented on another female presidential candidate, Zuzana Čaputová. In his publicly broadcasted homily, Orosch declared that to cast a vote for her meant a “grave sin” for a Catholic, calling her an “ultraliberal candidate” (Gehrerová 2019). As in the Czech Republic, in the Slovak religious milieu of recent years, there can be traced the rejection of political liberalism and the rights of the LGBTIQ+ minority, as well as opposition to the Istanbul Convention.

A bigger public uproar was ignited by the Advent Pastoral Letter of the SEC a few years before. In addition to human sexuality, this dealt extensively with the topic of *gender ideology*, which is one of the main targets of the Christian Right not only in Slovakia (Đurinová 2015) but also across Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Kováts 2018; Lavizzari and Prearo 2019). The letter reads as follows: “The adherents of the culture of death come with a new ‘gender ideology.’ Through the noble catchwords a breakdown of family life, which is to be sacred, is being promoted in society. This is a blasphemous riot of man against his Creator. This is what the actors of the culture of death and the proponents of gender ideology want to destroy in the name of noble catchwords” (KBS 2013). As is obvious, the letter’s authors worked with the term *culture of death* taken from St. John Paul II’s encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* of 1995.

There are plenty of other examples of how Christian ecclesial leaders struggle against this *ideology*, which plays the role of a straw man in their narratives. For instance, in its 2020 written opinion, the Dogmatic Committee of the Augsburg Evangelicals stated that “[t]o love the Lord means to be obedient to His Word and not to interpret it according to fashion trends and different ideologies. We reject the labelling as homophobes for those who do not share the same view of ideology related to same-sex attraction or transsexuality and gender identity” (Vieroučný výbor ECAV na Slovensku 2020).

3.2. Parties and their relation to Christianity and the Catholic Church

Czech Republic

Due to the long-lasting and strong secularization of Czech society, the right-wing parties, including the protest ones (Kim 2020), have pursued mainly (neo)liberal and eventually conservative discourses, but they have widely ignored pointing out the importance of Christian values (Hanley 2010, 116). However, after 9/11, the 2004 Madrid train bombings, and the London bombings of 2005, things have begun to change. Moreover, the advent of the *migration crisis* shaped the dynamics of the conservative backlash, with the Christian–Western narrative being employed not only by the KDU–ČSL. In this period, the issue of religion has become a common weapon in political rhetoric (Kratochvíl 2019).

After 1989, the KDU–ČSL established themselves as the most significant representatives of the Christian (and, more concretely, Catholic) electorate in the country. The party lobbied for the restitution of property once seized from the Catholic Church during the communist era. In particular, due to the prevailing liberal opinion in Czech society regarding reproductive rights (CVVM 2007), the party did not obviously promote its conservative programmatic issues (e.g., a ban on abortions and resistance to same-sex partnerships) in its electoral campaigns (Linek and Lyons 2011, 1158). However, several *abnormalities* from liberal democratic standards emerged during the period analyzed.

Due to the rising popularity of the *clash of civilizations* approach after 2001, during the 2009 electoral campaign, regional and predominantly Catholic political representatives of the KDU–ČSL strongly opposed the second mosque to be built in Brno (ČTK 2009), the largest city in and historical capital of Moravia (Moravia occupies the eastern part of the Czech Republic and is more Catholic than Bohemia). Shaped by other terrorist attacks in Europe and the emergence of the recent *migration crisis*, there has been a shift from nationalism to civilizationism, which, “driven by the notion of a civilizational threat from Islam” (Brubakers 2017, 1191), has given birth to an identitarian type of Christianity.

The rising resistance to Islam and Muslims, as well as the adherence to *Christian roots*, *Christian–Western culture*, and the *Judeo-Christian pillars of our civilization*, seems to be quite new in the rhetoric of the Christian Right in the Czech Republic. For example, high-ranked politicians of the KDU–ČSL expressed their support for the authoritarian populist and illiberal Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán (KDU–ČSL 2013). The then party chairman Pavel Bělobrádek congratulated Orbán on his victory in the 2018 general elections, saying that

“we have to defend values of European Christian civilization and national cultures” (Bělobrádek 2018). Prior to the 2017 general election, the KDU-ČSL formulated their basic programmatic directions for the 2017–2019 period, emphasizing the issue of Judeo-Christian civilization, “our culture,” while opposed to “multiculturalism” and “gender ideology” in education, as well as the trivialization of “our culture” (KDU-ČSL 2017, 4, 7–10). Finally, the KDU-ČSL have opposed the ratification of the Istanbul Convention by associating it with “gender ideology” and the “attack on traditional family,” further arguing for the need to preserve the “status quo” and the traditional role of men and women in society (Guasti 2021, 196–197), although that document was primarily aimed “against violence against women and domestic violence” (Council of Europe 2021).

After the 2017 general elections, Cardinal Duka congratulated in a letter the chairman of the openly xenophobic and Islamophobic Freedom and Direct Democracy, writing that “I’m convinced that we are united with care over the security of the people in this country and a series of other topics” (ČT24 2017). Duka ignored pressure from the more cosmopolitan and rather influential Catholic intelligentsia informally headed by prominent Catholic priest Tomáš Halík, who asked him to condemn the party for its xenophobia and had previously criticized him openly “for failing to make a distinction between Islam and Jihadist terrorism” (Dizdarevič 2017, 161). Duka defended his letter of congratulation by emphasizing that this (xenophobic) party supported the values of the *traditional family*, “which consists of men and women” (ČT24 2017). A Dominican friar, Filip Antonín Maria Stajner, even publicly recommended that Christians vote for Freedom and Direct Democracy rather than for the KDU-ČSL (PL 2017).

Finally, in 2021, Josef Nerušil, an employee of the Archbishop of Prague and an administrator of Duka’s Facebook page, publicly declared his decision to run for the 2021 general election as a leader of Freedom and Direct Democracy in a Prague constituency, saying that the party more corresponded to Christian values than the too moderate Christian Democrats. Neither Duka nor the archbishopric distanced themselves from Nerušil’s affiliation to the party (APHA 2021), which once again irritated the more pro-liberal urban Catholic intelligentsia.

Slovakia

Until 2016, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH; Štefančík 2019) was considered the main Christian-oriented political party, with a close affinity

to the Catholic Church. Its roots can be traced in the environment of Slovak Catholic dissent. In the first years of its existence after 1989, the KDH's policy was embodied primarily within the personality of its founder, Ján Čarnogurský, an important representative of Catholic anti-communist dissent, who is today known for his admiration of Vladimir Putin. His political thought has long been characterized by a strong emphasis on conservative Christian and national values. Since its establishment, the KDH has promoted the idea of a return to Europe, namely, Slovakia's geopolitical reorientation to the West and Euro-Atlantic cooperation (Hynčica 2015). However, over the years, the party has gone through many internal tensions.

In the 2016 general election, the KDH did not enter Parliament for the first time in its history. In this period, there was significant party fragmentation in Slovakia. Several conservative-oriented political parties emerged, and some other parties strengthened the conservative elements in their programs. All of these tried to fill an ideological gap, seeking to appeal to Christian-oriented voters (Sekerák 2019). Despite the entry of Marian Kotleba's far-right party into Parliament, this should not be viewed as a mainstreaming of this type of politics. One of the parties that sought the favor of conservative voters was the Slovak National Party. Its chairman, Andrej Danko (who was already in the position of speaker of the Parliament), stated at his meeting with the SEC that he would do everything possible to ensure that LGBTIQ+ rights were not enforced in Slovakia (SITA 2016).

It is worth noting that a few years before, the chairman of the Social Democrats, Robert Fico (the then PM), had also sought balanced relations with the Catholic Church, stating, "I would be very happy that if the Church is a mother to the believer, let the state be the father of all citizens" (SITA 2008). Such claims are unsurprising because this nationalistic rhetoric, supplemented in later years by cultural conservatism, is typical of Fico (Burzova 2012). Fico also openly manifested his sympathy toward the now-deceased Cardinal Ján Chryzostom Korec, the former bishop of Nitra, who—as a heavily persecuted and secretly consecrated bishop during the communist regime—was a Slovak ecclesial legend and dissident icon. This can be explained as Fico's attempt to reach conservative voters. It is apparent that many other political parties have been interested in this type of electorate. We should mention that the KDH, which is ideologically similar to its Czech counterpart the christian-democratic KDU-ČSL, was unsuccessful once again in the 2020 general election.

In 2014, there was an interesting political cooperation between these two parties regarding the constitutional protection of *traditional marriage*. The then ruling Social Democrats, with the help of the votes of the opposition Christian Democrats, achieved a substantial constitutional amendment introducing a strict definition of marriage as a union of man and woman. A year later, some conservative NGOs (especially the Alliance for the Family, on which see below), in a close collaboration with the Catholic Church, collected signatures to hold a nationwide referendum on the protection of the *traditional family*. However, the referendum was characterized by a low turnout and led to a significant polarization of public opinion (Valkovičová 2017; Synek Rétiová 2021).

3.3. Christian-minded organizations and initiatives

Czech Republic

In the 1990s, there were some insignificant political groupings of the Christian Right bearing certain pro-fascist, corporatist, and clerofascist traits, such as the Movement of National Unification. This group appealed to the relevance of religion and Catholic morality and was persuaded of the importance of “traditional and natural religion in which our national tradition was established and our past formed” (Mareš 2000). In the new millennium, similar nationalistic, conservative, and pro-Christian initiatives emerged, which also manifested as strongly anti-EU and as defenders of Christian identity in Europe. In particular, in 2001, the conservative historian Petr Bahník founded a Society for Cultural Identity – Linden Cross, which organized conservative lectures, participated in anti-Marxist and anti-EU demonstrations, and closely collaborated with nationalistic and antisemitic initiatives. In 2007, Bahník became chairman of the tiny Rights and Justice Party, a “movement for nation and family,” which appealed against immigration, the EU, homosexual relationships, and euthanasia (onl-iHned 2007). In the previous year, the St. Wenceslas National Assembly, an umbrella movement of Czech nationalists (Mareš 2009), of which Bahník was a chairman, declared as dangerous the process of decomposition of traditional Christian values that had been caused by anti-Christian, multiculturalist, and supranational political elites. Finally, Bahník initiated the manifesto D.O.S.T. (*dost* means *enough* in Czech) in 2007, which gradually became active under the name Akce D.O.S.T. (Action D.O.S.T.). Akce D.O.S.T. has become popular due to the direct support it has enjoyed from Ladislav Jakl and Petr Hájek, the closest collaborators of Czech President Václav Klaus. The manifesto emphasized the relevance of the “Western, Antique-Christian roots of our

traditional culture,” families of men and women, and the “cultural and spiritual values of Western civilization.” It condemned a would-be political correctness and leveling aimed at creating a multicultural worldview (Akce D.O.S.T. 2007).

Moreover, a number of conservative and pro-Catholic groups focusing predominantly on regular conservative issues such as sexual education and abortion have emerged. In the mid-1990s, the Committee for the Defense of Parental Rights was founded in Brno as a reaction to the intention of the Ministry of Education to launch compulsory sexual education in primary schools. According to this initiative, only parents were morally responsible for the education of their children (Konzervativní strana 2010). As its successor, the Alliance for the Family was formed in 2017, which lobbies for *traditional families* and against same-sex marriages. In the late 1990s, the Pro-Life Movement initiative emerged. This is primarily a pro-life initiative, lobbying for legal restrictions on abortions by organizing the annual March for Life in Prague since 2001 (supported by Cardinal Duka) as well as exhibitions such as *Stop Genocide*, which portrayed bloody fetuses in city squares around the country. Although it has never turned to terrorist or violent attacks on clinics (Rees 2013), it can be viewed as implicitly nationalistic and anti-Islamic in its character.

As for the traditionalist-oriented currents within the conservative Catholics, several nationalistic-oriented initiatives on the Christian Right emerged in the early 1990s, such as the Society of Charles IV and the Club of Francis Ferdinand d’Este. The latter recruited its members and supporters from KDU-ČSL, radicals, and nationalist exponents of neo-Nazism and anti-semitism. In 1997, intellectuals under the leadership of Michal Semín, a well-known strongly conservative figure in the Czech Republic, founded the Una Voce initiative focusing on promoting church services in the Latin language for mystical and aesthetical reasons. Una Voce established itself as an anti-global and anti-EU initiative and directed criticism against Cardinal Vlk for his liberal views. Una Voce coordinated its activities with nationalist and far-right groupings and finally ended its activities shortly after the new Millennium (although they were renewed in 2012) due to being overshadowed by other traditionalist Catholic initiatives, such as the Lefebvrists and the St. Joseph Institute. The Lefebvrists, who appeared in the Czech Republic shortly after 1989, have become known for their religious and liturgical activities not only in larger Czech cities such as Brno and Prague but also in the town of Frýdek-Místek, reaching up to hundreds of supporters. Tomáš Strizsko, a prominent leader of the Czech Lefebvrists, claimed that Christians should not vote for

the current KDU-ČSL, alleging that they do not promote conservative values and are too close to Marxist and liberal political parties (FSSPX 2008). The St. Joseph Institute, a Catholic and conservative initiative founded by Michal Semín in 2005, has criticized the current liberal secular order and fought against secularization and “organized naturalism,” asserting the defense of “Catholic positions against syncretism, ecumenism and other pitfalls” (ISJ 2021).

Regarding the opposition to governmental anti-COVID measures and analogous anti-vaccination initiatives and activists, a well-organized and active alliance of initiatives with multifarious ideological affiliations has emerged in the Czech Republic. This includes individuals from non-political associations, media celebrities from the medical profession (including nationalists), far-right groups, and the Christian Right and Catholics represented by Action D.O.S.T. and the St. Joseph Institute. They organized sharp protests against the official implementation of COVID passes, calling it discriminatory and claiming that the strong assistance of sophisticated technologies in this process was introducing “permanent sanitationist apartheid,” thus making society drift toward the verge of a “new totalitarianism” (Akce D.O.S.T. 2021). Furthermore, pointing to the *abortion industry*, the lack of sufficient immunity after vaccination, and the negative side-effects of vaccination, activists from the Christian Right gathered around Michal Semín published an open letter to the Archbishop and president of the Czech Bishops’ Conference, Jan Graubner, in the ultra-Catholic online journal *Te Deum*, criticizing him for appealing to people to get vaccinated and for considering that act to be impeccable (Hodie 2021). Last but not least, Action D.O.S.T.co-organized (together with a vast number of initiatives and tiny non-parliamentary political parties, including nationalist and neo-Nazi groups) mass demonstrations against anti-COVID measures in Prague.

Finally, rather bizarre disinformation activities, which explain vaccination based on the *chipization* conspiracy theory and the interest of Bill Gates, the WTO, and the EU in creating controllable *biorobots* and severely reducing the world population, are being disseminated by the self-constituted Byzantine Catholic patriarchy of a few priests headed by the self-declared *archbishop* Eliáš Antonín Dohnal, who was earlier excommunicated from the Catholic Church and was recently residing in Ukraine. They have been declared anathema by the Catholic Church and other Eastern churches and have achieved some popularity in Ukraine, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic (Štampach 2021). However, the Czech Bishops’ Conference and the overwhelming majority of Catholics

have supported or accepted vaccination and governmental measures, including closures and sanitary restrictions during services. Only a marginal initiative, known as the Třeboň Proclamation, has criticized how official restrictions were imposed on worship activities, funerals, and the rights of citizens to practice peaceable outdoor assemblies.

Slovakia

In Slovakia too, various conservative NGOs can be found. Many of them are more or less close to the institutionalized Catholic Church. Unlike the Czech Republic, the influence of groups associated with the pre-conciliar form of the Roman liturgical rite has been rather marginal, although it has begun to increase in recent years.

Right-wing, religious-oriented groups gather mainly around the National March for Family, an annual mass event. The SEC is the main organizer of this march and supports it publicly through its pastoral letters. The partners of the march include, among other organizations, the NGO known as the Alliance for the Family. This was established in 2013 and has become the strongest opponent of LGBTIQ+ rights in Slovakia (Tektaş and Özgür Keysan 2021). The main public face of this organization is Anton Chromík, who has enjoyed significant media attention, especially in the period before the so-called referendum on the family in February 2015.

While Chromík has tried to be more consensual, often pointing to the alleged threats that the concept of the so-called traditional family has been facing, a much more confrontational type of communication with the public and the media was promoted by Jana Ray Tutková several years before the Alliance for the Family was established. Ray Tutková, who is Director of the Centre for Bioethical Reform, was one of the first pro-life activists in Slovakia (and was recently also known as an anti-vaxxer). Her fight against abortion has included drastic PR tools, such as the large-scale billboards that flooded Slovakia with their depictions of artificially aborted fetuses, similar to the aforementioned Czech Stop Genocide campaign (Beláňová 2020).

Another partner of the aforementioned march that is worthy of note is the traditionalist Institute of Leo XIII, which in its official *vision* states that “[w]e constantly watch as promoters of new values attack Christianity, as well as all pillars of a healthy society in an effort to replace them with enlightened social experiments. Utopian models that require the creation of a new, morally and socially ‘liberated man.’ Therefore, the Institute of Leo XIII aims to confront

these ideological efforts in order to build a broad, public Christian opposition that is aware of these threats" (Inštitút Leva XIII, 2010).

When it comes to the anti-vaxxer movement in Slovakia, this cannot be associated exclusively with the Christian Right. It is made up of several subcultures, not all of which are Christian-oriented. In addition to the aforementioned Ray Tutková, Peter Grečo, who often contributes to the conspiracy journal *Zem & Vek* (Earth & Age) and appears on the anti-system online ZVTV television channel, has close ties to this movement. He opposes vaccination and rejects the views of Pope Francis, while identifying himself with the conservative Christian Right. Nevertheless, the Catholic bishops' official stance regarding vaccination against COVID-19 is fully in line with the position of the Church and Pope Francis. In their appeal of November 2021, the bishops wrote the following: "We believe that vaccination is a great help allowing to stop the pandemic and save thousands of lives. By vaccination, we protect not only ourselves but also others. That one who doubts, let her decide precisely because the Christian vocation is to take care not only of herself but also of her neighbours and help them on the path of life. Let us be courageous and take this step out of love for others, for the weak, for the endangered" (TK KBS 2021).

3.4. Pro-Catholic media

Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, there is one non-commercial and apolitical TV channel focused on Christian audiences, *TV Noe* (established in 1996), whose director is the Salesian Leoš Ryška. Similarly, the Christian station *Radio Proglas* (established in 1995), directed by the Catholic priest Martin Holík, is also non-political and far from spreading radical or extremist attitudes. Finally, there is the traditional and soft Catholic-leaning journal *Katolický týdeník* (The Catholic Weekly).

In the 1990s, a series of periodicals emerged (e.g., *Týdeník Politika*, *Dnešek*, *Pochodeň Dneška*, and *Nový Dnešek*) aimed at promoting conservative or even ultra-conservative Catholic views commonly mixed with nationalist, anti-semitic, anti-Gypsy, anti-EU, and anti-NATO approaches (Mareš 2000). In some cases, these are even combined with elements of neo-fascism and neo-Nazism.

In the new millennium, a series of new journals emerged that spread conservative issues, either targeting traditionalist Catholic readers (e.g., the bi-monthly *Katolík revue* established in 2002) or affiliated to the Lefebvrists (*Te*

Deum). In 2004, the conservative bi-monthly *RC Monitor*, with the subtitle *The World through Catholic Eyes*, was issued for the first time. Recently, this has also shown itself to be anti-EU in its orientation, and one of its texts openly supported Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) before the parliamentary elections (Fuchs 2017), as well as supporting Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán (Cfam 2018). Currently, there are several other conservative online media, such as *Křesťan dnes* (Christian Today) and *Konzervativní noviny* (The Conservative Newspaper), the latter of which recently absorbed authors from the disappearing *Konzervativní listy* (The Conservative Papers; 2009–2019).

In regard to the disinformation scene, Petr Hájek, a former advisor and secretary of President Václav Klaus, surrounded by some personalities from the Christian Right, launched his conservative, anti-EU and pro-Kremlin online news server *Protiproud* (The Countercurrent) in 2013. This portrays its role as a defender of conservative and Christian values in a time of *migration crisis*. It openly declares its closeness to *Parlamentní listy* (The Parliament Papers), a leading disinformation (or eventually hybrid) online media server in the Czech Republic to which Cardinal Duka did not hesitate to give an interview (PL 2021). Finally, the expansion of the internet and social media has enabled initiatives (e.g., the Alliance for the Family [with its chairwoman Jana Jochová] and the Pro-Life Movement [with its speaker Zdeňka Rybová]) and individuals (e.g., Roman Joch and Matyáš Zrno) to disseminate the ideas, opinions, and thoughts of the Christian Right and lobby for its interests, including during the recent public campaign against same-sex marriages.

Slovakia

As in the Czech Republic, there are various moderate Christian media in Slovakia directly connected with the Catholic Church, such as *Katolícke noviny* (The Catholic Newspapers, established in 1849), *Rádio Lumen* (established in 1993), and *TV Lux* (established in 2008). However, the conservative Christian Right in Slovakia prefers other information channels and media. In particular, the moderately conservative (and mostly Catholic) website *Postoj.sk* should be mentioned, as well as the recently established website *Christianitas.sk* and the slightly more radical online *Denník Štandard* (The Daily Standard) and *Hlavné Správy* (The Main News). All of these regularly publish articles critical of non-heterosexual minorities, progressivism, and liberalism. When it comes to *Christianitas.sk*, despite being independent of the official Catholic hierarchy, some Catholic hierarchs (including the aforementioned Msgr. Orosch) are among the interviewees and contributors. The website is closely connected

to the Slovakia Christiana Foundation, which, in its own words, “defends the teaching of the Church, natural understanding of marriage and family, freedom to profess the Christian faith and seeks to restore Christian civilization based on Catholic morality and Greek philosophy, based primarily on the Second Vatican Council decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*” (Komár 2021).

The Slovakia Christiana Foundation was established in 2016. According to the register, its founder was the Foundation of the Institute of Social and Religious Education of the Priest Piotr Skarga, which was registered in Krakow in 2001. Skarga (1536–1612) was a Polish Jesuit, preacher, hagiographer, and leading figure of the Counter-Reformation in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Slovakia Christiana Foundation has been inspired by the international *Traditio, Familia, Proprietas* (TFP) movement, which aims to protect the traditions of Christianity, family, and private property.

This foundation was one of the main organizers of the first Conservative Summit (Nadácia Slovakia Christiana 2021) held in Bratislava on September 20, 2021, where Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó spoke as the keynote speaker. Other high-profile speakers at the summit included Speaker of the Slovak Parliament Boris Kollár (chairman of the We Are the Family party), former Slovak MEP and current MP Anna Záborská, former Slovak PM Ján Čarnogurský, Slovak Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Family Milan Krajniak, and KDH Czech senator (and former chairman of the KDH) Jiří Čunek (who is highly critical of non-heterosexual minorities). The summit was co-organized by the Polish conservative university Collegium Intermarium (established in 2021), which is closely linked to *Ordo Iuris*, a conservative Polish think-tank known for its protection of *traditional values*. Thus, the alliance between the Slovak and Polish (and partly Hungarian and Czech) Christian Right is quite obvious.

The aforementioned minister, Milan Krajniak, a former MP and current vice-chair of the We Are the Family party, can be considered one of the loudest critics of liberalism and liberal democracy. Before entering politics, he publicly referred to himself as the *last crusader*. His speeches in parliamentary debates are a good illustration of the contemporary Christian Right’s rhetoric in Slovakia: “We are not members of the Islamic, atheistic, liberal civilization, we do not have in Slovakia any mosques. But we have something here that every regime respected and that was churches; not under any regime did anyone let any church that had value and meaning fall down, and all those churches are Christian” (Krajniak 2016a); “Western civilization is built on three foundations:

Judeo-Christian ethics, Greek Athenian democracy, and Roman law. If liberal democracy seeks to castrate this civilizational identity of the West by removing the first pillar, the first foundation, then we will be a weak, emptied civilization without internal strength" (Krajniak 2016b).

It should be added that the criticism of the rights of sexual minorities is currently one of the main activities of the Christian Right in Central Europe (Kuźelewska 2019). Moreover, it can be stated that the fight against *gender ideology* is not only the topic of the far right (Đurinová and Malová 2017; Kazharski 2019), but it has also already become a standard part of Slovak politics and the rhetoric of conservative, right-wing media and NGOs (Valkovičová and Meier 2020).

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a brief overview of the activities of the conservative Christian Right in two countries: the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In both cases, while there are a number of differences, many common elements can be found. While in the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium, the situation in the two countries was quite different due to their separate political developments and the position of the Catholic Church in society, various similar tendencies can be observed, at least for the most recent decade.

In Slovakia, in the 1990s, the Christian Right had a strong political influence in the form of conservative nationalism, which, at that time, was not part of the so-called culture wars. This was related to the emancipation efforts of Slovaks and the stage of state and national identity building (Findor and Kusá 1999). In the Czech Republic, this was a rather marginal political phenomenon. However, especially since the illiberal cultural/conservative backlash (Norris and Inglehart 2019), the societal situations have converged. Paradoxically, this has happened despite the continuing social modernization and secularization. The Catholic Church and its affiliated organizations have become important public agents. In addition, many other non-religious actors (NGOs and political parties) have emerged, adopting identitarian, conservative rhetoric that refers to Christian values or roots as a defense against an external threat, whether Islam or political (supposedly *decadent Western*) liberalism. This rhetoric is associated with resistance against the rights of sexual minorities. Many (predominantly online) conservative media that have appeared in recent years (in the form of either alt-right or more moderate media) focus on these issues. These tenden-

cies in both countries reinforce the divide between liberals and conservatives (Rončáková 2015), with *Christian values* being used as an *empty signifier* in the public sphere, especially in connection with political Catholicism in its most radical forms.

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Catholics and the Far Right in France

A Breach in the Dam

Anne Guillard and Tobias Cremer

Introduction

This chapter is about the ambiguous relationship between religion and far-right politics in France. From the defense of nativity scenes in public spaces to a new rhetoric about France's Catholic identity, just like other right-wing populist movements in Europe and North America, the French Rassemblement National (RN)—called the Front National (FN) until 2018—is increasingly referencing Christianity in the context of its ethno-cultural right-wing identity politics. During the 2022 election, the RN was joined in this endeavor by Éric Zemmour, a former journalist turned far-right presidential candidate, who, although being Jewish, has called himself “steeped in Christianity” and proclaimed that Catholicism has a “birth right” to cultural hegemony in France (Zemmour and Leclerc 2018). However, closer inspection suggests that both the RN's and Zemmour's references to religion are driven less by an appreciation of Catholic values, beliefs, and institutions than by a desire to employ a cultural *Christianism* (Brubaker 2017; Cremer 2021b, Cremer 2023) or a *zombie Catholicism* (Le Bras and Todd 2013) as a secularized ethnic identity marker against Islam. Zemmour himself, for instance, confirmed in an interview that he was “for the Church but against Christ” (Lindell 2022).

For many decades, the historically dominant Catholic Church in France has strongly opposed the far right. Bishops repeatedly broke their *laïcité*-imposed silence on party politics to condemn the FN/RN's policies and call their flock to vote against it. Conversely, Catholic voters have traditionally exhibited a strong *religious immunity* against the populist right, voting for the FN/RN at significantly lower rates than the rest of the country (Perrineau 2017). More recently, however, there have been cracks in this Catholic bastion against far-right pol-

itics. Under the impression of internal crises, public scandals, and overall demographic decline, Catholic hierarchies have begun to gradually retreat from politics, while a group of conservative Catholic laypeople have sought to erode traditional taboos among their brethren by forming a *union of the rights* against what they perceive as the threats of Islam and liberal cosmopolitanism. As a result, in 2022, practicing Catholics, for the first time in France's post-war history, disproportionately supported a far-right candidate in the first round of the presidential election, with 16% of them voting for Éric Zemmour compared to just 7.1% of the population writ large (IFOP 2022).

This chapter investigates these ambiguous dynamics between Catholicism and the far right in France. Specifically, it explores the rise of a new Christian right and how it relates to far-right identitarian movements and the right-wing populist campaigns of Éric Zemmour and Marine Le Pen. It does so in three steps: first, it traces back the historical relationship between religion and politics in France and the ways in which Catholicism has become a barrier to the far right; second, it analyzes the factors that have led to the gradual erosion of the Catholic taboo against the far right; and third, it discusses the potential consequences of the breach in the Catholic anti-far-right dam for French politics.

Background: The Catholic dam against the far right in the 20th century

France's Catholics, while on average politically conservative, have historically been one of the most formidable bastions against the far right in the country. As political scientist Pascal Perrineau has observed, "the nationalist drive that feeds the far right in France always stumbled against the block of practicing Catholics who yield far less to the temptation of the FN than most other parts of the population" (Perrineau 2014, 39). For decades, polling data and election results showed a significant *religious immunity* against the populist right, with churchgoers supporting the FN at significantly lower rates than the rest of the population (Cremer 2021a). For instance, in the 2012 presidential election, only 4% of practicing Catholics chose Marine Le Pen compared to 18% of the general population (Du Cleuziou 2019, 312).

This reluctance among Catholic voters vis-à-vis the FN was mirrored in their leaders' behaviors. Senior clergy opposed the FN's ethno-nationalism and its references to Catholic identity on theological grounds, referring to Catholi-

cism's universalist principles, publicly castigating the party's paganist tendencies, and calling FN policies "incompatible with the Gospel and the teaching of the Church," as Cardinal Decourtray stated from the pulpit in 1985 ("We are tired of seeing contempt, distrust and hostility against immigrants grow in the country. We are tired of the ideologies that justify these attitudes. How could we allow ourselves to believe that language and theories that despise the immigrant have the guarantee of the Church of Jesus Christ?" [Tincq 2015]). When in 2002, the far-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen qualified for the second round of the presidential election for the first time, France's bishops under the leadership of Cardinal Lustiger publicly urged Catholics not to vote for him.

Catholic immunity to the far right was not a matter of course historically. As the Republic was built, from its birth in the Revolution, against the Church and the latter's fusion with the *Ancien Régime*, Catholic leaders were for a long time highly critical of democratic politics. This resulted in the centuries-long antagonism that Portier has called the war of the two Frances: *La France Catholique* vs. *La République Laïque* (Portier 2016, 7). This antagonism culminated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries during the Third French Republic, leading to the 1905 law of separation, which, through the principle of *laïcité*, codified one of the strictest separations of Church and state in the world. The Church in France vehemently opposed its expulsion from the public sphere for decades, and it was only after 1945, under the influence of Charles De Gaulle, that the Church gradually accepted *laïcité* and encouraged Catholic lay people to engage in Republican politics (Willaime 2008).

In this context, most Catholics aligned themselves with center-right political parties that defended secularized Christian values, while abstaining from adopting the label of Christian Democrats in order to abide with *laïcité*. Despite the subsequent emergence of an influential faction of left-leaning Catholics who focused more on the social Gospel, the commitment of French Catholics to the center right has since become a constant in French politics. For instance, in the first round of the 2017 presidential election, 46% of practicing Catholics and 55% of frequent churchgoers voted for the center-right candidate François Fillon, compared to just 20.1% of the general population (IFOP 2017). This attachment to the center right, combined with the powerful taboo created against the FN by Catholic hierarchies, has historically kept France's Catholics away from extreme right-wing movements (Cremer 2021a).

Moreover, this antagonism has been reciprocated by the FN since its beginning. At its creation by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1972, the Front National was composed of *Pieds-noirs* (former colonists returning from Algeria), monarchists,

and former Vichy supporters nostalgic for the *régime de Vichy* that ruled France and collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War, who showed no concern for Christianity and even opposed its influence on the grounds of fascist atheist ideology (Roy 2019). Despite some early connections between the FN and ultra-conservative Catholic monarchists around the Society of Saint Pius X (which lost its canonical recognition in 1975), the party was never close to the religious right and made no secret of its hostility toward Church representatives. For instance, in the 1990s, Jean-Marie Le Pen accused bishops of Freemasonry, arguing that because they would betray the French nation in favor of the interests of the universal Church, “we do not need the advice of the Bishops” (Roy 2016, 86). As the FN transformed from a neo-fascist to a more right-wing populist party, with its rhetoric shifting from a focus on race to a new *civilisationist* discourse directed against Islam, it was first neo-paganism and—following the leadership change from Jean-Marie Le Pen to his daughter Marine—then secularism rather than Christianity that were the FN’s preferred points of reference (Almeida 2017). In recent years, however, this traditional antagonism between Catholicism and the FN appears to have softened, and Catholics’ religious immunity to the far right has begun to erode.

Stemming the tide: French Catholicism and the temptation of the far right

Three factors have contributed to the weakening of Catholic opposition to the far right: first, the re-politicization of religion around the questions of bioethics and gay marriage; second, the marginalization of Catholics in their traditional political home on the center right; and third, the erosion of traditional taboos around the far right due to the silence of the Church’s leadership and the growing influence of a group of *identity Catholics* who have sought to de-diabolize the far right in Catholic circles.

1. France’s culture war and the Catholic counter-revolution

The election of Socialist President François Hollande in 2012 marked a turning point in Catholics’ self-perception in society. Under his presidency, major legislative projects to introduce gay marriage and liberalize surrogacy were introduced, which led to a sizeable mobilization of Catholic voters. With millions taking to the streets, the *Manif pour tous* (LMPT; Demonstration for all),

a highly conservative movement critical of gay marriage and progressive social morals more broadly, was born. This mobilization spread rapidly over the country and took many observers by surprise. But it also highlighted a fundamental trend: the re-emergence of an organized Catholic right, backed by an electorate that considered itself to be the legitimate defender of a heritage that is religious, as well as economic, social, and political, and which they saw under threat by the policies of the socialist government (Fourquet 2018).

However, at the root of these cultural anxieties were more than party politics. Instead, a momentous collapse of religious practice and allegiance had begun to cause major concerns that the *Catholic matrix*, which had structured French society for centuries, was eroding (Fourquet 2018). Indeed, since 1945, France has been one of the most rapidly de-Christianizing countries in the world. The share of Catholics, which in 1945 was still 98%, dropped to 80% in the 1980s and collapsed to just 32% in 2021, while church attendance imploded from about 38% in 1961 to just under 3% in 2021 (Portier and Willaime 2021). As the *first-born daughter of the Church* became increasingly de-Christianized and Catholics became a minority, many of them began to feel marginalized. Their fears often crystallized around perceived threats to the anthropological foundations of Christian morality as a result of the secular left (Du Cleuziou 2019). While most of France's practicing Catholics remain well integrated in French civil society and supportive of the country's liberal democratic institutions (in fact, on average, more so than the rest of the population; Fourquet and Gautier 2022), the *culture wars* arounds issues such as gender, gay rights, surrogacy, and assisted dying have facilitated the rise of a small but well-organized and politically potent movement of *identity Catholicism* that deliberately seeks to set itself apart from the dominant culture and the anthropological changes brought by modernity (Du Cleuziou 2019). Seeking to reinvigorate a centuries-old tradition of mistrust of modernity, it is promoted by intellectuals such as Chantal Delsol, Rémi Brague, Pierre Manent, and Fabrice Hadjadj, who are united in their rejection of relativism, egalitarianism, and an individualistic conception of autonomy (Elie, Choquet, and Guillard 2017).

Within the Church, the supporters of this brand of *identity Christianity* use marketing techniques for proselytizing purposes, inspired by evangelization practices from Evangelical churches across the Atlantic. This is illustrated by the establishment of masculinist Christian camps by various Christian communities (Community of the Beatitudes, Emmanuel Community, Chemin Neuf Community, etc.), which are inspired by the pastoral proposals of John Eldredge in his book *Wild at Heart* (Eldredge 2001). It can also be seen in the

attempt of the Bishop of Toulon-Fréjus, Dominique Rey, to create a French version of the knightly order of the Knights of Columbus.

In this context, the international circulation of knowledge and practices among religious institutions, social movements, and academics mobilized against *gender ideology* has been particularly blatant. For example, the International Children's Rights Institute, whose board counts French and international activists associated with the LMPT, has been founded by American academic Robert Oscar Lopez. Meanwhile, the American leader of the National Organization for Marriage, Brian Brown, has come to France to meet with the organizers of the LMPT protests. The LMPT, moreover, appears to have become an international model for conservative mobilization, as an Italian offshoot, the „Manif pour tous—Italia“, has adopted the label in order to initiate anti-gay rights protests of their own. The fact that it has also cooperated with far-right political parties such as Lega Nord and Fratelli d'Italia as well as neo-fascist groups (Garbagnoli 2018) reveals how far-right political movements have sought to infiltrate, politicize, and radicalize what started in 2012 as a comparatively mainstream Catholic grassroots movement in France (Kuhar and Patternote 2018).

2. The failure of the counter-revolution: Catholics' waning influence on the center right

The example of the Manif pour tous epitomizes how some Catholics' suspicion of modernity can be utilized by political actors with a desire to enter the political arena. For instance, a number of activists used the mobilization around the Manif pour tous as an opportunity to gain more influence within the center-right party Les Républicains (LR) by creating in 2013 the so-called Sens commun movement. Capitalizing on the hundreds of thousands of people in the streets in the spring of 2013, the new Catholic right quickly constituted itself as a force to be reckoned with. The fact that it associated itself with the LR was a reminder of the movement's anchorage in traditional Catholic milieus opposed to the far right. In fact, FN president Marine Le Pen and most of her paladins remained pointedly absent from the Manif pour tous demonstrations, and Sens commun leaders publicly criticized FN statements on Islam and immigration (Du Cleuziou 2019).

However, the *Catholic counter-revolution* also laid the seeds for new points of contact between Catholic conservatives and the identitarian right. For instance, through extensive media coverage, the Manif pour tous attracted many

non-practicing Catholics, who were often more concerned about identitarian questions such as the perceived threats of Islam and immigration than their churchgoing brethren, who were focused on societal issues (More in Common 2017, 2018). What is more, several FN figures, including Marion Maréchal Le Pen, Bruno Gollnisch, and Gilbert Collard, defied Marine Le Pen's example and publicly joined the demonstrations, while at the same time seeking to shift the conversation from faith and moral issues to identitarian concerns and encouraging a victimhood posture.

These influences became increasingly powerful as the Catholic's own position within the center right weakened. Since the defeat of their champions François Fillon and François-Xavier Bellamy in the 2017 presidential and 2019 European elections, the Catholic forces of *Sens commun* have become orphaned and were increasingly marginalized within LR, which gradually abandoned bioethical issues and the fight against the transformation of the family model. The result has been a strengthening of the *hard* identity wing among Catholics (Le Morhedec 2017), which has created new connections between conservative Catholic circles and identity-based networks and far-right politicians.

3. The de-demonization of the far right

The French far right itself has sought to further the porosity between Catholics and extreme right-wing circles in two ways: on the one hand, through the strategy of *dédiabolisation* (de-demonization) initiated by Marine Le Pen and, on the other, through an increased use of Christian references as an identity marker.

The first phenomenon, the FN/RN's policy of *dédiabolisation*, has helped erode the common taboo associated with the far-right vote in not only society writ large but also among many Catholics (Dézé 2015). Widely regarded as a neo-fascist party at its foundation, the FN has gradually morphed into a mainstream right-wing populist party under the leadership of Marine Le Pen. Since taking over in 2011, she has removed her father's antisemitic references from her speeches and ended relations with neo-Nazi groups. She also replaced her father's old guard of party officials with a younger generation of politicians who were free from the legacy of the Vichy regime and the Algerian *Pieds-noirs* (Dézé 2015). Programmatically, the FN embraced more left-wing economic policies, calling for a strong welfare state and economic protectionism against the *neoliberal* and *cosmopolitan* elite (Perrineau 2017). This historic transformation of the FN, which changed its name in 2018 to *Rassemblement*

National (RN) in an attempt to relaunch the party, was rewarded by significant electoral success. As early as the 2012 elections, the party became the favorite of the working class, which voted for it at a rate of 31%, while also recording unprecedented success among 18–24-year-olds (+5 points) and 25–34-year-olds (+8 points) (Mayer 2017; Perrineau 2017). The 2017 and 2022 elections further confirmed this trend.

The party's metamorphosis from a neo-fascist to a right-wing populist party was also noticeable in its positioning toward religion. The FN/RN swapped its ethnic and racial rhetoric for a discourse with civilizational overtones aimed against Islam (Brubaker 2017). Marine Le Pen and the party leadership generally prioritized a radical reading of secularism over Catholic references as the best antidote to Islam, dedicating a whole chapter of its manifestos to *laïcité* and demanding a stricter ban on religion in the public sphere (Almeida 2017; Cremer 2021b). However, Marine Le Pen's niece, Marion Maréchal Le Pen, pursued a parallel strategy, which aimed at cultivating connections with Catholic circles and presenting herself as a champion of France's Catholic identity by intensifying the use of Christian symbols and language. Educated in the Catholic elite school of Saint-Pius X, Maréchal Le Pen knew how to appeal to Catholics' sense of marginalization. With concerns about the disappearance of Catholicism being ripe, this strategy began to bear fruits in the mid-2010s, as in 2015, Bishop Dominique Rey of Toulon-Fréjus, invited Maréchal Le Pen to a diocesan summer university.

This normalization of far-right voices in some Catholic milieus coincided with a noted retreat of France's institutional Church itself from the political debate. Under the impression of internal crises, public scandals, and demographic decline, important parts of the French episcopate, who would have been more critical of the far right were drawn to what Rob Dreher has called the "Benedict option," in which the Church assumes a minority position and focuses on the strengthening of internal ties, doctrine, and community, while largely abandoning aspirations to shape society as a whole (Dreher 2017). While theological in outlook, this privatization of institutional religion politically paved the way for the spread of counter-cultural attitudes within the Catholic community and meant that the reservations historically expressed by the bishops about the far-right party became increasingly muted. For instance, in contrast to 2002, on the eve of the first round of the presidential elections of both 2017 and 2022, France's bishops did not publicly call on Catholics to vote against Marine Le Pen. While far from endorsing the far-right candidate, this silence undermined the traditional taboo against the RN and created a vac-

uum in which political entrepreneurs, from the identity Catholics to Marion Maréchal Le Pen, could portray this lack of public opposition as tacit consent (Cremer 2021a, 2023). Yet, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen's religious-laden discourse only provided the blueprint for the strategy of another far-right politician who has appealed to Catholic voters in a way that the RN never managed.

The breach of the dam: Zemmour, la droite unie, and the end of the Catholic exception?

In December 2021, Eric Zemmour launched his 2022 election bid with the foundation of his new *Reconquête* party. As a regular guest on television and radio channels and a columnist in the written press, Zemmour had shaped French public opinion for 15 years through his rhetorical and political excesses, some of which have led to him being condemned for religious and racial hate speech (Finchelstein et al. 2021). He was particularly well known for his endorsement of the far-right *grand remplacement* theory, claiming that political, intellectual, and media elites seek to substitute the French and European population for immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb (Camus 2011).

While Zemmour thus pursued a similarly (if not more) radical rhetoric on issues such as race and immigration as that of Marine Le Pen, an important difference was that he has adopted more conservative stances on many social issues, such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and gender equality. In numerous essays, such as “*Mélancolie française*” and “*La France n’a pas dit son dernier mot*,” he has made the case for a *union of the rights* against a political class that in Zemmour’s view has betrayed the *people* by renouncing the essential values of the nation, order, and tradition (Zemmour 2010, 2021). According to Zemmour, the term *far right* is only a leftist moral category to disqualify legitimate conservative thoughts (Zemmour 2021). The only reality that exists is a *patriotic right* promoting order and legitimate conservatism. In this attempt to erode the barriers between the far right and the center right, Zemmour capitalized on his status as a journalist, author, and *intellectual*, who often cites historical references or classical literature to appear more socially acceptable than Marine Le Pen (Roger-Lacan 2021).

The extent to which this strategy had been successful in undermining traditional taboos among Catholics became obvious when Zemmour launched his political party. That very day, two political entities were present to support the new candidate: *La voie du peuple* (VIA), the new name for the Christian Demo-

crat Party, and the Mouvement conservateur, the new version of Sens commun, both of which had traditionally been associated with the center right and had hitherto remained distanced from the FN/RN. However, Zemmour succeeded in rallying these movements' leaders to his cause. Specifically, VIA's president, Jean-Frédéric Poisson, was working behind the scenes to ensure the success of Zemmour's candidacy by supporting the creation of the *New Conservative magazine*, released by Paul-Marie Coûteaux, a close acquaintance of Zemmour (Adenor 2021). Meanwhile, the president of the *Mouvement conservateur*, Laurence Trochu, who fought alongside François Fillon in 2017 and, after the latter's election defeat, transformed *Sens commun* into the *Mouvement conservateur* in 2020 (Adenor 2021), was disappointed by LR's subsequent development and announced that her movement would instead support the outsider Zemmour in 2021. This decision epitomized the erosion of the historical taboo around the far right in Catholic circles.

Zemmour's posture as an anti-system candidate and his constant transgressions against „political correctness“ have also made him popular among those identity Catholics who have started to define themselves as a counter-cultural minority. Moreover, the institutional Church's relative retreat from the political debate and the subsequent normative vacuum in Catholic milieus have been accelerated by the rise of a new *cathosphere*—a derivative of *blogosphere*—in which laypeople with far-right opinions, who are often explicitly hostile to the pope and Catholic hierarchies, have promoted Zemmour's candidacy (Tricou 2016)."

Nicknamed the *family candidate*, Zemmour is presented as the only politician ready to fight the *culture of death* that according to him prevails in society (Zemmour 2016). Such a depiction of Zemmour may seem puzzling, as he has explicitly declared himself to be “against Christ and His values” (Zemmour 2018), and is highly critical of Church leaders. His conception of a *surveillance secularism*—“laïcité de surveillance” (i.e., the tendency to place religions under state control)—is, in fact, close to that of Le Pen, and this is only thinly concealed by his rhetoric about the importance of the Church in the national construction of France. Yet, such factors no longer seem to be sufficient to repel those identity Catholics who, steeped in a narrative of victimhood and decline, have shown themselves to be ready to support any candidate who promises to protect them against the dominant secular culture. Indeed, in the first round of the 2022 presidential election, 40% of all Catholics (and 40% of regular churchgoers) voted for one of the far-right candidates, eight points more than the French as a whole, and 16% of churchgoers voted for Zemmour, compared to

just 7% overall (IFOP 2022). In the second round, 55% of all Catholics and 61% of regular churchgoers still voted for Macron (more than the French overall average). Nonetheless, the share of Catholics voting for Le Pen grew significantly from 2017 (IFOP 2022), suggesting a broader erosion of the electoral bastion that French Catholicism has historically represented against the far right.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the gradual political radicalization of conservative Catholics over the past decade is reshaping the relationship between politics and religion in France. For over half a century, Catholics had acted as a safety net against the far right. But in recent years, French Catholics' *religious immunity* seems to have eroded. Our analysis has shown that this trend is the result of three key factors: First, it has been spurred by a sense of marginalization, decline, and victimhood in Catholic circles as a result of the rapid secularization of society as well as the legal liberalization of gay marriage, abortion, and surrogacy. Second, the mainstream parties' gradual scaling back of their associations with Christian values and milieus has left Catholics politically *homeless* and made them more available to the far right's identitarian appeals. Finally, the institutional Church's self-imposed silence and retreat from the political sphere, combined with the rise of a *cathosphere* of lay leaders who are openly sympathetic to Le Pen and Zemmour, has eroded traditional social taboos.

This development may seem surprising given that the political platforms of the RN and Eric Zemmour continue to openly clash with Christian values, beliefs, and institutions, especially on their core issue of immigration. Yet, many conservative Catholics' focus on only one segment of Christian anthropology (sexuality, life, and the family) to the detriment of other Christian values (e.g., social and ecological justice). Moreover, their identitarian concerns around the future of *Catholic France*, has opened this milieu to personalities such as Zemmour. It is enough to read the pope's latest encyclical, *Fratelli tutti* (Pope Francis 2020), to understand that Catholic authorities have become keenly aware of the risks posed by such identitarian postures. The question is, however, whether their flock will follow their leadership or be more attuned to the *zombie Catholicism* preached by Zemmour and Le Pen.

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The Christian Right in Germany

Sonja Angelika Strube

The Federal Republic of Germany is a federally structured parliamentary democracy and social constitutional state. Within the two parliaments that are elected proportionally, the long-standing members of the Bundestag are the Social Democrats (SPD; 2021 federal election: 25.7% of the votes), the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU; 2021 federal election: 24.1%), the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP; 2021 federal election: 11.5%), Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Alliance 90/The Greens; 2021 federal election: 14.8%), and the socialist Die Linke (The Left; 2021 federal election: 4.9%, in parliament via direct mandates). Since 2017, the right-wing populist and in parts extreme-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD; Alternative for Germany), founded in 2013, has also been represented in the Bundestag (2021 federal election: 10.3%).

In the *Motherland of the Reformation*, the Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations are approximately equal in size. The Roman Catholic Church is represented through the Deutsche Bischofskonferenz (German Bishops' Conference), while most of the Protestants are represented through the regional churches belonging to the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD; Protestant Church in Germany). According to the Eurobarometer Survey (Bundeszentrale 2020), in 2018, 28.6% of the population described themselves as Catholics, 25.8% as Protestants, 2.2% as Orthodox, 7.6% as members of another Christian denomination, 3.5% as Muslims, 0.7% as Buddhists, 0.1% as Jews, 0.1% as Hindus, and 26.9% as non-believers, while 2.3% answered "other" and 2.2% "don't know." The regional differences between East and West Germany are large. While in the territory of the former German Democratic Republic, the vast majority regard themselves as non-believers (68.3%), in the territory of the old Federal Republic of Germany (1949–1990), 74% of the population still consider themselves Christians. In Germany, there is long-standing, reliable ecumenical cooperation between the major Christian churches, which ultra-conservative fundamentalist groups do *not* join or favor.

While the German Constitution is religiously and ideologically neutral, it strives to maintain a so-called *positive neutrality* toward religious communities. Thus, the state maintains a partnership with the major religious communities, letting them offer religious education in public schools and theological studies at public universities, as well as *outsourcing* a large part of social services to them. The state also collects a membership fee through a tax for those religious communities that are accepted as *public corporations*, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the regional churches belonging to the EKD.

This reliable cooperation reduces the susceptibility of committed Christians in Germany to religious fundamentalism. However, fundamentalist Christians, as well as protagonists of the extreme right, use this as their main gateway for their accusation that the big Christian churches in Germany are succumbing to the *Zeitgeist* and are “*marionettes*” of a “*red-green dictatorship*”.

The religious protagonists: Their strategies, media, and networking

Since the emergence of the internet in the late 1990s, two concurrent and interlinked networking movements can be observed in Germany and in large parts of the German-speaking world: (1) the development of interdenominational networking between ultra-conservative/fundamentalist Christian groups of different Christian denominations (which in former times accused one another of being heretical and therefore did not collaborate with one another); (2) collaborations of such groups and interdenominational alliances with politically extreme right-wing media, groups, and parties (Strube 2014).

Ultra-conservative and fundamentalist Christians as minorities in each denomination

Within each of the major denominations represented in Germany—Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and various Evangelical and Free Churches—some ultra-conservative and at the same time politically extreme right-wing Christian groups (subsequently called *right-wing Christians*) can be identified. In addition, some individual members of certain Christian minority groups (e.g., Orthodox and Russian-speaking Free churches) have engaged in these processes of political radicalization. At the same time, right-wing Christians are still small minorities within their churches, and no Christian denomination, large church, or movement (e.g., Evangelicalism or Pietism; cf.

Pieck 2015; Heimowski and Markstein 2020; Dietz 2022) can be described as fundamentally or predominantly right-wing Christian.

Corresponding to global developments, the *demarcation line* between ultra-conservative/fundamentalist right-wing Christians, on the one hand, and moderate conservative or more liberal religious currents, on the other, runs not along denominational lines but crosswise through each Christian denomination. Whereas the reasons for good interdenominational collaborations of liberal Christians are to be found in the long-lasting endeavors of the ecumenical movement, the political collaborations of right-wing Christians—also called an “ecumenism of hate” (Spadaro and Figueroa 2017)—are a relatively new phenomenon, which can be observed worldwide, connecting even the US–American and Russian Christian Right (e.g., RGOW [2018], with articles by Stoeckl, Elsner, Wasmuth, and others).

This observation once again confirms the insight of Gordon W. Allport that religiosity of any denomination can “make or unmake prejudices” (Allport 1954, 444). It is therefore less a matter of the concrete content of faith or church structures but rather of the basic authoritarian or egalitarian patterns underlying the respective religiosity (Strube 2021b, 2021c). This also explains the phenomenon of interdenominational alliances between right-wing fundamentalist groups, which actually accuse each other of heresy on a theological level.

Instrumentalization of religion through the political right

Complementary to this, although clearly distinguishable from it, we can observe a turn to Christian and ecclesiastical themes in some milieus of the political extreme right. This turn had already begun in the 1990s, and since the mid-2000s, it has discovered the agitation field of anti-genderism (Hark and Villa 2015; Strube 2015, 2017a, and 2019). New-Right and extreme-right media, such as *Junge Freiheit*, *eigentümlich frei*, *Blaue Narzisse*, *Freie Welt*, *PI-News*, and *Compact-Magazin*, have started to report positively on right-wing Christian actions. Currently, some protagonists of the extreme right in Germany, as well as the AfD, give themselves a Christian image (Claussen et al. 2021). The tactical background of this politically motivated turning toward Christianity is the endeavor to reduce, undermine, and erode the—up to now—relatively strong tendencies of the majority of the German population to distance themselves from the extreme right, as the far-right thought leader Götz Kubitschek himself explains (Kubitschek 2019). Less extreme populist instrumentalizations of

Christian symbols and narratives can also be found in conservative political parties and milieus.

Right-wing Christian alliances

The formation of right-wing Christian alliances takes place mainly digitally, via right-wing Christian websites, blogs, chats, etc., which are often run by individuals, even if they give the impression of representing a large movement. This leads to new forms of virtual communities with potential global outreach. People who stand alone with their opinions in their direct environment can successfully network globally and feel part of a large movement (Strube 2021d). Current major advances in translation technologies make it possible to present a website in several languages without foreign language skills. At the same time, a few protagonists of a scene can artificially create the impression of a grassroots movement by running numerous websites (i.e., *astroturfing*; Strube 2017b: 60–63).

In addition to virtual communities, there are also some right-wing oriented parishes or persons within the Roman Catholic Church and the EKD that represent a challenge to the church leadership, such as the Catholic *Philipp Neri Institut* in Berlin, pastor Olaf Latzel in Bremen, some priestly confraternities (e.g., unofficial groups such as *Communio veritatis* [communioveritatis.de], but also the *Priestly Fraternity of St. Pius X* [FSSPX]; cf. Steinhauer 2002; Damberg 2009), and initiatives such as the *Forum Deutscher Katholiken* (Forum of German Catholics), whose board members are almost all authors of the New-Right weekly newspaper *Junge Freiheit*. Some of the new spiritual communities are very authoritarian and therefore have strong affinities with right-wing positions (e.g., the *Opus Sanctorum Angelorum* and the *Legionaries of Christ with Regnum Christi*; Reisinger and Röhl [2021], 83–108 and 124–151). Right-wing Catholic milieus have in common that they are critical or openly hostile to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), have an affinity toward religious traditionalism as well as religious and political anti-modernism, and sympathize with the schismatic *Ecône* movement (FSSPX) and other traditionalist associations, such as *Una Voce* and *Pro Missa Tridentina*.

Within the evangelical sphere, some protagonists of the *Evangelische Allianz in Deutschland*, the biggest network of evangelical communities in Germany, had already cooperated with the New-Right weekly newspaper *Junge Freiheit* in the 1990s (Kornexl 2008; see below). This was mainly carried out by the editor-in-chief of the news agency IDEA e.V., Helmut Matthies, and its managing di-

rector, Hartmut Steeb (Kornexl 2008; Strube 2014). In recent years, this commitment has been increasingly criticized by the EKD and also within the Alliance, sometimes leading to public distancing (e.g., EAD 2020; cf. Heimowski and Markstein 2020; Dietz 2022).

Today, house groups, extended families, and free congregations can also be found within the evangelical spectrum, including among the evangelical Free churches in various regions of Germany, which have radicalized in recent years by committing themselves to the AfD, PEGIDA, and the so-called *Querdenker* anti-vaccination movement, even calling the Federal Republic of Germany a dictatorship (Greifenstein 2020). In part, they are perceived as problematic by congregations and larger church umbrella organizations. At the same time, however, there is a lack of clear and resolute opposition to right-wing statements in many parishes and among some church authorities because of a need for harmony or a misunderstanding of Christian charity, which eventually encourages right-wing opinions (Greifenstein 2020). Furthermore, there are some pastors and preachers who operate on their own on the internet, beyond church institutions and structures and without commissioning, and who have founded their own *parishes*—digitally or in real life (e.g., Christian Stockmann with his *Mandelzweiggemeinde*; see Greifenstein 2020; e.g. *Baptistenkirche Zuverlässiges Wort/Faithful Word* in Pforzheim).

Right-wing Christian social media as the main protagonists

Because the formation of right-wing Christian alliances takes place mainly digitally, social media belong to the most important protagonists of the Christian Right in Germany. In the mid-1990s, the New-Right weekly newspaper *Junge Freiheit* (JF) sought and established cooperation with authors of the right-wing Christian spectrum, in addition to traditionalist Catholic individuals, especially the news agency IDEA e.V., which is close to the *Evangelische Allianz in Deutschland* (Strube 2014; Kornexl 2008). Since then, there has been continuous and mutual cooperation between JF and the IDEA e.V. editorial staff. For some years, in the news sections of the website of the *Evangelische Allianz in Deutschland*, numerous texts, mainly about Islam and persecutions of Christians, were republished that had originally been written for JF and other, partly anonymous, extreme-right blogs, until effective contradiction from the EKD, the cancellation of financial support for IDEA e.V., and controversial discussions within the Alliance led to a certain insight and change in 2018.

In the Roman Catholic sphere, the private Austrian website *kath.net* (financially supported by *Kirche in Not* [Church in Need] and the *Legionaries of Christ*) has been the most important German-speaking *bridging medium* (for the term *Brückenmedium*, see Pfeiffer 2001) since 1999/2000, introducing Catholics, in cooperation with the IDEA e.V. news agency, to New-Right media, content, and positions and, since 2013, to the AfD. The same dynamics apply to *katholisch.info*, *philosophia-perennis.com* (run by David Berger), *gloria.tv* (founded by the priests Reto Nay and Markus Doppelbauer), and, in particular, the private and interdenominational blog *Christliches Forum* (*christlichesforum.info*), which links to numerous New-Right and Christian-Right media. This blog is run by Felicitas Küble, who is manager of the *Christoferuswerk*, is involved in organizing the prayer march *1000 Kreuze für das Leben* (1000 Crosses for Life, organized by EuroProLife/europrolife.com), and writes for several New-Right and extreme-right media, including *PI-News* (Strube 2015; Küble 2017). These and other private right-wing blogs, forums, digital associations, and so-called *institutes* often refer to each other and become central *alternative* sources of (dis)information within the Christian-Right and New-Right scene.

Between 2004 and 2012, the anonymous private Catholic website *kreuz.net* disseminated explicitly anti-constitutional extremist content, demagogic hate speech, antisemitism, and Holocaust denial. Nevertheless, the reactionary *Netzwerk katholischer Priester* (Network of Catholic Priests; *priesternetzwerk.net*), as well as the traditionalist Institut *Philipp Neri* (*institut-philipp-neri.de*) and the former *Institut Sinfonia Sacra*, supported this platform through advertisements (Strube 2014), and the auxiliary bishop Athanasius Schneider in Kazakhstan published on this website. In 2013, the law enforcement authorities were able to identify two Roman Catholic priests, who also run the far-right website *gloria.tv*, as the operators of *kreuz.net*.

In recent years, an internationalization (primarily through text adoptions from US websites such as *Church Militant* and *Lifesitenews*) as well as an intellectualization can be observed in parts of the German-speaking Christian Right. Websites choose the name *institute* and publish long texts with many footnotes and references, which can only be unmasked as pseudo-scientific after a thorough and knowledgeable reading. Examples of this are the website called *St. Boniface Institute* (*boniface-institute.com*), founded by the Austrian Alexander Tschugguel, who is close to *Tradition, Family and Property* (TFP; White 2019; for more about TFP, see below) and works together with far-right protagonists and media (e.g., Steve Bannon [2021] and the far-right website *info-direkt.eu* [2021]); and the traditionalist website *thecathwalk.de*, affiliated to

the FSSPX, whose links to the political right are established through authors from—or in favor of—the political right spectrum (AfD, the Austrian far-right party FPÖ, etc.). A weblog called *Renovatio Institute* (renovatio.org), run by Simon Wunder and Christian Machek, who takes part in panel discussions with Marion Maréchal from the French Rassemblement National (Collegium 2021) and whose so-called scientific advisory board was dominated by ideas of the far-right historian David Engels (cf. Pfahl-Traughber 2021; Linden 2021), popped up in 2020 with numerous pseudo-theological articles and disappeared suddenly in spring 2023.

Thus, a pseudo-scientific parallel structure to educational institutions, academies, and universities has been established (at least virtually), which works in a well-founded scientific manner and is similar to what Weronika Grzebalska and Andrea Pető have described for Poland and Hungary under the term *polypore-science* (Pető 2021, 193–198). The attempt to intellectualize their positions corresponds to the repertoire of strategies of the intellectual New Right and is oriented toward the establishment of so-called *alternative media* and the creation of *alternative facts*, as took place in the USA under the presidency of Donald Trump.

The thematic foci of the predominantly male-run websites *thecathwalk.de*, *boniface-institute.com*, and *renovatio.org* are the reestablishment of the Old/Tridentine Mass, anti-gender activism, the commitment to the restoration of patriarchal social structures, and an anti-Islamic crusade-inspired view of Europe as the *Christian West threatened by Islam*.

Anti-gender activism/Anti-genderism

Important right-wing Christian players in terms of international networking are to be found in the field of anti-gender activism. Gabriele Kuby, whose books have been translated into numerous European languages since 2006, acts as a thought leader and guarantor of content among the Christian Right as well as in political far-right circles. In German-speaking countries, Birgit Kelle is also known for her anti-genderist publications. Like her husband Klaus Kelle and Gabriele Kuby, she publishes in numerous New-Right media (e.g., *Freie Welt*, *JE*, *eigentümlich frei*, *Achse des Guten*, and the online magazine of the Kopp publishing house) and takes part in several international anti-genderist congresses.

Since 2006, the initiative *EuroProLife* has regularly organized the prayer march 1000 Kreuze für das Leben in various cities, which is partly infiltrated or even co-organized by activists from the extreme right, e.g. the *Bürgerinitiative Ausländerstopp* (citizen's initiative against foreigners). While the organizers have not distanced themselves from these infiltrations, some Catholic dioceses have distanced themselves from these prayer marches (Erzdiözese München Freising 2009). Another anti-gender activist, the German–Russian Mathias Ebert, is a member of Ivo Sasek's Swiss sect *Organische Christus Generation* (ocg.life),

Organische Christus Generation (ocg.life), as well as his Holocaust-denying Anti-Zensur-Koalition (Anti-Censorship Coalition – anti-zensur.info) and his online-channel Kla.tv. In 2014–2015, Ebert organized several anti-genderist demonstrations in major German cities in the name of his blog *Besorgte Eltern* (Concerned Parents), together with the German–Russian *Arminiusbund*, which is close to the anti-constitutional extremist NPD party, and in cooperation with the far-right Jürgen Elsässer and Pegida, with reporting by *Russia Today* (RT). Ebert's anti-genderist networking activities fit with and were part of Sasek's antisemitic esoteric and conspiracist cross-media networking (for further information: Pöhlmann 2023).

One of the most visible anti-genderist manifestations in Germany is the *Demo für alle* (Demo for All; demofueralle.de), which, since 2014, has been organized by Hedwig von Beverfoerde, a member of the AfD-affiliated *Initiative Familien-Schutz* (Initiative Family Protection; familien-schutz.de), which is currently run by the husband of AfD politician Beatrix v. Storch, figurehead of the so-called Christians in the AfD. Between 2014 and 2017, Beverfoerde organized demonstrations with from several hundred to a maximum of 5,000 participants, inviting speakers from the CDU, churches (e.g., Hartmut Steeb [former Secretary General of the *Evangelische Allianz in Deutschland*], Andreas Laun [former Catholic auxiliary bishop of Salzburg], and Karin Maria Fenbert [former managing director of the German section of the Catholic aid organization *Kirche in Not*]), and the AfD. Groups of members of the extreme-right identitarian movement regularly took part in the demonstrations. Probably due to a lack of participants—and also owing to the above-mentioned intellectualization—the activities have shifted to an annual *symposium*, which is financially supported by *CitizenGo*, as well as by the Catholic newspaper *Tagespost* and the New-Right *JF* (Beverfoerde 2019). Beverfoerde, a Catholic and a member of the CDU until the end of 2016, works closely with Sven and Beatrix von Storch in their network of campaigns (Strube 2017b, 2019). She

also coordinated, together with Beatrix von Storch, the German section of the European citizens' initiatives *One of Us* and *Mum, Dad & Kids*. Andreas Kemper's research (2019) shows that a large part of the anti-gender protagonists come from the nobility and are related to each other.

A brief glimpse at the list of the *alliance partners* of the Demo für alle reveals other anti-genderism players in Germany, but, at the same time, this proves to be astroturfing. Among the 29 listed virtual initiatives (as of January 11, 2022), at least three are significantly run by Beverfoerde. Two currently operate under Sven von Storch's name and address. Several websites represent the virtual activities of individuals (e.g., Gabriele Kuby, Prof. Dr. Manfred Spieker, Dr. Albert Wunsch, and Birgit Kelle) or refer solely to a magazine series. Six virtual initiatives consist of anonymous blogs, Facebook pages, or abandoned domains, or they cannot be found independently of the Demo für alle. Two of the three Austrian websites are run by Leni Kesselstadt. Only three supporters point beyond the inner circle of the demonstration's initiators toward parties and churches: two CDU-affiliated initiatives in Baden-Württemberg (Evangelischer Arbeitskreis and the Christian Democrats for Life [CDL] Baden-Württemberg) and the *Forum Deutscher Katholiken*. International support and networking are provided by *CitizenGo*.

Others, such as the *Aktion Kinder in Gefahr* (Children in Danger; *aktion-kig.eu*), headed by Mathias von Gersdorff, consist mainly of a blog as well as some internet petitions and promote various anti-abortion actions such as *1000 Kreuze, 40 Tage für das Leben* (40 Days for Life), and the Demo für alle. Older versions of the *Aktion Kinder in Gefahr* website linked to the website of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Tradition, Familie und Privateigentum e.V.* (German Society for Tradition, Family and Property [TFP]), chaired by Mathias von Gersdorff, as well as to its US, Austrian, French, Italian, and Polish branches and alliance partners.

The international TFP was assessed by sociologist Karin Priester in 2009 as a "right-wing extremist sect" (Priester 2009, 15), and its German website contains articles with anti-democratic content (e.g., "Dictatorship of Equality" [Solimeo n.d.] and "Dictatorship of Tolerance" [Ureta n.d.]). While the TFP (together with its website *herz-jesu-apostolat.org*) is an unknown micro association in Germany whose public activities hardly go beyond producing blog texts and short videos, mainly by Mathias von Gersdorff, it is relevant because it operates in networks under various names and is politically influential in other countries (e.g., *CivitasCristiana.nl* in the Netherlands and *Ordioiuris.pl* in Poland;

the Croatian organization *Vigilare.hr* also uses the emblem of the TFP; see also tfp.at/links).

Narratives and ideology

The most important topic for the collaboration between right-wing Christians and protagonists of the New Right in Germany is anti-genderism/anti-gender activism (Hark and Villa 2015). It is insinuated that the various feminist or queer activists or persons who are engaged in gender equality form a globally collaborating *gender lobby* with a homogeneous *gender ideology*, aiming to establish a *totalitarian new world order* financially supported by multi-billionaires such as George Soros. This is clearly an antisemitic conspiracy narrative. Additionally, we find the anti-Muslim narrative of *Christian Occident versus Islam*, which is linked to the topic of *persecution of Christians*. Anti-genderism triggers a large range of different prejudices and hostilities (cf. Strube 2021a). Religious points of contact for Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism are the exclusivist conviction that the Christian faith is the only true one, with Islam seen as an erroneous belief or even *ideology* that must be fought, and a peculiar kind of Christian charity and solidarity only with persecuted Christians worldwide, which assumes that religious discrimination and harassment are almost exclusively committed by Muslims *against* Christians. These convictions are sometimes merged with a missionary zeal toward Muslims and, more often, with a general rejection of migration, culminating in the insinuation that Muslims are waging a *birth jihad*, aiming at the *decline of the Christian West*.

Moreover, such convictions increase susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs and pave the way for a conspiracy–ideological parallel society. In fact, right-wing Christian groups show a high affinity to conspiracy narratives such as the *great replacement*, the *new world order*, and the *great reset*. Since 2020, many of them, especially anti-gender activists such as *Demo für alle*, also reject anti-pandemic regulations and sympathize with the *Querdenker* (lateral thinkers), the German anti-vaccine movement. Even though these Christian groups have turned out to be insignificant both within the major churches and in the German anti-vaccine movement, the COVID-19 protests demonstrated the mobilization potential of conspiracy theories. This is especially relevant, as, after the US, Germany is suspected to have the second-largest QAnon following (CeMAS 2022).

The political audience targeted

The political commitment of far-right Christians is primarily directed toward the implementation of ultra-conservative family policies and pro-life/anti-abortion positions, including the goal of codifying their own concepts of a *God-given natural law* not only in ecclesiastical morality but also in the legislation of Western democracies. Frequent support is also given to economically libertarian socio-Darwinian positions, while anti-discrimination legislation and, to some extent, the protection of minorities are often rejected.

In the early 2000s, right-wing Christians opposed the SPD–Green government coalition, especially its introduction of registered civil partnerships in 2001. Increasingly, criticism, opposition, and a so-called *resistance* have also been directed against the CDU, which was liberalizing on socio-political issues under Angela Merkel, and the CSU. The aim has been to influence their party programs. Since the 1980s, right-wing Christians have also organized themselves in fundamentalist micro parties (e.g., *Christliche Mitte* [Christian Center, CM] and *Partei Bibeltreuer Christen* [Party of Bible-abiding Christians, PBC]). From 2013 onwards, right-wing Christian milieus turned to the AfD and contributed significantly to its rise and image as a *civilian middle-class* and ostensibly non-extremist party, as shown above in the example of the *Demo für alle*. At the same time, the AfD has accumulated the political and social influence of right-wing Christians (Häusler, Jentsch, and Sander 2018, 22), who are a loud but small minority in Germany. Religious-sounding narratives and arguments on the part of the AfD and the formation of working groups such as Christians in the AfD (chrafd.de) and even Jews in the AfD (j-afd.org) have supported the impression of its being a middle-class party and enabled it to reach special conservative milieus such as German Russians (for whom the AfD even provides a Russian translation of its website: russlanddeutsche-afd.nrw/ru/). Despite the steady radicalization of the AfD, which became absolutely obvious as a result of its splits in 2015, 2017, and 2022, when Bernd Lucke, Frauke Petry, and Jörg Meuthen left the party, its support found on right-wing Christian websites (e.g., kath.net) has remained constant, which points to a parallel radicalization within their readerships – and perhaps the silent loss of other less radical readers.

Increasingly, right-wing Christian milieus are adopting decidedly anti-democratic positions, including ideals of a Christian or Catholic (medieval) estate-based society or theocracy with the special participation of the aristocracy. Collaborations are emerging between these groups and those pro-

tagonists of the extreme New Right who are interested in the strategic use of Christian symbols and narratives (e.g., collaborations for joint publications between right-wing Christians, AfD politicians, and protagonists of the extreme right and the identitarian movement; see Dirsch, Münz, and Wawerka 2018 and 2019). International networking seems to be more important and promising than hoping to achieve political power in Germany. Right-wing Catholic groups also strive for exclusive and absolute sovereignty of interpretation within the Roman Catholic Church, which they want to restore in an anti-modernist, pre-conciliar way.

Effects

The AfD's electoral successes in conservative regions (e.g., in southern and southwest Germany, as well as in some pious regions in Erzgebirge in Saxony) are likely to be influenced by its ostensibly *middle-class* image and thus also by support from right-wing Christian milieus (e.g., Demo für alle), while its greater successes in strongly secularized regions (especially in East Germany) are more likely to be attributed to the radical wing under Björn Höcke. Within the CDU/CSU, a controversial debate has erupted about whether AfD voters can be won back by aligning CDU/CSU positions with AfD positions or by sharply distancing themselves from the far right. In 2017, ultra-conservative members of the CDU/CSU founded the association WerteUnion (the Value Union), which collaborates in part with the AfD and which many CDU members reject because of its proximity to the AfD (Neuerer 2020; Middelhoff 2020; Parth 2022).

Since the beginning of the 2000s, we can observe an online radicalization among right-wing Christian milieus. In churches as well as in society, and increasingly under the influence of disinformation campaigns about COVID-19 measures, (still small) right-wing parallel societies are forming, which take their information exclusively from right-wing and so-called *alternative* media. However, in large parts of the churches and society, there is also a clear counter-protest against this right-wing drift, as in the spontaneous *welcome culture* toward refugees in 2015 and in protest statements and publications against right-wing populism by churches and their leaders (Migrationskommission 2019). Currently, in 2021–2023, Christian counter-protests against anti-genderism are also taking place through campaigns such as #Liebegewinnt (love wins) and #OutInChurch outinchurch.de/; Brinkschröder

et al. 2022), which receive episcopal encouragement in opposing discrimination against LGBTIQ+ persons within the Roman Catholic Church. In November 2022, even the basic Church regulations regarding employment were modified by the German Dioceses.

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The Political and Religious Landscape of Greece

Christian, Far Right, but Not Christian Far Right

George Kordas

Introduction

The Greek political system has recently come under the microscope of researchers, especially since the 2009 economic crisis. However, most approaches undermine the Greek Orthodox Church's (GOC's) importance regarding the Greek state's function. The historical origins of the GOC's relationship with the Greek state were established after the 1821 Revolution, as the Church gained a prominent role in the everyday life of the newborn state. Through a historical retrospect, we can observe the GOC's crucial position during the different periods of the Greek state. The current article focuses on the Greek political scene's last two decades, during which the first populist radical-right party entered the Greek Parliament. My research questions the relationship between the Church—both the official Church and its religious organizations—and the far right, instead presenting the Greek Church as a potential influencer of the electoral body favoring far-right political parties. The article's structure is as follows: after introducing the framework, I briefly review the Greek political system and landscape before summarizing the Greek religious landscape, acknowledging the significance of the Church–state relationship. Moreover, as the pandemic has triggered various social and political transformations, I draw certain conclusions regarding the relationship between the Church and the Greek far right in the last two decades. Finally, I emphasize the opportunistic character of the religious issue for the Greek far right.

The political and religious landscape in Greece since 2001

The political landscape

The current article's timeline covers Greece's last two decades, which have been characterized by an established duopoly (Teperoglou and Tsatsanis 2014). Until 2012, the political system was dominated by the social democratic party PASOK (Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinema [Panhellenic Socialist Movement]), which has mainly governed the country since 1981, and the right-wing party Nea Dimokratia (ND; New Democracy). In the 2009 elections, these two parties gained more than 75% of the votes (YPES 2022).

PASOK's governments were linked with Greek society's economic modernization (Moschonas 2020), the return of the Olympic Games to Athens (2004), and the first post-transition clash with the Church, which took place in 2000 regarding the inclusion of religion on identity cards. People were mandated to declare their religion on their identity cards until 1986, when PASOK made this optional. ND then changed this back to mandatory before shifting to an optional solution. While the EU favored deleting this reference to religion, the Greek Orthodox Church increased its pressure, declaring a referendum in 2000 and collecting three million signatures in favor of the declaration of religion on identity cards (Molokotos-Liederman 2003, 296). ND governments took the friendliest stand toward the Church's positions (Michailidis, Vlasidis, and Karekla 2021), and ND was also most connected with the outbreak of the Greek economic crisis in 2009, as the party won the 2004 and 2007 national elections.

Amid the rather monotonous political scene of 2000, Giwrgos Karatzaferis, an ND parliamentary member, was expelled from his party. Thus, Karatzaferis formed LAOS, a populist radical-right party (Psarras 2010; Georgiadou 2019, 151–152). The party's name was framed with two meanings: the Greek word *laos* describes the *people* (Georgiadou 2020), while the acronym refers to the forming of Laikos Orthodoxos Synagermos (Popular Orthodox Rally), highlighting religion's significance for the newly created party (Psarras 2010).

In terms of its electoral support, voting for LAOS was acknowledged as a "choice of protest" (Georgiadou 2019, 164–165). Anti-political and anti-systemic criteria directed such a protest vote, and the party's ideology was openly anti-immigrant and prone to conspiracy theories (Georgiadou 2019, 168). The party entered the electoral competition for the first time in the 2004 double election (National and European Parliament elections). LAOS entered the Greek Parlia-

ment after the 2007 national election (with 3.8% of the vote), and its anti-systemic policies boosted the party to its electoral peak in the 2009 election (5.6% of the vote). Nevertheless, the party's decision to support the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)¹ in 2010 and participate—with PASOK and ND—in the coalition government under Loukas Papadimos resulted in LAOS's electoral defeat in the 2012 double election (2.89% in May 2012 and 1.58% in June 2012), leading to its vanishment from the Greek political scene (Georgiadou 2014).

The absence of significant national crises until their outbreak in 2009 emphasizes the significance of these crises for comprehending the radical transformations that the political and social landscape experienced. In particular, the 2009 economic crisis hit the old political system badly, with PASOK being heavily defeated in the 2012 national election. Therefore, a political opportunity occurred for challenger parties to take advantage of the frustrated electoral body. The political landscape was reshuffled, and the extreme-left party of SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) replaced PASOK (Voulgaris and Nikolakopoulos 2014). At the same time, LAOS suffered a heavy defeat, helping to strengthen the neo-Nazi party Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn; GD), which received 6.92% of the electoral vote, and the populist radical-right party Anexartitoi Ellines (Independent Greeks), which gained 7.51% of the electoral vote (Georgiadou 2014, 199). Notwithstanding the economic crisis, Greece had to deal with the refugee and migration crisis in 2014, and the Greek political scene reached a high level of polarization.

The Greek far right's transformation—a continuing process since 1974's democratic transition (Georgiadou 2019)—has consisted of two phases. The first phase followed the extreme right's appearance. Specifically, with GD as its leading actor, the Greek extreme right adopted nativist and racist positions, acting like a fascist militia, even after entering the Greek Parliament in 2012. GD appeared in 1980, publishing a journal under the same name and then transforming into a political movement in 1983 (Georgiadou 2019, 172). Even though it remained on the margins of political life until 1994, the party never hid its extremist nature and Nazi ideology (Georgiadou 2019, 173). GD repeatedly mentioned its paganistic beliefs, and since the early 1990s, it has extended its activities by attacking extreme-left supporters, attempting to provoke clashes in the streets. As a result of the reshuffling of the Greek

1 The first MoU was signed on May 2010 between the Greek government and the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund in order to cope with the Greek government-debt crisis.

political system following the outbreak of the 2009 economic crisis, GD found fertile ground for escalating its violent attacks against migrants and extreme-left supporters. As polarization became the main characteristic of the Greek political scene after 2009, the party's violent attacks resulted in the murder of Pavlos Fyssas (an extreme-left rap singer) by GD members in September 2013 (Verousi and Allen 2021b, 24–25). The outcry that this triggered pushed the Greek government to examine the party's activities. After years of trials, the party was finally convicted as a criminal organization in 2020.

The Greek far right's second transformation phase coincided with the strengthening of populist radical-right parties across Europe. Mudde (2007) has provided a framework of major and minor definitions for understanding the new balances inside the far-right family, revealing that nativism, authoritarianism, and populism are core characteristics of the populist radical-right family (Mudde 2007). LAOS was the first electorally successful representative of the populist radical right in Greece,² as it corresponded to Mudde's major definition (Georgiadou 2019, 159–160). Later, we explain how its alliance with the Greek Church benefited both sides and boosted nativism and populism in Greek society. The Independent Greeks and the Greek Solution, the party's heirs, can also be placed in the populist radical-right family. However, they distance themselves from a very close collaboration with the Church, instead favoring Euroscepticism and the acceptance of the Christian religion as aspects of their nativism.

The religious landscape

The Church's intervention in Greek politics is legitimized by the Greek Constitution, which specifies a privileged position for the Greek Orthodox Church as the representative of the prevailing religion in Greece (Fokas 2020). This is a kind of a “trade off,” as Papastathis (2015, 9) points out, referring to the Church's function as an interest group. The Church contributed to democratic decline by diffusing nationalist ideas across the country and demonizing the Greek communists between 1949 and 1967, the period known as *stunted*

2 The party failed to pass the electoral threshold of 3% in the 2004 national elections; however, it gained visibility and reached 4.1% in the 2004 European elections. In the 2007 national elections, it entered Parliament, gaining 3.8% of the national vote. Its electoral peak happened in the 2009 national elections (5.6%), while it achieved 7.1% of the national vote in the 2009 European Parliament elections (Georgiadou 2019, 163).

democracy (Nikolakopoulos 2001). Specifically, the Greek Civil War (1946–1949) divided Greek society among pro- and anti-communists, with the latter of whom the GOC was positioned. To better diffuse its ideology and propagandize against anti-communist danger, the Church organized fraternities that promoted the Church's support for family and country while framing communists as the common enemy (Makrides 2004). Among these fraternities were Zoi (Zoe), Sotir (Savior), and Chrysopigi (Golden Font), whose differences were mainly dogmatic (Ladouceur 2019). They were involved in propagandist activities, such as publishing journals, organizing social events, and supporting the Greek state's actions to protect children from communists. This period ended with the Church acknowledging the importance of the Greek Dictatorship (1967–1974) for the country (Roudometof 2011). However, after the democratic transition, these fraternities' power declined, although those involved remained prominent figures in the functions of the Greek Church (Papastathis 2015, 16).

The transition to democracy after 1974 and the social democratic PASOK's electoral triumphs during the 1980s contributed to the Church's democratization and Greek society's modernization. The GOC's interference in the political scene was weakened in what seemed to be the first period of an improved Church–state relationship. However, this transition was not followed by the Church's democratization, as many members, notorious for their pro-junta beliefs, remained active. Such was the case of Christodoulos Paraskevaïdhs, who, during the Greek junta, was the chief secretary of the Holy Synod (“1969 m.Ch. meta chountas” 2000), a position that offered him the opportunity to network, later becoming the Metropolitan of Dimitriada and Almyros.

Christodoulos's nomination as the head of the GOC in 1998 restored the Greek Church's prominent role in political life. While his predecessor, Serafeim, had followed a more moderate strategy, avoiding any clashes with political leaders, Christodoulos reimported the GOC into the public sphere, claiming the right to interfere in the general political agenda. Under Christodoulos, the Church supported the first electorally successful populist radical-right party in Greece, LAOS (Roudometof 2011, 106). Karatzaferis often referred to his relationship with Christodoulos, claiming that they had discussed the national situation and agreed on a common policy (Psarras 2010, 88). Furthermore, Christodoulos openly manipulated the part of the electoral body that was under his influence, stating that “the voters of Mr. Karatzaferis are not far-right supporters, they are good Christians” (Psarras 2010, 125–126). The GOC also clashed with Costas Simitis's social democratic

government regarding the identity cards issue. The GOC's sensitivity regarding the declaration of religion on identity cards resulted in a clash with the PASOK government. Its most characteristic episode was the declaration of a national referendum and the collection of three million signatures in favor of the Church's position (Molokotos-Liederman 2003, 296).

Soon after his death, Ieronymos, Christodoulos's successor, adopted a lower profile (Papastathis 2011, 403). Nonetheless, after GD's electoral gains, the Greek Church became sympathetic to the party's positions in a *peculiar flirtation* (Zoumpoulakis 2013, 62–72). Despite its ethno-nationalist profile and promotion of paganistic and satanic beliefs (Psarras 2012, 218–221), three Metropolitans favored GD: Serafeim of Piraeus, Amvrosios of Kalavryta, and Andreas of Pogoniani and Konitsa (Psarras 2012, 213; Zoumpoulakis 2013, 52).

In particular, Serafeim—along with GD members—was the main protagonist of the protest against the Chytyrion Theatre in autumn 2012, accusing a play of blasphemy against Christ (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2015, 84–85). Although he was supported by GD members, in April 2013, he accused the party of paganism (Sakellariou 2014, 305–306). Serafeim expressed his Islamophobia, opposing the foundation of a Department of Islamic Studies at the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki on the grounds that it threatened national security and social peace (“Peiraews Serafeim” 2014). Amvrosios is better known for his past, as he was the leader of the Religious Services in the Royal Military Police during the junta. As he did not hide his political ideology (Papastathis 2015, 14), Amvrosios also organized a rally in favor of Macedonia, in which he was photographed with GD MPs (“Amvrosios: Agkalia me tous Chrisavgites” 2018). Nevertheless, his discourse was full of anti-LGBTIQA+ rhetoric and the imputation of national disasters, such as the floods in Mandra and the fire in Mati, to the atheism of the SYRIZA government. Regarding GD, Amvrosios described the party as a “sweet hope for the desperate citizen” (Sakellariou 2014, 306–307). Metropolitan Andreas's case is less known, as he avoided publicity. However, he participated in a “festival of hate” organized yearly by the extreme right in Grammos and Vitsi, former battlefields of the Greek Civil War (Sakellariou 2014, 306).

Public policies in Greece under the specter of the Church–far right relationship

The Church's prominent role in Greek social life rose significantly when specific events appeared on the political agenda. Before 2012, Greek governments' almost complete consent to the Church's positions prevented the political manipulation of religious topics. However, after 2012, Islamophobia, LGBTIQA+ rights, anti-gender campaigns, and the novaxx movement arose in political affairs. Islamophobia was successfully diffused in Greek society through LAOS's anti-immigrant political program. According to the party's declaration, this position is at the party's core, simultaneously promoting nationalism (Georgiadou 2019, 158–159). LAOS's position became the basis for a peculiar flirtation between the party and Archbishop Christodoulos, offering the latter the opportunity to highlight the undivided link between Orthodoxy and Hellenism: “keep Hellenism and Orthodoxy as those are our foundations” (Avgoustis 2021). The Church thus claimed the role of national identity's defender against those who were not born Greek Orthodox (Karyotis and Patrikios 2010, 47), transforming *ius sanguinis* into *ius religionis*.

Anti-immigrant rhetoric was re-activated in a polarized political scene after 2012 due to GD's entrance into the Greek Parliament. The party began attacking immigrants, fulfilling its public announcement regarding the breakout of a pogrom (Psarras 2012, 417–420). It also began blood donations and breadlines for Greeks only (Koronaïou et al. 2015, 243). The 2014 migration and refugee crisis reintroduced challenges to national identity as a result of Greece's new, non-Christian populations, leading the Church to join forces with extreme-right groups (Verousi and Allen 2021a). Christodoulos's nationalist discourse from the early 2000s was replaced by Ieronymos's more discreet discourse. Such a shift opened the field for the extreme-right parties, which took advantage of the political opportunity that the 2014 crisis created, recruiting new members in the name of Orthodoxy and the formation of national identity.

During the same period, the Church reopened discussions regarding the construction of a mosque in the Votanikos neighborhood of Athens. In agreement with GD's core positions, the conservative, pro-religious website Penta-postagma (2015) promoted a demonstration against the mosque, in which the Greek Old Calendarists and local city councils participated. At the end of 2016, Giwrgos Lakafosis, a journalist from the ultraconservative orthodox website Ekklesia Online, questioned whether the mosque would be a bridgehead for

Turkey's interference in Greek politics (Lakafosis 2016). Two days after that article, the Greek police scattered a squat at the site of the mosque. It was revealed that responsible for the squat were citizen groups from the 2015 demonstration and GD central figures such as parliamentary members Elias Panagiwtaros and Elias Kasidiaris ("Ekkenothike I katalipsi" 2016). Even though GD disappeared from the political scene after its legal condemnation in October 2020 as a terrorist organization, Archbishop Ieronymos, in January 2021, insisted on describing Islam and its believers as a belligerent political party rather than a religion (Dilwseis Ierwnymou gia to Islam 2021).

Notwithstanding the rising significance of post-materialist issues in Greek society due to the rise of SYRIZA, Greek society favors strongly conservative views (Pew Research Center 2017). LGBTIQA+ rights and the visibility of sexual minorities rose significantly after 2012, as legislation regarding same-sex civil partnership was voted on in 2015 (Papadogiannis 2016). However, Church leaders were totally against it, characterizing homosexuality as an "aberration" (Archbishop Ieronymos), "worse than an animal attitude" (Metropolitan Anthimos), a work of Zionism (Metropolitan Serafeim), and a "physical abnormality" ("O Mitropolitis Mesogaias" 2014). Moreover, Serafeim threatened those who voted in favor of the legislation with excommunication ("Serafeim: Tha aforistoun" 2013). The Church's disagreement with LGBTIQA+ rights was based on the presentation of a traditional Christian Orthodox idea of the family. However, it remains remarkable that no specific actions from social actors and movements close to the official Church—and motivated by the Church's discourse—could be found. Nonetheless, the Church did not condemn the hatred expressed against the LGBTIQA+ community by GD members (Zoumpoulakis 2013, 37).

Patriarchy, sexism, the body's self-determination, and euthanasia are some of the most highlighted topics on this agenda. The Church represents some of the most conservative parts of Greek society, having already announced its positions through its Bioethics Committee. Regarding euthanasia, the Church opposes the concept of "assisted suicide" (Tristram Engelhardt 2014, 250). Nevertheless, the most controversial topic remains abortion. Once more, the Church has clarified its position, considering, among others, that "abortion does not constitute an individual right, but an ethically unacceptable act, and its legalization, direct or indirect, an impermissible social deviation" (Bioethics Committee 2003). Furthermore, the Church focuses on the embryo's rights, denying any actions responsible for its destruction (Tristram Engelhardt 2014, 250).

Seeking high visibility regarding the abortion topic, religious associations have succeeded in persuading the Holy Synod to establish the Day of the Unborn Child (Lakasas 2021). The most recent episode regarding abortion took place in January 2020, when an advertisement was placed on Athens's metro, focusing on the unborn child and its bodily behaviors and feelings to sensitize the public against abortion (Sakkas 2020). The turmoil on social media resulted in the advertisement's removal and the exposure of those responsible. It was discovered that 20 Orthodox Christian associations had paid Statheres Sygkoinwnies (STA.SY.; Urban Rail Transport) to upload the advertisement on Athens's metro stations. Those associations have created the movement *Afiste me na zisw*: Kinema yper tis zwis (Let me live: Movement in favor of life!).

Searching for its members, we can find pro-religious students and scientific movements, women's associations, multi-child families, and associations fighting for Northern Epirus (*Afiste me na zisw* 2019). Its members come from organizations such as Panellinia Enwsi Filwn Polytekwnn (Panhellenic Union of Friends of Families with Many Children; P.E.F.I.P.), Panellinios Syndesmos Voreioipeirotikou Agwna (Panhellenic Association of Those Fighting for Northern Epirus; P.A.SY.V.A.), Syllogos "O Agios Nikodimos o Agioritis" (Association of Saint Nikodimos of Mount Athos), Christianiki Enosi Epistimonwn (Christian Union of Scientists; X.E.E.), Christianiki Foititiki Drasi (Christian Students' Action; X.F.D.), and Adelfotis Orthodoxou Ierapostolis "O AGIOS RAFAIL" (Fraternity of the Orthodox Mission of Saint Rafael).

Despite this vast network, it has been impossible to find any connections with other international organizations (e.g., the World Congress of Families). Moreover, searching for their national connections, we observe a network where *Afiste me na zisw* is at the core, giving the impression that abortion has become crucial for the Church's discourse. After the uproar that the advertisement against abortions created, some research regarding its funding took place. It was discovered that the P.E.F.I.P. funded the advertisement. While this union has no direct connections to political parties or church clergy, its founder was a monk from Mount Athos ("O Agioreitis Monachos" 2022).

Notwithstanding the above, the Greek Church is prone to conspiracies. Christodoulos's death in 2009 was considered by many as a conspiratorial act, with Nikos Nikolopoulos, a conservative member of the Parliament, connecting Christodoulos's death to the imposition of the Memorandum and the loss of national sovereignty (Makrogiannelis 2016). Although antisemitism remains prevalent among specific parts of the Greek Church, the COVID-19

pandemic directed the Greek Church to the diffusion of new conspiracy theories and a clash with the Greek state (Kordas 2021).

Precisely when the global scientific community was mapping the unknown virus, the Greek Church acted independently against the suggested pandemic measures. When in March 2020, discussion focused on the role of saliva in virus diffusion, the Church defended Holy Communion, pronouncing its safety and claiming that external interference in the Church's doctrinal topics was non-negotiable ("Koronaiois: Metadidetai kai me to salio" 2020). The government's weakness allowed the Church to present itself as cooperative with the Greek government by announcing the shortening of the religious mysteries on March 16 ("Ekklesia tis Ellados: I DIS" 2020).

However, the Church's social reflections became visible only during the anti-government demonstrations regarding the pandemic's management. Searching for the Novaxx movement inside the Greek Church, we can observe the diffusion of anti-vaccination theories, the occurrence of deaths, especially in Mount Athos monasteries (Tsoumis 2022), and priests who opened their churches during the pandemic, despite the governmental measures ("Koronoiois: Sto edwlio" 2021). The peak of such activity was seen in the anti-vax demonstration on July 21, 2021, in Syntagma Square in Athens. Journalists photographed believers with crosses and images of saints and priests carrying huge crosses, reflecting Christ's martyrdom, who were marching with far-right supporters ("Syntagma: Epeisodia" 2021). Two months after that demonstration, the Athenian Orthodox Christian Unions published a declaration against the compulsory nature of vaccination ("Orthodoxa Christianika Swmateia" 2021).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a geopolitical crisis, unveiling Russian interference in several aspects of social and political life in EU member states. A characteristic example is the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and its religious relatives in the GOC. For an in-depth understanding of this topic, this chapter focuses on the official Church's positions and the case of the Mount Athos monasteries. The historical relations between Russia and Greece allowed Archbishop Christodoulos to renew these relations and communicate closely with the Russian leadership. Specifically, a breach existed in Christodoulos's relationship with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew due to the ecclesiastical status of some Greek metropolises (Kapranos 2003). Therefore, Christodoulos aimed for the intervention of the Russian Patriarchate, strengthening relationships between the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches (Kapranos 2003). Nevertheless,

such a shift did not come from thin air, as Christodoulos had visited Moscow already in 2001, during Russia's Victory Day, even holding discussions with Putin ("San Simera: Putin" 2022). Even though the Greek Church has distanced itself from the Russian one due to the war in Ukraine ("Polemos stin Oukrania" 2022), conservative voices still nostalgically reproduce Christodoulos's visit and discussion with Putin in 2001 ("San Simera: Putin").

Mount Athos's monasteries are special places for the Russian Orthodox Church due to the presence of Russian monks. Moreover, Putin has visited Mount Athos several times since 2005, expressing his admiration for the historical area and funding the monasteries' renovation. Putin's interest in the monasteries since 2016 and his future aims for the area have recently been highlighted (MacFarquhar 2018). Some monasteries, such as Panteleimon, are known for their prominent pro-Russian positions, and the area was affected by the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2016 (Walker 2018). The tensions between monks reached new heights in April 2022, when the abbot of the monastery of Esfigmenos complained about the presence of Russian ultra-nationalists on Mount Athos (Lykesas 2022). Such complaints were accompanied by photos presenting monks and believers with a flag of Tsar Nikolaos, triggering a game of declarations between the two sides, as Russia appears to be afraid of the possible persecution of the Russian monks ("To Patriarcheio Moschas" 2022).

Is the Christian Right still possible in Greece? The case of Niki (Victory)

The 2022 national elections in Greece highlighted the case of Niki (Victory), a new, ultra-conservative political party. Although the party was formed in 2019, it has only now gained visibility among the electorate, achieving 3.7% of the votes and electing 10 representatives.

Regarding ideology, the party presents how significant religion is for its functioning in its statute, which claims that "Niki is the movement that aims to unite all Greeks who are inspired by patriotic and Orthodox morality to defend the ideals of freedom and independence of the whole nation, the values of the Orthodox Christian faith, and the democratic character of the nation-state, within the framework of the current constitution and legislation" ("Niki—Statute"). Moving forward, the party promotes its anti-abortion positions ("Amvlwseis: Kairos na nomimopoiisoume, xana"), prioritizing what

is known as “the rights of the unborn child.” The party promotes the model of a married heterosexual couple with a child, underlining its significance (“Theseis gia tin Paideia”). Furthermore, it denies that LGBTIQA+ people are capable of marrying and adopting a child due to its belief in the value of the traditional family (“Peri tis kyvernitikis prothesis”). There are also references to climate change as a conspiracy theory, while migrants are understood as a trick for Greece’s Islamization (“Apo tin Greta tis ‘klimatikis allagis’”).

Regarding institutions, Niki is an interesting case, as its leader, the theologian Dimitris Natsios, has been a talk-show presenter on the religious TV station 4E for a decade (Moscholiou 2023). Natsios has been politically active since 2014 through various populist radical-right parties (Moscholiou 2023), achieving no gains. However, his network has expanded over the years, including the organisation Enomeni Romiosini (Moscholiou 2023) and members from Saint Paisios circles (Dimokidis 2023). Moreover, although it remains challenging to draw a direct line between Niki and Afiste me na ziso, Enomeni Romiosini seems to be the missing link that brings them all to the same table. Nevertheless, it is only now that the party’s increasing activity has become visible

According to Christian values, the party’s strategy can be summed up in its policies for avoiding spiritual, biological, and territorial self-destruction by promoting virtue and honesty. Moreover, Niki speaks against partitocracy and favors a more direct democracy, with people as its core (“Antikeimenikos Skopos”). While the party has openly rejected significant rights, as we explained above, discussing the relationship between the state and the Church broadens its vision. Specifically, it claims that Christian Orthodoxy is part of the Greek DNA, but religious freedom is viewed as a core human right. However, such an acceptance is followed by its declaration regarding the state’s social ethics agreement with Christian values (“Scheseis Kratous-Ekklesias”), a topic thoroughly presented in the party’s ideology.

Conclusion

After the economic crisis, a new two-party system was established in the Greek political scene, whose second pole was SYRIZA, a secular radical-left party. SYRIZA’s harmonic cooperation with the Greek Church benefited the latter in maintaining its social capital while abstaining from the political scene. However, the pandemic crisis exacerbated relations between the Greek state and the Greek Church. To protect its doctrinal positions, the Church did not hesitate

to ally with the far right or allow its members to diffuse conspiracy theories against the state's anti-pandemic policies.

The Church's influence over the most conservative part of the electoral body created conditions for a cultural backlash and polarization in Greek society. While the Church remained neutral in the political scenery, it promoted its positions through the media, as in the case of the discussion that occurred following the anti-abortion advertisement. Moreover, the Church pressed the government regarding Holy Communion. In addition, its religious organizations, which were on the margins of social life during the previous years, gained visibility through the anti-abortion advertisement and participated in anti-pandemic demonstrations with far-right content. Given this, along with the far right's use of religion as an aspect of the supposedly endangered Greek identity, we can observe the weakness that such organizations faced in mobilizing Greek society.

Furthermore, such weakness was a result of the absence of specific funding. Even though the P.E.F.I.P. was thought to have funded the anti-abortion advertisement, its patrons are currently unknown. Therefore, political parties are attempting to cover once more the empty social space. Golden Dawn's disappearance offered an opportunity to the populist radical-right party Greek Solution to attract a specific part of the electoral body. Nevertheless, since 2020, the party's website contains only four articles regarding abortion and LGBTIQA+ topics, which openly reject any concessions in terms of rights for women and the LGBTIQA+ community (Press Releases 2022). The 2023 national elections offered the ultra-conservative party Niki the opportunity to cover the existing political gap by adopting the absent positions from Greek Solution's program. The geopolitical crisis triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought about a dilemma in the Greek Church regarding its position toward its religious brothers, the Russians. Given the GOC's open support for Ukraine, it remains to be seen how the Greek pro-Russian right will react and how successful the Russian interference in Mount Athos will be. Notwithstanding Russia's invasion significance, it remains to be seen how the Greek Church will benefit from those parties' participation in the Greek Parliament and what will be the future of Christian Right in Greece.

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Tracking the Political Scope of Ultraconservative Christian-Right Movements in Italy

Strategies, Mobilizations, and Narratives

Massimo Prearo and Alessio Scopelliti

Introduction

In the days during which Italy debated over the storming of the headquarters of the CGIL, the country's main workers' union, in Rome (October 9, 2021) by the neo-fascist extreme-right movement Forza Nuova (Bruno, Downes, and Scopelliti 2021), Giorgia Meloni was in Spain for a rally organized by the Spanish radical-right party VOX. The charismatic leader of Brothers of Italy set the crowd on fire in Madrid with a speech that is already famous: "Yo soy Giorgia, soy una mujer, soy cristiana" (*Corriere della Sera* 2021; Euronews 2021). Meloni claimed that "these identities are currently under attack", although nobody can oblige her or anybody else to deny these fundamental features (Sondel-Cedarmas 2022). The reference to being Christian has a relevance of the first order. In fact, the political right and far-right parties, and their recent transformations (Köttig, Bitzan, and Petö 2017), such as the transformation of Matteo Salvini's Lega (Bolzonar 2021) from being a regional-based party to a national party, have accustomed us in recent years to winking at the most conservative movements among the vast galaxy of the Italian Catholic world. At the beginning of 2019, Italy was inhabited by 60.3 million residents, of whom 55.5 million were Italian citizens (91.3%) and 5.25 million were foreigners (8.7%). Among the Italians, 82.2% were Christian (80% Catholic Christian), 16.3% were atheist or agnostic, and 1.5% professed other religions (Italia in Dati 2020). Accordingly, the (Catholic) Christian Right always seek to intercept a large part of *moderate* Italian Catholics.

The Italian case is not comparable, either quantitatively or qualitatively, to that of other countries, such as the United States, Russia, and Eastern Eu-

ropean countries (Graff and Korolczuk 2021). Still, as in other countries, the trajectory of ultraconservative Christian-right movements has developed in a counter-revolution (Raison du Cleuziou 2019). A favorable political opportunity structure marked by the retreat of the religious element from the party-political system (Prearo 2020) is one of the determinants that could explain such a renewal of ultraconservative Christian mobilizations in Italy. More specifically, since the 1990s, Italy has been experiencing a dismantling of the Catholic party of Christian Democracy (Ozzano 2020) and a collapse of the *First Republic*. Since then, new parties have emerged in the Italian right-wing sphere, including Go Italy (Forza Italia), which introduced itself as the new moderate right wing, Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia), which inherited the Italian neofascist political culture, and the League (Lega) a sort of anti-political, anti-clerical, and anti-systemic party. For over 20-years, Go Italy was the political party that dominated the right-wing coalition. After the general elections of 2018, where the League made its best score ever, becoming the leading party within the right-wing coalition. More recently, the general elections of 2022 offered a quite different landscape with Brothers of Italy becoming the first party within the coalition and in Italy, with a score of 26%. Alongside the right-wing radicalization of the Italian electorate, the galaxy of Italian ultraconservative Catholic movements has reshaped the landscape of the *traditional* Catholic mobilizations in Italy, displacing their political positioning to the right and the far right in order to build alliances with parties seeking an ideological renewal, such as Brothers of Italy and the League (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone 2018).

The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on the strategies that ultraconservative Christian-Right movements have been using in recent years. In the first section we focus on the new path of Italian ultraconservative Catholic activism and the emergence of the *anti-gender* issue and its politicization. In the second and third sections, we briefly highlight the main frame of the discourses mobilized by the actors in both the religious and political fields. We conclude by examining the political effect of the Christian Right in Italy, indicating the particular relation that this particular kind of religious-based movement seems to have with the Catholic Church in Italy and, of course, with the Vatican.

Positioning the main actors in the ultraconservative Christian-Right galaxy

Between 2013 and 2015, the Italian Parliament, led by a center-left majority, found itself debating three *sensitive* issues for this Catholic sphere: the fight against homophobia and transphobia, gender education programs in schools, and same-sex unions. In this period, a particularly polarized heated public debate on these religious matters, and the strong opposition from center and right-wing MPs, opened a window of political opportunity for these new ultraconservative Catholic movements. In fact, since 2013, they have been organizing an important *anti-gender* campaign (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), mobilizing within the spaces of Italian Catholicism: the parishes.

In these spaces, as well as through a new organization whose format was imported from France, *La Manif Pour Tous Italia*, these ultraconservative Catholic movements have organized conferences and meetings to recruit potential activists and volunteers and build a *community of the movement* (Taylor and Whittier 1992). On June 20, 2015, a small number of ultra-conservative Catholic groups founded the *Comitato Difendiamo I Nostri Figli* (Defending our Children Committee) to coordinate an important event: Family Day. The name Family Day echoes the format of a similarly named demonstration that was organized by the Episcopal Conference of Italy (CEI) in 2007 against a bill on same-sex couples' rights, which was later abandoned. Apparently identical, these two events mark a crucial step in Italian Catholic activism. In fact, a sequence of ultraconservative Catholic reactions (Della Sudda and Avanza 2017) arose against the moderate and compromising strategy implemented by the Roman Catholic Church on the so-called *non-negotiable* issues of life and family. One of the critical moments of this sequence was the importation of the *March for Life* between 2011 and 2012 by two pro-life Italian and transnational organizations: *Famiglia Domani* (Family Tomorrow) and the European Movement in Defense of Human Dignity and Life (MEDV). In particular, *Famiglia Domani* and its supporters have been very active in organizing events, meetings, and forums, with guest speakers such as Roberto De Mattei of the Lepanto Foundation and Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke, who is very close to Steve Bannon and is one of the most traditionalist and ultra-conservative clerics in the Catholic Church.

In the March for Life context, the fight against the *theory of gender* or *gender ideology* emerges as a new cause of mobilization, especially for two new organizations: ProVita and Jurists for Life. This new mobilization process can be

defined as a mobilization *from below*, as it transcends the religious affiliations of the individuals who engage in the political field.

After two years of intense and local campaigning, in June 2015, these groups and organizations, composed almost exclusively of laypeople, took about 400,000 people to the streets. The media and the literature identify the *anti-gender movement* in Italy as a secularized, apolitical, and non-confessional identity composed almost exclusively of radical and uncompromising ultra-conservative Catholic Christians. At the time, the newspaper *La Repubblica* spoke of a “Family Day galaxy” (2015) to indicate the set of actors present in the streets, recording the absence of the Catholic hierarchy and, above all, of the CEI. In particular, ProVita Onlus played a significant role in linking groups and sharing information by publishing a magazine on pro-life issues: *Notizie ProVita*. Thanks, in particular, to its president, Tony Brandi, a regular attendee of the World Congress of Families meetings, ProVita maintains and develops links at the international and transnational levels of pro-life and anti-gender mobilization. The group defines itself as *non-political* and *non-partisan*. However, as evidenced by a lengthy investigation by the *Corriere della Sera*, it has documented ties with the neofascist party Forza Nuova (Pinotti and Tebano 2017).

Giuristi per la Vita is a task force composed of lawyers and jurists who aim to operationalize the pro-life and anti-gender struggle through the instrument of law in the courts. In 2014, their first success was to prevent the dissemination in schools of three information booklets on gender education, which were distributed by the National Anti-Racial Discrimination Office (UNAR) and the Government’s Equal Opportunities Department as part of the fight against discrimination related to sexual orientation and gender identity. In summer 2013, on the initiative of young Roman Neocatechumenals, and supported by Catholic MP Luca Volontè (founder of the Novae Terrae Foundation and since 2018 president of the Dignitatis Humanae Institute), La Manif Pour Tous Italia was founded with the agreement and support of the *mother* French organization La Manif Pour Tous and its leader Ludivine de La Rochère. In 2016, the group changed its corporate name. It became Generazione Famiglia. It managed to capitalize on previous anti-gender mobilizations, nationalizing their identity and extending the field of struggle by including *pro-family* rhetoric to gain influence in Italian electoral campaigns. In 2019, at the World Congress of Families, ProVita Onlus and Generazione Famiglia announced that they were merging into one organization: ProVita & Famiglia. Moreover, the Comitato Difendiamo i Nostri Figli, created in 2015 as the organization for

coordinating the Family Day event and led by Massimo Gandolfini (a Catholic and Neocatechumenal physician who was already active in the Italian pro-life associations), has played a strategic leadership role in the media and the political field. In 2018, one of the co-founders of the Comitato, Simone Pillon (a Neocatechumenal pro-life activist lawyer), was elected as a senator for the League.

These organizations constitute the entrepreneurs (Cobb and Elder 1972) of the pro-life, anti-gender, and pro-family cause, whose characteristics, and probably also reasons for their success, are, on the one hand, a secularized, *non-religious* positioning with respect to the Catholic Church and, on the other, a *movementist* positioning with respect to the political parties. In other words, the specificity of the Italian ultraconservative movement's entrepreneurship composed of lay Catholics is to position itself in a non-competitive manner with respect to the two spheres that define the identity of the movement: the religious and the political.

Varieties of movements: Insights from World Congress of Families XIII

A further moment of strong mobilization was undoubtedly World Congress of Families (WCF) XIII in Verona in 2019. With the support of both local institutions and international organizations such as Citizen Go, the International Organization for the Family, and the National Organization for Marriage, this new non-religious and movementist cartel positioned itself as a hegemonic actor in the *Family Day galaxy*.

To understand the extremely variegated composition of the Italian ultraconservative Christian-Right galaxy in this new pro-life/anti-gender/pro-family sequence that is renewing the field of ultraconservative Catholic activism, it is necessary to distinguish between a mainstream area and a satellite area. In the former, we find the entrepreneurs of the cause, with the functions of institutional participation (e.g., ProVita & Famiglia is part of the consultative National Forum of Parent Families, established at the Ministry of Education) and political representation (e.g., participating in parliamentary commissions' debates and thus influencing the course of policies on issues such as same-sex civil unions or even stopping them, as in the case of the so-called *Zan Bill*, a proposed bill against hate crimes). More generally, they seek to occupy—or infiltrate—public and media spaces through shock actions, such as posters expos-

ing the *fetus* to make citizens and especially women *more sensitive* toward abortion. Moreover, there is a whole constellation of satellite organizations participating in mobilizations with more or less consistent numbers and playing a *local* function, so to speak, on the margins of this galaxy. These are, by contrast, more likely to manifest religious and non-secularized positions, as well as opposition to the secularized party politics and institutions of the state, and they are often closer to branches of the extreme right and anti-ecclesiastical positions.

In addition to the institutional and political presence at the WCF, more religious and more radical satellite organizations attended the closing demonstration at the Congress. Thanks to the official photos on the Facebook page of WCF XIII in Verona, we were able to identify the following organizations: Alleanza Cattolica, Ora et labora in difesa della vita, Associazione culturale Contra Tenebras, Movimento con Cristo per la vita, Movimento mariano, Centro culturale “il Faro”, Movimento evangelico famiglie italiane, Comitato Beato Mingus Agustin Pro – Viva Cristo Re, Circolo cattolico Christus Rex, Militia Christi, and the better-known Giuristi per la Vita and Movimento per la Vita. It is to be noted that only representatives of Christian religions (e.g., the Orthodox Archbishop of Budapest and Vienna, the Chairman of the Patriarchal Commission for Family and Motherhood of the Patriarchy of Moscow, the President of the Federation of Italian Pentecostal Churches, and the President of the Italian Evangelical Alliance) and representatives of the movement’s entrepreneurs were allowed to appear as speakers.

The Italian ultraconservative Christian Right can be defined more as a space than a movement. In fact, it is a heterogeneous galaxy with *local* organizations characterized by religious and political specific identities and a center dominated by groups of activists, leaders, and, more generally, entrepreneurs of this religious and political cause. While satellite organizations participate and mobilize *from below*, the entrepreneurs produce discourses and campaigns to influence public debate on life, gender, sexuality, family, and religious freedom issues, becoming involved in political and electoral processes. From the top, they circulate discourses and narratives that are ready to use and can easily be reproduced without specific skills or experience of activism, even by the *grassroots* politically right-wing churchgoers who identify themselves with ultraconservative Christian claims (Lavizzari 2020). Such people seem to perceive themselves as victims of a weakened and powerless Catholic Church and of a secularized state led by *genderist* and *homosexualist* lobbies. The following

section takes a deeper look at the narratives and discourses produced by the ultraconservative Christian Right in Italy.

Narratives and discourses

Among the above-mentioned groups, we focused our analysis¹ on ProVita & Famiglia (PV&F) because of its pivotal role in organizing World Congress of Families XIII in Verona. Moreover, PV&F is one of the ultraconservative movements that has explicitly demonstrated a political alliance with radical-right parties. In fact, at WCF XIII, the first Conte cabinet, which at the time was composed of the League and the Five Stars Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle), officially endorsed the event through the participation of multiple members of the Italian government as speakers at the conference, including Matteo Salvini (Minister of Internal Affairs), Lorenzo Fontana (Minister for the Family and Disabilities), and Simone Pillon (Senator of the Italian Republic). We should remember that PV&F presents several ideological similarities with radical right-wing parties, including a nativist core ideology. In fact, it is not unusual to find PV&F's content on social media (PV&F 2018a), where the ultra-conservative movement seeks to justify the contradictions that characterize its so-called *Christian* ideological roots and its refusal to host refugees. For instance, in 2018, PV&F claimed that there was a common misunderstanding of the following biblical verse (Matthew 25:35): "For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home". According to PV&F, "the guest is not an immigrant, because the guest eats, greets and leaves, the immigrant remains for life. Indeed, the traditional interpretation of this work of mercy is not *welcoming refugees* but *hosting pilgrims*" (PV&F 2018a). In this sense, both radical right-wing and ultraconservative movements share a xenophobic political agenda. The goal of this section is to reveal the religious narratives and discourses produced by PV&F that are intercepted and internalized by radical right-wing parties. To achieve this, for the period 2018–2021, we analyzed 33 petitions that are freely available on PV&F's website.

1 For this chapter, we employed a critical discourse analysis to understand the ideas, values, and legitimization strategies that PV&F has used when addressing the religious sphere—an approach developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) and Van Leeuwen (2007).

The idealization of the *traditional family* is the first core narrative that ultra-conservative movements employ when addressing messages on religious matters. This narrative reinforces the institutionalization of the archetypal family by supporting the idea that “the family is the cornerstone of the state” (PV&F 2021a). In its essence, the traditional family is represented as a married couple (a husband and a wife) who live with their biological children. The husband is recognized as the head of the family who sustains economically all its members. In exchange for this, the other components of the household owe him obedience and care (Fineman 1995). Another way that these actors reinforce this narrative is by associating the traditional family with the *natural family*, claiming the “right of children to grow up with a mum and dad” (PV&F 2021b).

The *condemnation of abortion* is another strong narrative. In fact, the pro-life discourses often attribute a social value to reproduction within communities and condemn abortive practices regardless of any pregnancy’s circumstances (Avanza 2020), describing abortion as “a death sentence before being born” (PV&F 2018b). Nevertheless, our analysis shows that this topic has been proposed in alternative ways. For instance, there are discourses that insinuate the danger of abortion practices for women’s health both physically and psychologically. As such, even though contributions from feminist political theory have long established abortion as a woman’s human right (Ballantyne 2021), the narration provided by actors linked to the ultraconservative Christian Right is meant to shift the critique of abortion from an ultraconservative value-based argument (*save the life of the fetus*) to a matter of women’s health care (*save the woman’s life*). To some extent, this discourse serves as a way to *intercept* the feminist audience (as they both argue in defense of women’s interests).

The *antagonization of LGBTIQ+ people’s rights* is the third main narrative that characterizes PV&F. In the period observed, the most frequently occurring discourse linked to this narrative was related to the critique of the Zan Bill. The Zan Bill was a bill that contained a set of articles punishing language and deeds that discriminate against people for their sexual orientation, gender, or gender identity. As such, ultra-conservative and radical-right circles waged a strong opposition to the law, defining it as dangerous for democracy and freedom. For this reason, it has often been defined as a “gag law”, meaning that all believers “risk prison and rainbow re-education” (PV&F 2021b). Another major discourse that reinforces the antagonization of LGBTIQ+ minorities is defending childhood from the threat of gender theory/ideology. In fact, one of the most common discourses employed by the analyzed actor was fighting “homosexual” lobbies who want “to indoctrinate our children” (PV&F 2020). As such, PV&F de-

velops discourses that, on the one hand, encourage the traditional framing of gender relations that evoke the complementary and *natural* roles of men and women, while, on the other, antagonizing all those political actors that disseminate gender theory and “confuse children’s minds by spreading controversial ideologies” (PV&F 2020) (Gusmeroli and Trappolin 2021).

Finally, we observed how, alongside the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, PV&F has proposed discourses that encourage an increasing *skepticism toward science* and even—albeit less explicitly—anti-vax discourses. For instance, PV&F has delivered ethical considerations on how COVID-19 vaccines have been produced by pharmaceutical companies. In fact, the critique mostly focused on “the production and exploitation of cell lines from aborted babies for drug development purposes” and “experimentation on human embryos” (PV&F 2021c).

Given these findings, we should remember that the discourses framed by this actor are not usually clear-cut messages that belong to one or another narrative. Rather, they may cut across more than one narrative in order to reinforce and legitimize ultraconservative religious values. In fact, discourses such as the promotion of the traditional family and the condemnation of abortion have usually been employed to encourage conservative models of gender roles, with women subordinated to and dependent on men (Braghiroli and Sandri 2014). Similarly, the threat of gender theory does not exclusively stigmatize LGBTIQ+ communities, but it is also employed as a grand discourse that cuts across narratives such as “the moral value of maternity and the protection of human life” (Gusmeroli and Trappolin 2021, 518). Similarly, the rising skepticism toward science echoes previous narratives such as the condemnation of abortion.

All in all, these results are in line with recent literature showing that the religious arguments employed by ultraconservative movements are generally used “to oppose liberalism, feminism, gender equality, and individual human rights” (Stoeckl 2020, 223).

Conclusion

To sum up, the real strength of the Italian ultraconservative movements lies in their influence outside—and within—the Italian political offices. First, the galaxy of the Christian Right mostly conducts its political networking within the right-wing political sphere. In fact, it is among the radical right, in par-

ticular, that the ultraconservative movements find their most suited allies. For instance, these movements have managed to elect some of their exponents to the ranks of radical-right parties, such as Simone Pillon, who was elected in 2018 as an MP of the League; while at the general elections of 2022, a large part of candidates from Brothers of Italy had subscribed the pro-life and pro-family Manifesto promoted by the anti-gender movement. To this end, the radical-right parties, such as the League and Brothers of Italy, intercept and internalize the requests of the Christian Right, *normalizing* their religious/moral discourses, such as the dictatorship of political correctness, the threat of gender theory, and the loss of Italian identity.

Second, alongside this ideological homogeneity on religious matters between the Christian Right and the right-wing coalition (led by Matteo Salvini), the Parliament has witnessed a series of political debates that have wrecked, or jeopardized, many progressive battles. For instance, in 2016, the Cirinnà Bill legalized civil unions for same-sex couples, but, following an intense political debate that ended with a compromise between the center right and center left, it did not introduce the recognition of stepchild adoption for same-sex couples. In 2021, thanks to a secret ballot (strongly demanded by the right-wing coalition), further examination of the Zan Bill was stopped by the Senate. More recently the League has proposed a new bill to toughen the (already existing) penalties for surrogate motherhood. Following the example of European radical-right parties' *friends*, such as Law and Justice in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary, and with the technical and juridical support of Italian ultraconservative Catholic entrepreneurs, these Italian radical-right parties could propose restrictive policies on crucial issues such as LGBTIQ+ rights and abortion.

Certainly, the Italian Christian Right has not managed to come together in a joint political party in order to gain access to the Italian Parliament and explicitly enforce its ideology. Nevertheless, in a more hidden way, it remains one of the most powerful Italian lobbies, capable of influencing parliamentary legislation and spreading its political agenda within both public opinion and the mainstream media. To conclude, it is important to note the comfortable position of these movements with respect to the Vatican, which is one of the main reasons for their public visibility. Contrary to traditionalist movements (which are critical of the Second Vatican Council), these contentious but mainstream new Catholic movements recognize the authority of the Vatican and of Pope Francis, whom they are very careful to not openly criticize. This is probably the reason why, albeit with underlying tensions, the Vatican is very comfortable with having an *army of crusaders* at war against *gender ideology* and *LGB-*

TIQA+ lobbies, just as the new Catholic movements are comfortable with having such a powerful institution that gives them *carte blanche* by not hindering their projects—and even supporting them.

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The Christian Right in Contemporary Lithuania

Key Actors and Their Agendas

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Introduction

Religion has returned to the public life of many European countries, and the northern European country Lithuania is no exception. Politics is one of the areas in Western societies where this return has been evident. The electoral success of far-right parties, their use of religious references, and their self-presentation as defenders of Christian values are among the indicators of this return. The return of religion to public life has also been manifesting in civil society activities. In this article, based on observations, a literature analysis, and various social research data analysis, we investigate the Christian-Right phenomenon, including its key actors, agendas, and relations with religious organizations in contemporary Lithuania. We argue that the Christian Right in Lithuania covers both parliamentary and non-parliamentary political parties, sustains close relationships with the dominant Roman Catholic Church, tends to politicize religion, and focuses on preserving *traditional* values in the spheres of intimacy and family life. In the last decade, the Christian Right in Lithuania has been publicly supporting anti-genderism ideas, resisting ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), and fighting against the legislation of same-sex partnerships and the introduction of sexual education in public schools. Our discussion of these themes is divided into five parts. The first two parts introduce Lithuania's political and religious

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landscapes, followed by a discussion of the religious influence in politics and the Roman Catholic Church's politicization process and its consequences.

Lithuania's political landscape

According to the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, Lithuania is a democratic parliamentary republic with elements of a semi-presidential regime. State powers are divided into three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial powers. Legislative and executive powers are combined and executed under the leadership of the Lithuanian Parliament. An independent judiciary system executes judicial power. Lithuania is considered a semi-presidential republic because the President of Lithuania is elected by universal suffrage and provided with flexible powers over the state's foreign and domestic policies.

Lithuania's political landscape is characterized by a multi-party system. Today, Lithuanian politics is dominated by a center-right government. This is formed by a coalition of the liberal conservative party Tėvynės sąjunga—Lietuvos krikščionys demokratai (the Homeland Union—Lithuanian Christian Democrats; with 35.5% of the seats in Parliament), the liberal parties Liberālų sąjūdis (the Liberal Movement; with 9.2% of the seats) and Laisvės partija (the Freedom Party; with 7.8% of the seats), and right-wing President Gitanas Nausėda (The Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania n.d.). However, since the parliamentary elections of 2020, Lithuanian politics has been defined by a tension between these two poles of power. This tension has arisen due to multiple factors, including the Istanbul Convention and same-sex civil partnership legislation. While the government supported the adoption of both legal acts, President Gitanas Nausėda took a more socially conservative stance and expressed sympathy for the opposing positions taken by the Catholic Church (Platūkytė 2021). Political polarization at the highest levels of state leadership in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to the polarization of society and reinforced the influence of the Christian Right.

Lithuania's religious landscape

Constitutionally, Lithuania is a secular state. However, the Roman Catholic Church holds an important role in Lithuania's public life. This can be attributed

to the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has significantly contributed to the development of Lithuanian national identity. In 1864, when imperial Russia's authorities banned all publications in the Lithuanian language in the Latin alphabet, the Roman Catholic Church helped organize underground schools to preserve the Lithuanian language. During the Soviet occupation, the Roman Catholic Church emerged as a powerful actor in the anti-Soviet dissident movement and became a protector of civil society. Over the centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has transformed in the public eye from a military threat to pre-Christian societies to a guardian of Lithuanian culture and national traditions. Due to these historical circumstances, the Catholic Church has always spoken out against what it perceives to be a threat to Lithuanian national identity. Since 2000, there have been a number of legislative initiatives that have been perceived as threatening and that therefore advanced the politicization of the Roman Catholic Church (Ališauskienė and Kuznecovienė 2012).

The important role of the Roman Catholic Church was also verified by signing three agreements between the Holy See and the Republic of Lithuania in 2000. These agreements acknowledge the cooperation between the Roman Catholic Church and the state of Lithuania and focus on areas such as education, culture, and pastoral care of Catholics serving in the army. It is important to mention that the Roman Catholic Church becomes politically proactive when outside values are perceived as threatening its religious teachings and values, potentially producing a religious cleavage. In these cases, the Roman Catholic Church becomes active in the Lithuanian news media and seeks to present its views and opinions on a wide range of social and political issues (Ališauskienė and Kuznecovienė 2012; Pocė 2020).

However, the Roman Catholic Church is not the only religious organization in Lithuania. According to the 2011 Population and Housing Census, the population at the time was affiliated to 59 religious organizations (Ambrozaitienė et al. 2013, 152). Nine religious organizations are recognized as *traditional* by the state and thus “part of Lithuania’s historical, spiritual and social heritage: Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, Judaist, Sunni Muslim and Karaite” (The Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania 1995). Traditional religious organizations are favored by the state and receive governmental subsidies. Non-traditional religions are referred to as *other* religious communities in the law and may be granted the status of state recognition after 25 years of registration. The three-tier system of regulation of religious organizations in Lithuania has cre-

ated inequality for and social ostracism toward non-traditional groups within society (Ališauskienė 2023).

Despite the existing religious diversity, the religious landscape has always been stable, with Roman Catholicism being the dominant religious organization in Lithuania (Schröder 2012). According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census, 74% of Lithuanian society identified themselves as Roman Catholics, while 4% of the population identified as Russian Orthodox, and approximately 2% of the population identified with other religious communities. Approximately 6% of the Lithuanian population did not identify with any religion, and 14% did not answer the question at all (Lietuvos statistikos departamentas 2021). However, it is important to note that the Roman Catholic community in Lithuania is not homogenous. While the majority of Lithuanians define themselves as Roman Catholics, only about one quarter are practicing Catholics. Others can be described as *cultural Catholics*, to whom being Catholic is a matter of ancestry or culture rather than everyday religion (Žiliukaitė et al. 2016; Kuznecovienė et. al. 2016).

Influence of religion on politics

The Roman Catholic Church is a powerful actor in Lithuanian politics, as it regularly interacts with politicians, political parties, and state institutions in three major areas: education policy, biopolitics, and other moral issues.

The political influence of the Roman Catholic Church can be described as both direct and indirect. Its direct influence encompasses the Roman Catholic Church publicly entering the political sphere. The majority of its direct political engagements are executed by the Lithuanian Bishops' Conference, the official meeting of the bishops and the main organizational body of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania. This regularly issues official statements on various political issues that are perceived as being against the Catholic Church's teachings and values.

The Roman Catholic Church's indirect influence refers to its influence through individual politicians, political parties, and religious non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As a majority of politicians affiliate themselves with Roman Catholicism, the Church's indirect influence is inevitable when individual politicians vote according to their religious beliefs. However, political parties such as Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija—Krikščioniškų šeimų sąjunga (Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance),

which gathered 4.8% of the votes in the parliamentary elections in 2020, Krikščionių sąjunga (the Christian Union), which gathered 0.75% of the votes, and Nacionalinis susivienijimas (the National Alliance), which gathered 2.14% of the votes, are known to incorporate the Catholic Church's social teachings directly in their political programs (The Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania n.d.). Often, they also represent the positions and views of the Roman Catholic Church in public debates. Example of such representation would be the anti-abortion efforts by Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance, the political party claiming to represent the Polish minority in Lithuania, which, on several occasions, has served in governing coalitions. In 2017, it initiated the Law on Protection of Prenatal Life to ban abortion, but this was opposed by the Ministry of Health (Lrytas 2017). The aforementioned political parties are also known to support anti-LGBTIQA+ efforts and present themselves as defenders of national traditions and Christian values. The involvement of individual priests and the use of religious services to mobilize the voters are among the strategies of these political parties (Delfi 2020; Bendžius 2020). Representatives of these right-wing political parties also maintain relations with the Lithuanian Roman Catholic Church through informal communications and interpersonal relations (Jackevičius 2016). However, none of these parties with the exception of Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance have received sufficient electoral support, and their influence in politics has been limited. Nevertheless, these political parties represent the political wing of the new wave of the Christian Right and have become more prominent in recent years.

A significant role in strengthening the Roman Catholic Church's position in the political arena of Lithuania is played by religious NGOs, such as Laisvos visuomenės institutas (Free Society Institute), Krikščioniškosios kultūros institutas (Christian Culture Institute), the youth movement Pro Patria, Nacionalinė šeimų ir tėvų asociacija (the National Family and Parent Association), Vakarų Lietuvos tėvų forumas (Western Lithuanian Parents' Forum), and Krizinio nėštumo centras (Crisis Pregnancy Center). Such NGOs have been visible in the Lithuanian public sphere since the year 2000, as public discourse analysis research has shown (Ališauskienė and Kuznecovienė 2012). These organizations help the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania to increase its influence and public support. They also actively lobby to preserve some religious values in Lithuania's legal system and oppose any legislation that is perceived as threatening to so-called traditional values. For example, the Free Society Institute often participates in public discussions on educational and

biopolitical issues. It expressed support for Poland's near total ban of abortion in 2020 and claimed that "there is no (human) right to abortion in international law, European law or national law" (Černiauskas, Krancevičiūtė, and Lenkauskaitė 2020). Meanwhile, the Christian Culture Institute has actively worked against the organizers of Baltic Pride 2018. Journalistic investigation showed that both of these NGOs are known to maintain relations with the Polish anti-LGBTIQ+, anti-abortion, and anti-divorce organization *Ordo Iuris* (Černiauskas and Krancevičiūtė 2021). The youth movement *Pro Patria* is also active in public discussions on various issues and is closely affiliated with the Christian Cultural Institute.

The Roman Catholic Church, political parties, and religious NGOs often share close relations that influence the policy-making process in Lithuania. These relations are conducted through various interpersonal and organizational links and informal communications. They manifest through the adoption of identical positions on various social issues, which contributes to creating the illusion that these organizations represent the majority opinion. In March 2022, members of the Parliament introduced a legal amendment according to which women seeking abortion would be provided with information about *crisis pregnancy* and have the opportunity for a consultation (The Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania 2022). The only organizations in Lithuania providing such assistance are the Crisis Pregnancy Center in Vilnius and the Crisis Pregnancy Program in the Family Center of the Archdiocese of Kaunas. Crisis pregnancy centers are a worldwide phenomenon that are often associated with Christian churches and are characterized by anti-abortion philosophy (Provost and Archer 2020). Similar conclusions about the intense relations between actors in the above-mentioned organizations, as well as with diverse political parties, have been reached by a research study carried out by an NGO supporting LGBTIQ+ rights (JARMO 2021).

Politicization of the Catholic Church

In 1996, the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania declared its intention to abstain from any direct participation in the political process (Subačius 2015). However, the Catholic Church's engagement in the public sphere often follows a pattern of religious politicization. Robertson described religious politicization as the increasing concern of religious organizations with governmental issues (1989, 11). One example of the politicization of the Roman Catholic

Church in Lithuania relates to the introduction of the State Family Policy Concept, which was adopted by the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania in 2008. This concept introduced a narrow definition of the family, with a marital relationship between a man and a woman as the main criterion. The Concept received wide support from the Catholic Church and its satellite NGOs for reflecting Catholic values and “providing the state with guidelines for its further development” (LVK 2008). In 2011, the Constitutional Court ruled that the definition of family as being based on a marital relationship is too narrow and discriminatory, as it discriminates against other forms of families and therefore cannot be used as a guideline in the state’s political process. Thus, the State Family Policy Concept was declared unconstitutional (15min 2011).

Another example of the politicization process of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania has been the resistance of some priests to vaccination against COVID-19. The main arguments used by some priests against vaccination are based on conspiracy theories, religious presumptions, or personal beliefs about the vaccine’s alleged harm. Most of these cases were seen in regions where religious observance is higher compared to urban areas. Vilnius Archbishop Gintaras Grušas, President of the Lithuanian Bishops’ Conference, called these tendencies “dangerous” and said that “Catholic priests who urge not to get vaccinated for reasons other than medical do not reflect the Roman Catholic Church’s principled provisions” (Kupetytė 2021). However, individual priests continued to discourage their parishioners from getting vaccinated, and some even claimed that the vaccines were the “mark of the beast” from the New Testament’s Book of Revelation (Delfi 2021).

Public debates about same-sex civil partnership legislation illustrate another example of the Roman Catholic Church’s politicization process in Lithuania. Same-sex civil partnership in Lithuania is not legalized yet, and thus the country is one of the last among EU members where same-sex civil partnerships are not recognized. In December 2020, the Lithuanian Bishops’ Conference called on the government not to equate same-sex partnership with a family, as “equating various other forms of cohabitation with the family by ignoring the natural complementarity of the sexes inevitably negates the nature of the family and erases it as the constitutional basis of society and the state” (BNS 2020). In March 2021, the Roman Catholic Church again expressed its opposition to the legislation in a joint statement with other Christian religious communities, claiming that it would “change the natural concept of the family” (BNS 2021a). The attempt in May 2021 to introduce a same-sex civil partnership bill in the Lithuanian Parliament failed due to insufficient support from Par-

liament members and, arguably, due to the Roman Catholic Church's indirect influence.

The participation of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuanian politics is controversial, with some seeing it as a potential violation of the principle of separation of religion and state. The Church has interfered in Lithuanian politics on numerous occasions in the past, the most prominent being the sexual education policy formulation process of 2015–2016. In 2016, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports of the Republic of Lithuania adopted a family and abstinence-oriented sexual education program that clearly favors Catholic religious values.

The Roman Catholic Church remains an important and powerful institution that executes its political engagements decisively, and its efforts are often successful in Lithuania. Due to its position as the moral authority of the nation, and thanks to the high level of religious affiliation within society, the Church's discourse frequently becomes part of the background for the formation of policy.

It is important to underline that various non-Church actors contribute to manifesting and enhancing the relationship between religion and state. Religious news media channels, such as *Bernardinai.lt*, *Alkas.lt*, and *Propatria.lt*, publish daily news and commentaries on current affairs from the Catholic Church's perspective to a wide range of readers. In addition, the previously mentioned religious political parties and religious individual politicians contribute to maintaining a close relationship between religion and state. Moreover, in 2021, activists established *Krikščionių darbuotojų profesinė sąjunga* (Lithuanian Union of Christian Workers) (BNS 2021b). This was established due to alleged Christianophobia within Lithuanian society. The founders argued that Christians are forced to act against their faith and values and that Christian workers were facing mobbing and psychological pressure. Among its founders were members of the Free Society Institute and members of the Catholic clergy. Together, these actors are contributing to the advancement of the Catholic Church's role within politics and helping maintain the relationship between religion and state.

Effects of the convergence

Despite the evident convergence of religion and politics in Lithuania, political parties that align themselves with the Roman Catholic Church and follow

its teachings have not succeeded in gaining sufficient electoral support in any elections. The only exceptions are the parliamentary mandates that have been obtained in single-seat constituencies in the Vilnius District. This can be attributed to the fact that this has a predominantly ethnic Polish electorate with a tendency to vote for Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance. Past elections have shown that only moderate political parties are able to facilitate sufficient support and gain enough mandates to influence politics in Lithuania in a decisive way. Religious political parties often adopt far-right, nationalistic, Eurosceptic, and anti-globalist views and support closer relations with Russia. These positions are not popular with the majority of the voters, and they usually fail to mobilize votes. This demonstrates that Lithuanian voters are not in favor of a religious far-right government.

Nevertheless, the convergence of religion and politics in Lithuania is manifesting in two major ways. First, the Roman Catholic Church is allowed to play a legitimate role in the policy-making process. In the early 1990s, the Church gained and maintained substantial access to the policy-making process, mainly due to its prestigious status as the moral authority of the nation and its ability to work behind the scenes. In addition, religious NGOs often represent the same positions as the Church. As a result, the Church, by direct and indirect means, is playing a significant role in the policy-making process in Lithuania.

Second, the participation of the Roman Catholic Church in the policy-making process contributes to tendencies toward the religious radicalization of society and the rise of the Christian Right. This became noticeable during the COVID-19 pandemic and the presidency of right-wing President Gitanas Nausėda. People's frustration with COVID-19 restrictions and vaccination efforts caused nationalistic rhetoric to erupt over almost everything, and nationalism in Lithuania is fused with Roman Catholicism (Vardys 1997). Religious arguments are also occasionally used to reject vaccination against COVID-19. Examples of such arguments include claims that the science behind the development of vaccines is inherently immoral. Supporters of such rhetoric feel emboldened due to the presidency of President Gitanas Nausėda, who is known to maintain a close relationship with the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy. As a result, the Church has become more prominent in public life, and Lithuania has experienced an increased religious radicalization of society.

Generalizations

This chapter has aimed to define the Christian Right, its main actors, and its agenda in contemporary Lithuania. The Christian Right in Lithuania covers both parliamentary and non-parliamentary political parties, sustains close relationships with the dominant Roman Catholic Church and religious NGOs, tends to politicize religion, and focuses on preserving traditional values in the spheres of intimacy and family life. In the last decade, the Christian Right in Lithuania has been publicly supporting anti-genderism ideas, resisting ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, and fighting against the legislation of same-sex partnership and the introduction of sexual education in public schools. The Christian Right in Lithuania generally refers to the Roman Catholic Church's participation in state politics and the incorporation of its teachings into official policies. This is achieved through the execution of the Roman Catholic Church's direct and indirect influence on Lithuanian politics. Direct influence refers to the Roman Catholic Church elites' direct participation in the political sphere, while indirect influence refers to the religious influence executed by religious politicians, religious political parties, and religious NGOs. The Roman Catholic Church's direct and indirect influence on state politics was especially intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, largely due to pandemic restrictions and vaccination efforts, contributing to the rise of the Christian Right.

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Discerning Christian anti-liberalism from the far-right in the Netherlands

Marietta van der Tol¹

Introduction

The potential for the development of a Christian Right in the Netherlands is relatively limited. In 2019, out of a population of approximately 17 million, 20.1% associated themselves with the Roman Catholic Church, 14.8% with a range of liberal and conservative Protestant churches, 5% with Islam, and 5.9% with other groups, while 8.6% of the population attended some kind of religious service once a week or more (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2020). Unlike countries with a long tradition of an established church, the Dutch religious landscape is fairly decentralized and even fragmented: there are many types of conservative Christian churches, and the differences between them may not necessarily be obvious to the external observer. Among the more conservative Reformed traditions are the Gereformeerde Gemeenten, the Christian Reformed Church, and the Restored Reformed Church, which split from the moderate Protestant Church in the Netherlands. These churches are strongly represented in the Bible Belt, which is concentrated in suburban and rural spaces in the Netherlands. Politically, the Netherlands is among the most advanced constitutional democracies in Europe. Moderate to conservative Christians tend to be represented by the center-left Christian Union, while some conservative Christians may vote for the conservative-right *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij* (Reformed Political Party). Some conservative Christians have sporadically voted for the far-right *Forum voor Democratie* (Forum for Democracy).

1 The author wishes to thank Beatrice de Graaf, Arnold Huijgen, and Constant van den Heuvel for their insights and comments in preparing this chapter.

This chapter explores anti-liberalism in Dutch conservative Christian communities in relation to their openness to far-right content. It does so through the lens of three issues: 1) The political alliance between the conservative Christian Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP) and the far-right Forum voor Democratie (FvD); 2) the import of anti-liberal content by means of the Nashville Statement; and 3) the existence of a Christian far-right fringe, the so-called Bodegraven circle, which espouses a localized version of QAnonesque ideas. My main argument is that the susceptibility of conservative Christians to the far right (where this exists) seems to lean on particular intersections with anti-liberal sentiments. More specifically, these include the role of left-leaning elites in processes of secularization; anger about COVID-19 measures as well as political pressure to get vaccinated against COVID-19; and the use of the Christian imaginary of the end times in QAnonesque conspiracy theories by a fringe of radicalized Christians. This intersection of conspiracist thinking with anti-liberal sentiments is unusual among Dutch Christians; however, the pandemic provided relatively fertile ground for seeds of far-right content to be sown within conservative Christian communities. While the platform of the far right has been contested from within Christian communities in the Netherlands, its resonance is a warning sign that must be taken seriously.

The incoherent overlap of conspiracy theories, far-right politics, and conservative Christian politics

Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, far-right content entered conservative Christian communities through the political backdoor: the alliance that the Reformed SGP fostered with the far-right FvD, led by Thierry Baudet, for the purposes of the 2019 midterm elections, in which the FvD won 14.8% of the vote (Kiesraad n.d.). The FvD represents a form of elitist populism, nationalism, and cultural Christianity, vocalizing this in dramatic characterizations of left-leaning elites, Islam, and migration, as well as at any hint of restrictions of personal freedoms. The party has since styled itself after the Make America Great Again campaign and appears to be relatively well connected with far-right intellectuals and politicians internationally. Thierry Baudet is linked a circle of far-right thinkers that gathered around the now emeritus professor Paul Cliteur in the law faculty of Leiden University where Baudet wrote a doctoral thesis with strong romanticist–nationalist overtones. This circle briefly included right-wing opinion maker Eva Vlaardingebroek, a recent convert to

Catholicism, who according to her own X-account has made appearances in Dutch, Swedish, and American media, and spoke about free speech at CPAC Hungary in 2023. Baudet's own international connections include far-right figures such as John Laughland (Botje and Cohen 2020, 104–105), Theodore Dalrymple (Botje and Cohen 2020, 158), and a circle of intellectuals who appropriated the work of Roger Scruton. Within the Netherlands, Baudet attracts the support of the alt-right ethno-nationalist group called Erkenbrand and is often criticized for tolerating antisemitism within the youth organization of the party, led by Freek Jansen (Botje and Cohen 2020, 223–226; Sterkenburg 2021, 213–218).

The FvD has received financial and intellectual support from among conservative Christians, who may be associated with the SGP, the FvD, or both. For example, Bart-Jan Spruyt is chair of a small anti-liberal and internationally seemingly well-connected foundation called the Edmund Burke Foundation, which in the past received donations from Pfizer and Microsoft and organized lectures and Summer Schools for emerging conservatives (Botje and Cohen 2020; Rietveld 2020, 55–56). According to Harm Ede Botje and Mischa Cohen, who wrote a lengthy book on Baudet's far-right networks in and beyond the Netherlands, this foundation facilitated the growth of Baudet's political movement in his early days (Botje and Cohen 2020, 53–61). It is unclear what its current activities are, and its most recent annual financial accounts (of just a few lines) give the impression of a dormant organization under the continued leadership of Bart-Jan Spruyt, Diederik Boomsma, and Jonathan Price, the latter of whom is an Oxford scholar and a graduate from Leiden Law School (Edmund Burke Foundation 2018). Its website still links to a number of conservative and far-right organizations (Edmund Burke Foundation n.d.), though it is unclear what the character of these connections is. Another example is Reformed entrepreneur Cor Verkade, who enabled the rise of Baudet's political party Forum voor Democratie by making meeting spaces available to them in the city center of Amsterdam (Botje and Cohen 2020, 145). He, as well as a circle of Reformed entrepreneurs under the leadership of Reformed lawyer (and FvD member) Jan Louis Burggraaf, has made significant financial contributions to the FvD. Verkade also supports the Transatlantic Christian Council, established by Henk Jan van Schothorst and Todd Huizinga, which, according to *Follow the Money*, acts as an international anti-genderist lobby (Wijnen and l'Ami 2020).

In light of the connections between parts of the Dutch Reformed elite and Forum voor Democratie, it is perhaps not surprising that the Dutch Reformed

party, the SGP, forged a short-lived strategic alliance with the FvD. The SGP is a very small party and has made use of the possibility of forging strategic alliances for electoral purposes (*lijstverbindingen*) in national elections. In the past, the SGP often allied itself with the Christian Union, a small centrist political party. However, in 2019, the SGP allied itself with the FvD, and gained an extra seat in the Dutch Senate as a result of it. This alliance coincided with disagreements over the suitability of political alliances between Christian parties and far-right parties at a European level, as well as over the direction of Christian Democracy in Central Europe, leading to the departure of the Christian Union from the increasingly right-wing European Conservatives and Reformists. This alliance between the SGP and right-wing politics soon came under scrutiny within the Dutch Reformed community, especially after Jan Schippers, who worked for the academic division of the SGP, suggested that the populist inclinations of the FvD were in tension with the foundations of the SGP (Beverdam 2019).

Jan Schippers' criticism coincided with a growing unease with populism and the apparent effects thereof under the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States. One of the main spaces for contention was the *Reformatisch Dagblad* (Reformed Daily), which is the main news outlet for the orthodox Reformed community. In response to this criticism, the Guido de Brès-Stichting (Guido de Brès Foundation), the academic division of the SGP, issued a public-facing apologetic publication entitled *Concurrent of Bondgenoot: een Christelijk Perspectief of Populisme*, written by J. O. van de Breevaart (Van de Breevaart 2020). In the prologue, the chair of the foundation, Arjan Klaassen, suggested that the book's author was searching for "honest answers" to the sticky issue of populism (Van de Breevaart 2020, 8). In reality, the author chose to present existing academic definitions and critiques of populism as left-liberal framing (and therefore suspect, irrelevant, or both): "Onder het mom van een wetenschappelijke definitie is hier feitelijk sprake van framing" ("Although disguised as an academic definition, what we factually see is framing"; Van de Breevaart 2020, 19). Thus, he downplayed the risks of the far right (on the basis of anti-liberal sentiment) and suggested that populism is a possible ally for the Christian political right (as a new form of neo-conservatism).

The short-lived alliance between the SGP and the FvD needs to be understood within a transnational context. The political leader of the SGP, Kees van der Staaij, attended two key congresses in 2017 and 2019, one in Verona and one in Budapest. The official page listing his extracurricular activities lists attendance at a three-day conference of the World Congress of Families in Verona

in 2019, which was paid for by the SGP. The other conference that is listed is the three-day conference *Pro Family and Pro Life*, held in Budapest in 2017, with his attendance partially paid for by the SGP and partially by the conference organizers (Tweede Kamer 2022). These conferences are known as spaces where European (including Russian) and North American anti-liberals and far-right politicians intermingle. In 2019, the Orbán government awarded Van der Staaij a high Hungarian medal for his work in protecting European families, his efforts against the persecution of Christians, and his general support for Hungary (Rietveld 2021, 109–110). That Van der Staaij received this medal, which few had been willing to accept from the Orbán government, is perhaps not surprising given the general interest in Christianity in Central and Eastern Europe in the Netherlands, but this was something that the SGP could have considered more carefully.

Since 2019, the SGP has chosen a different direction under the administrative leadership of Dick van Meeuwen (Bouma 2021). It severed its ties with the increasingly extreme FvD, but a clear rejection of the ideas of the FvD remains lacking within the SGP, partially because its political leader, Van der Staaij, himself has been hesitant to do so. This ambivalence has a social and religious cost. By treating the political alliance with the FvD as merely a political opportunity in isolation from local, national, and international formations of the far right, the SGP made far-right content look like respectable prejudice at the time of its alliance. By since failing to speak out against far-right content with one voice, it continues to facilitate the relative respectability of far-right content among conservative Christians. However, at a local level, SGP city councilors have been increasingly unwilling to form coalitions or otherwise collaborate with the FvD. Some major SGP figures have distanced themselves from the FvD as well, or even left the SGP (Keultjes 2021). This makes a significant difference at a local level. Even so, the churches remain spaces in which support for either the SGP or the FvD may continue to exist, which puts pressure on local religious leaders to navigate political ambivalences and articulate clear boundaries.

The American Nashville Statement against homosexuality in the polder

The second dimension to the growth of the Christian Right in the Netherlands is the Dutch translation of the American-made Nashville Statement of

the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which made its rounds among evangelical circles in the United States in 2018, amassing signatories from a great variety of conservative Christian churches and organizations in the United States (Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood n.d.). The Nashville Statement embodies a conservative backlash to left-liberal stances on sexuality and understands homosexuality, as well as other non-traditional relations, as an unjustified self-conception (Article 7): “We deny that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is consistent with God’s holy purposes in creation and redemption.” This statement was translated by a group of Dutch pastors toward the end of 2018 and sent around the Dutch Christian landscape to ask for more signatories (Nashville-verklaring n.d. a). The signatories appeared to include Van der Staaij, church leaders, and even conservative Christian university professors. Although the statement itself is more expressive of Christian anti-liberalism than far-right anti-liberalism, its American origins impressed on its Dutch supporters a stronger rejection of homosexuality than was common in Dutch conservative Christian churches: whereas in many Dutch conservative churches, an acceptance had been growing of the reality that some people *are* gay (as opposed to practicing), the Nashville statement asserted that being gay would be unnatural in itself.

Its publication caused a major outcry in January 2019, including from within the Dutch Christian community. It turned out that not everyone who was listed had actually signed the statement. Some had merely expressed sympathy with the project, including Van der Staaij. But the harm had been done. The impression given was that the statement enjoyed wide-ranging support among conservative Christians in the Netherlands. The statement has led a quieter life since, although it has triggered further conversations in a number of conservative churches. The appropriation of the Nashville Statement is perhaps an indication of the broader interconnectedness between Anglophone evangelicals and conservative Dutch Christians. For example, through the translation of books, some American pastors, including John Piper and Tim Keller, have become household names among Dutch conservative Christians, as has the British theologian Tom Wright. Moreover, churches maintain formal relationships with Reformed and Presbyterian denominations abroad, and their seminaries are spaces of connection for the Reformed and Presbyterian intelligentsia. This is only somewhat reflected on the Dutch website of the Nashville Statement, which references the Southern Baptist Convention and the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church in the United States, both known as extremely conservative associations of churches which

backed Donald Trump. The website also includes a letter to Olaf Latzel, pastor of the St Martini Church (Evangelische Kirche Deutschland, Bremen), who is known for his controversial teachings on homosexuality. There are also links to Walter Heyer Ministries and the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry (Nashville-verklaring n.d. b).

Some of the apparent signatories (though the full list has been taken offline) include pastor and spokesman of the translators Rinie van Reenen, pastor Orlando Bottenbley, and public intellectual Bart-Jan Spruyt, who continued to defend his support for the statement in the media. What stood out is the relatively large support within networks in the Restored Reformed Church, the Christian Reformed Church, and variations of the Gereformeerde Gemeenten, whereas representation from Pentecostal leaders, for example, relatively limited. This is reflective of the group of individuals who steered its publication. What is interesting is that the Nashville network in the Netherlands shows some overlap with religious figures who have shown themselves to be susceptible to conspiracy theories or who have felt the attraction of allying with the far right, which will be discussed in the next section.

However, this does not mean that a conservative perspective on gender and sexuality automatically implies far-right content. This content exists in subsets of conservative Dutch churches independently of the far right; however, within its international networks, anti-liberal content is not always neatly separated from far-right content, especially on issues to do with gender and sexuality. As a para-church initiative (Byrd 2020), its shape as a petition is curious: whereas its initiators may have looked to maximize its impact by amassing signatures, as in the United States, this also shows something significant—that support for the statement is organized along the lines of the initiators' personal networks, which may not be reflective of the churches to which they are attached.

A Christian far-right fringe: The Bodegraven circle and their QAnonesque conspiracy theory

A third dimension is the appearance of a Christian far-right fringe. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a handful of people who identify as (non-denominationally) Christian spread on their social media a localized version of QAnon—a well-known conspiracy theory about satanic pedophilia among the elite. They frequented a cemetery in the Dutch town of Bodegraven, where they left flowers to commemorate the children who were the supposed victims. One of the

alleged perpetrators was Jaap van Dissel, chair of the Dutch Outbreak Management Team, the main advisory body to the Dutch government on matters regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. In an informative video on behalf of the public news show Nieuwsuur, journalist Rudy Bouma narrated how a handful of radical Christians were spreading conspiracy theories in the Netherlands through their social media channels, including the YouTube channel The Red Pill Journal. Their conspiracy theories are partially homegrown, like the Bodegraven conspiracy, but they also borrow from QAnon regarding the supposed Great Reset plans of the World Economic Forum and the COVID-19 pandemic (Bouma 2022).

This Bodegraven circle has a relatively small and volatile following. Their support tends to depend on specific triggers, such as COVID-19 measures, that may come and go. Their network is not necessarily limited to radicalized Christians. Moreover, they are one thread of a more diverse web of far-right fringe groups in the Netherlands. The Bodegraven circle fits with the analysis of Nikki Sterkenburg, who argues that new far-right fringes in the Netherlands operate more openly compared to, say, the neo-Nazi far right, which tends to remain in the background and whose followers have learned to navigate the boundaries of criminal law (Sterkenburg 2021, 24). Instead, these Christian conspiracists threaten political leaders in their homes, share their footage publicly, and openly rely on a radical version of their Christian faith. This combination is indicative of what Matthew Rowley calls a form of *prophetic activism* (Rowley 2021). Several of the Bodegraven protagonists have been taken into custody: a few were sentenced for intimidating and threatening two cabinet ministers, and two more were referred for psychological assessment. Even so, the Dutch authorities are worried about the radicalization of conspiracy thinkers (Botje 2022). Although this is a worrisome development, Sterkenburg argues, based on interviews with different types of far-right followers, that the ones who are most visible are also the ones who may be least persistent when they receive help with their immediate personal problems (Sterkenburg 2021, 231–232).

How significant is the Bodegraven circle to the development of a violent Christian Right? According to historian Beatrice de Graaf, a violent Christian-Right movement does not quite exist in the Netherlands: according to her, radical ideas must be distinguished from the willingness to engage in violence, which may develop as a result of a process of radicalization (de Graaf 2021, 4). This willingness to engage in violence occurs in a handful of people who associate with religious fringes outside the Christian mainstream: Dutch Christians regard violence to be incompatible with the traditional Christian

faith (De Graaf 2021, 6–7). Even so, conspiracy theories and radicalization are problems for Dutch churches: 1) they assume a prophetic alternative to the churches; 2) anti-liberal aspects to their protests may resonate with conservative Christians' attitudes to wider society; and 3) their apocalyptic style and performances of militant victimhood (or even martyrdom) reverberate with familiar theological language and imaginary. Via processes of contagion, they may influence larger circles of supporters and sympathizers who may not themselves engage in violence but who might agree with the more threatening language—or who might simply share certain anti-liberal sensitivities on the basis of Christian anti-liberal sentiment.

The increasing susceptibility as well as the resilience to far-right content among parts of the conservative Christian community was particularly demonstrated in the aftermath of a livestreamed sermon on “The Great Reset” by pastor Paul Visser (Protestant Church in the Netherlands) in October 2021 (Visser 2021). Visser's sermon sent shock waves through the Netherlands. In this sermon, Visser connected the image of the apocalyptic beast (Revelation 13) with the supposed Great Reset plans of the World Economic Forum (though he confused this with the World Health Organization), the COVID-19 measures, and the ways in which elites supposedly used the pandemic to force significant societal change to the disadvantage of conservative Christians' lifestyles. It was the sort of sermon one might have expected from radical fringe figures, such as opinion maker Laurens van der Tang, pastor Rinie van Reenen, pastor Rennie Schoorstra, and writer and evangelist Jaap Dieleman in his magazine *Eyeopener* (van Beek 2021). Visser, who is known as a mainstream conservative from the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, saw his sermon picked up by the far-right party Forum voor Democratie as well as former Victoria's Secret model Doutzen Kroes, who promotes conspiracy theories through her social media. After a public outcry, Paul Visser apologized for his sermon, although some conservative Christians continued to see anti-liberal grains of truth in it (de Fijter 2021). This incident powerfully shows the significance of apocalyptic content, as secularized by the far right (van der Tol and Rowley 2021; van der Tol and Gorski 2022).

Although many Christians were embarrassed by the public debate over Christianity and the far right, the sermon may have been an important trigger for lay Christians to consider the boundaries between Christianity and the far right. In part, this was facilitated through lay contributions to the *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, a daily newspaper that is read by conservative Christians in the Netherlands. Some churches had already spoken out against the far

right at a senior level. For example, the synod of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands had earlier adopted the book *Heilige Strijd* by Beatrice de Graaf as an official synodical publication. This book explores the relationship between apocalyptic ideas and the search for security, and warns against the willingness to engage in violence and oppression in response to perceptions of evil (de Graaf 2017). However, among lay conservatives, such condemnation may have been less explicit or less confident. Anecdotally, many conservative Christians knew of fellow congregants who voted for the FvD or who played around with conspiracy theories. But who had the authority to say how far too far to the right would be? Perhaps the sermon by Visser provided a much-needed opportunity for lay Christians to engage with this question.

Conclusion

The decentralized organization of Christian churches in the Netherlands facilitates a space in which highly engaged conservatives, such as Bart Jan Spruyt, Cor Verkade, Henk Jan van Schothorst, Jan Louis Burggraaf, Rinie van Reenen, and Arjan Klaassen, are able to foster transdenominational and even transnational engagements with far-right politics. The strength of their initiatives in large part depends on the strength of their personal networks and interests. In the case of the Nashville Statement, these networks were significant within a specific number of denominations, but they could not begin to claim to speak on behalf of all conservative Christians in the Netherlands. Instead, this created space for moderates to affirm their disagreement with the position of the Nashville Statement. In the meantime, the SGP has moved away from a fraternal relationship with the FvD, lay contributors have spoken out against seeds of the far right in Christian circles, and, following the now retracted Great Reset sermon by Paul Visser, there is a greater awareness of the risks of the far right within Dutch conservative churches. This shows some of the resilience of Dutch conservative churches. In all of this, it remains important for churches to actively maintain the boundaries between Christianity and the far right, as Hannah Strømmen and Ulrich Schmiedel demonstrate (Schmiedel and Strømmen 2020). The Protestant Church in the Netherlands has assumed this responsibility by, for example, adopting the book *Heilige Strijd* by Beatrice de Graaf as an official publication of the synod, and there may be scope for further explicit rejections of the far right across the conservative denominations.

The three issues perhaps present a sliding scale involving a selection of Christian anti-liberalism concerning gender and sexuality, openness to collaboration with far-right political parties, and the promotion of conspiracy theories. The further down the scale, the smaller the support is within conservative Christian communities, and this is instructive. This scale indicates the priority of Christian anti-liberalism over support for the far right. Hence, a distinction must be made between Christian anti-liberalism and anti-liberalism as espoused by the far right. Motivations for anti-liberal orientations may be fundamentally different: Christian anti-liberalism may appeal primarily to the Bible, whereas far-right anti-liberalism may or may not take notice of biblical texts, yet alone attach spiritual authority to them, and instead places at the front the survival of white European cultural Christianity. Moreover, Christian anti-liberalism is not altogether anti-liberal: conservative Christians enjoy many freedoms that are grounded in the liberal tradition, although some disagree on specific ethical issues, such as abortion, sexual minorities, and issues in medical ethics. Christian anti-liberal sentiments are shared relatively broadly within conservative Christian communities in the Netherlands; this distinguishes them from liberal Christianity as well as from a society that is perceived to be liberal and secular. Their anti-liberalism may be present in political ideas, local conventions, theological rhetoric, and activism. But whereas Christian anti-liberal sentiments may be widely shared among Dutch conservative Christians, conservative Christianity's affair with far-right ideas does not seem to have grown deep roots.

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The Christian Right in Norway

Hans Morten Haugen

Norway is a relatively secular country, which might give relatively limited potential for a strong Christian Right movement, but there is a potential for broad mobilization on particularly family policy.

To understand the Norwegian context, the chapter provides a brief account of Norway's political and religious legacy. Four distinct movements are then identified. In support of these movements one must distinguish between leaders in churches and denominational organization – being cautious, sometimes giving warnings – and their members – many being active supporters. As the main churches, including Pentecostal churches, are relative moderate – only occasionally seeking to influence public policy, primarily family policy – it is more interesting to understand how Christian Right promoters seek to gain influence through four political parties: the Progress Party (Frp), the Christian Peoples' Party (KrF), Conservative (Konservativt, KON, new name from 2022; previously the Christians (PDK)), and the Norwegian Democrats (NDem; new name from 2023, previously the Democrats). Their positions range from relatively liberal Christian values discourse to ultra-conservative Christian nationalism discourse. To understand the potential and the limitations for Christian Right in Norway, I identify four explanations: The outward orientation characterizing the conservative lay movement, the churches' receptiveness of impulses from the global church, a rather limited political polarization, and higher awareness of dangers inherent in certain forms of pro-Christian and anti-Muslim worldviews.

The legacy

The Lutheran Church of Norway (CoN) formally ceased to be a state church in 2017 and has a (declining) membership of approximately 65 per cent of the Nor-

wegian population. Catholics constitutes approximately 3 per cent – most of which are immigrants, being slightly fewer than Muslims who are members of a congregations – while Pentecostals constitutes less than one per cent of the population, being active on various arenas, as will be shown. The Norwegian system for supporting religious communities is essentially about giving other faith and secular world view communities funding per capita similar to what CoN receives per capita. CoN is described as a folk church in the Norwegian Constitution and is relatively open-minded and liberal, seeking to be inclusive for persons with various backgrounds. The overall religious legacy is far more complex, however.

Norway practiced non-acceptance of religious minorities. Norway's legislation prohibited assemblies not approved by the local priest, of confessions outside of the Lutheran state church, and of Jews, until 1841, 1845 and 1851, respectively. The prohibition against Jews was reinstated in 1942, during the Quisling regime, the fascist collaborator regime during the second world war. The repeal of the prohibition of monastical orders happened in 1897, but from 1857 Catholic sisters established more than 20 hospitals (Hadland 2007). Jesuits were not allowed in Norway until 1956. What does characterize Norway is a relatively strong conservative lay-church movement, which still has a contentious relationship to CoN, due to CoN's rather liberal position on same-sex marriage and abortion. This movement, together with the temperance (tee-totaller) movement and Norwegian language movement forms the so-called countercultures. Its potency was evident in both Norwegian EC/EU referendums, in 1972 and 1994, with anti-Catholicism being a potent mobilisation basis in the 1972 campaign against Norwegian membership. Norwegian mission organisations grew strong during the late 19th century and 20th century, and international impulses to Norway came from the mission movement and the many Norwegians who were sailors in foreign seas.

Norway is also characterized by forced assimilation of the Sámi, Finnish-speaking Kven and Romani people – the former being indigenous and the two latter residing in Norway since the 16th century.

Overall, however, there is meager breeding ground for nationalist-conservative religion in Norway. Mudde defines nativism as nationalism with xenophobia (2007, 24). As measured by Pew Research Center (2018, 26), there are 10 West European countries that show higher scores on nativism than Norway.

The same study reveal that Norway stands out from the surveyed population in the other 14 West European states in that church-attending Christians are more open to immigration and less antagonistic against Islam as compared

to the Church members who seldom visit church (Pew Research Center 2018, 21; 23; see also Opinion, 2019, 32). Moreover, church-active are less nativist than passive church members (*ibid.*, 26).

Four movements

All the movements can be seen as an expression of counterculture, opposing a secularist political elite. The four movements that are considered important are Visjon Norge, the Christian zionism movement, the protagonists of Norwegian legislation being “Christian” and the protagonists of a more visible Christianity in public space.

A person who earlier was rather visible in Norway, Jan-Aage Torp, who is one of many pastors promoted by Visjon Norge (2022), has recently built alliances with Christian conservative organisations in Central Europe, most notably Ordo Iuris, and a couple of ambassadors to Norway (Larsen and Gilje 2021a; 2021b). Torp’s main platform is Kristen Koalisjon Norge (KKN) (2021), which has no other public persons connected (Gjøsund 2021), and he is currently irrelevant in Norway.

Visjon Norge (VN) is primarily a television channel broadcasting 24/7, and its founder has in several ways supported Donald Trump, in 2016 and in 2020, claiming before the election that Trump had won (Hanvold 2020). VN is staunchly pro-Israel, pro-right wing, and owns a Bible school. In February 2020, VN called for a donation of NOK 2020 to “shield your children” from Covid-19 (Larsen 2020). Its formidable growth in the 2000s and absence of the principle of arms-length distance in property transactions within the wider VN conglomerate has been revealed in a 2016 documentary with the title *The Money Preacher* (NRK 2016). The annual turnover has seen a decline in most of the 2010s (Nordahl 2019), but its influence has not been reduced. Its Christian conservative profile and general outreach justifies why VN, whose founder and owner is a Pentecostal, can be viewed as an important actor. VN is included in all larger channel subscriptions in Norway and is available also in Denmark and Sweden. The leaders of the low-church conservative organisations seek to distance themselves from VN (Ottosen 2020), but many of their members are financial contributors to VN.

Norway stands out by its vibrant Christian zionism movement, most notably the Norwegian branch of the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ). ICEJ has links primarily to KON, whose current chair used to work for

ICEJ Norway. While there are several pro-Israel protagonists within Frp, there are currently no Frp politicians serving as bridges between the Christian Zionism movement and the Norwegian Parliament. Until 2023 ICEJ Norway convened the annual Oslo Symposium, together with the organisation Kristen-folket and the weekly newspaper Norge IDAG, but in 2023 there are two Oslo Symposiums, one by Kristen Mediaallianse, Kristenfolket and De Frie Evangeliske Forsamlinger Oslo (IDAG 2023) and one by Kristen Media Norge and ICEJ Norway (2023). IDAG was founded by a *previous* editor of the Christian conservative and explicitly anti-Trump daily newspaper Dagen, whose *current* editor challenges KON, IDAG and VN leaders (Selbekk 2021). While its number of attendees is relatively small, Oslo Symposium, which is transmitted via VN, seeks to mobilize conservative Christians to engage politically.

The third movement consists of various ad hoc initiatives to keep Norwegian legislation in line with what is held as Biblical teaching. The petitions to keep a privileged role for Christianity in Norwegian schools in the 1960s and keep the prohibition against abortion in the 1970s are the two largest in Norway's history, collecting 756,000 and 610,000 signatures, respectively (Berg 2013). Both these and the efforts in the 2000s to keep the marriage act were lost battles (Monsen 2009). Nevertheless, the potency of these movements cannot be denied, and 53 per cent of Norwegians acknowledge that the Church does protect and strengthen morality (Pew Research Center 2018, 145). These campaigns and the underlying tensions very well illustrate religious polarization as identified by Ribberink, Achterberg and Houtman (2018) in secular Protestant countries in Europe.

Finally, various campaigns have emerged to foster a more visible Christianity in public space, often linked to anti-Islam manifestations. These tend to be spontaneous and *ad hoc*, one example being the campaign Yes to carry the cross whenever and wherever I want, with more than 107.000 FB-likes, representing highly diverse attitudes (Abdel-Fadil 2017).

This review shows that the Christian conservative movement in Norway has a certain ability to collect money and mobilize persons for the purpose of stemming the perceived threat of secularization – seeing legislation as the crucial tool. One example is the seminar with seven Lutheran organisations as convenors: Christian faith in a squeeze – Christian in a secularized society (KPK 2009). The main message was that Christian faith and committed action is somehow restricted by having legislation with a weaker Christian embedding.

Four political parties

There are complex dynamics between the movements and the parties. By counting what has been won during the last 50 years in the realm of defending “Christian values” the restrictions on twin abortion from 2019 is one of the few victories. This came as a result of the political bargain to make KrF join the center-right government, and a ban of so-called foetus reduction was included in the common platform of the then majority government (Four parties, 2019, 55), later approved by the Norwegian Parliament (2019).

The four relevant parties – characterized by emphasizing Christianity in highly diverse ways, ranging from faith-focused to nativist-focused – are presented according to their size. The support for the two smaller parties – receiving a total of 1.5 per cent of the votes in 2021 – indicates the relatively limited potential of the Christian Right in Norway.

The Progress Party (Frp) was originally an anti-taxation party that turned into a right-wing populist anti-immigration party. After a schism in 1994, when many liberalists left the party, the party radicalised during the late 1990s, becoming more anti-immigration and anti-Islam (Jupskås 2016). CoN leaders called upon people *not* to vote for this party at the parliamentary election in 1997, and Frp’s rhetoric was claimed to contrast with Western civilisation values (Haugen 2014). Its best election result came in 2009, with 22.9 per cent, but the support is currently almost halved, getting 11.6 per cent in the 2021 parliamentary elections, after being in government from 2013 to 2020.

The party leader from 2021, Sylvi Listhaug, oftentimes wearing a visible cross in her necklace, held five ministerial positions from 2013 to 2020. Listhaug has also been an ardent critic of CoN and of what she considers as “soft attitudes” by especially KrF, with the mean accusation that the former chair (2011–2018) sought to please imams as the low point (Furuly and Randen 2017; the phrase used was “Hareide licks imams up the back”).

According to her previous advisor (and spin-doctor), especially “in the large Pentecostal movement” there are Christians who felt “rejected” by politicians other than Listhaug, and an active approach to these was therefore prioritized (Hoel 2019), but the last period of some movement of voters from KrF to Frp was in 2013–2017 (Bergh and Aardal 2019, 17).

The party programme specifies that it is based on the Christian worldview (Frp 2021, 4) and calls for mandatory school worship – with exemption possibilities (ibid, 84). Its liberalist and majority culture position is evidenced in its long-standing rejection of the (generous) public support scheme for religious

communities (ibid, 91). While implementing this policy will negatively affect Pentecostal and other smaller churches, these concerns are subordinate to the concerns relating to the continued support to for instance Muslim congregations.

Specifically on immigration, Frp's party programme says that Norway shall receive only Christian refugees (Frp, 2021, 18). In the national budget agreement for 2021, Frp and the Government agreed that Christian, Ahmadiyya and Yezidi refugees are to be prioritized in the resettlement of refugees in Norway (Norwegian Parliament 2020, 1398–1399).

Christian Peoples' Party (KrF) – being a member of the International Democrat Union (IDU) – deviates from its sister parties in Europe by using *Christian People*, and not *Christian Democratic*, in its name. The party was established in 1933, and had its best election in 1997, with 13.7 per cent. Until 2013 KrF had a requirement of Christian confessional belonging for those representing the party, but now it seeks to appeal more broadly. The election result in 2021 was merely 3.8 per cent. It has lost voters to almost all parties.

KrF is not a Christian Right party but has appeal within Christian Right circles. 2021 saw a campaign among the two newspapers *Dagen* (daily, conservative) and *Norge IDAG* (weekly, right-wing) to urge their readers to vote for KrF (Søkelys 2021); as KrF is seen as a guarantor of certain traditional moral positions, notably opposing same-sex marriage and abortion (KrF, 2021, 33), and promoting Christianity in school and media.

The party had a split in late 2018, when the (then) party leader wanted to form a government with the center-left. A promise by the (Conservative) Prime Minister to be positive to modifying the Abortion act on twin abortion was important in shifting at least some of those who join a narrow majority (98–90) in voting for joining the center-right government. Several who wanted to form a center-left government subsequently left KrF.

The party leader 2018–2021 was replaced by another supporter of the 2018 majority. Despite the shift to the right, the current KrF party programme omits the earlier call for moving the Norwegian embassy to Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

The Norwegian Democrats (NDEM) a national-conservative party with nativist convictions, gained 1.1 per cent in the 2021 elections. It was established in 2002, a large share of its leading persons have a past in Frp, including its present leader. Its first party programme adopted in 2005 emphasized in the first paragraph that its principles build on Christian values (“livsverdier”). There is a shift from this explicit embedding and being supportive of “the church” (Dem [now

NDem] 2005) – presumably CoN – to the 2021 programme’s emphasis on combatting Islam, including prohibiting the hijab and halal food (NDem 2021, 20) and merely referring to a Christian value basis for Norway, as “Christianity is a bulwark...” (ibid, 49).

Moreover, in the section on culture and media the party announces policies, that will be based on the “Christian and Norse cultural heritage” (ibid, 69), being the first Norwegian party that is explicitly anchoring its policies in a Norse cultural heritage.

Conservativt (KON). This party finds that KrF is too soft, on issues like pro-Israel, anti-abortion and immigration control. Nevertheless, Christian conservatism characterizes KON more than nativism. The party gained 0.4 per cent in the 2021 elections (0.6 per cent in the local elections in 2019), was established in 2011 and changed name to Konservativt in 2022.

Its programme specifies that it will counter attempts to make atheism and humanism more influential. Rather, the Norwegian state “in all natural contexts must promote Christian culture and identity, and thus form a bulwark against attitudes and views of the human being that contradict this heritage” (KON 2021, 12). How exactly the state’s promotion of Christianity is to serve this function of “bulwark” is not clear, however.

Three specific policy priorities do provide some answers, however. The party wants to prohibit abortion (ibid, 10), same-sex marriage (ibid, 6) and introduce a compulsory subject on Christianity – with no exemptions (ibid, 19). All other religions are to be taught in social sciences. Finally, Christian asylum seekers are to be prioritized (ibid, 60).

In summary, while the programmes of the four parties differ substantively, they share one perception, namely that there are mutual relationships between positive, liberal values, including respect for human rights and “Christian values”. Hence, the Norwegian Christian heritage is understood by these four parties as encompassing liberal values. “Christian values”, however, has different meaning for different persons, ranging from a “humanist” protection discourse in KrF to a “nationalist” protection discourse in Frp, NDem and KON.

Moreover, Brekke, after interviewing central persons in PDK [now KON], finds that they generally perceive that there is a “leftist-Muslim Plot against Christianity” (Brekke 2019), a thinking that also characterizes NDem. These two parties, however, remain marginal, and there is disagreement between the party leaders whether a joint position on 25 issues launched in December 2021 might be a first step towards merging the two parties (Dem [now NDem] and

PDK [now KON] 2021). KrF's decline shows that mobilising by calling for traditional values, supportive policies for families and global justice is a too narrow basis to gain broad electoral support in Norway. Particularly Frp has a broader notion of what "Christian" entails, namely a belonging relationship and appreciation for Christianity as part of Norwegian tradition.

Reminding of the context and identifying four additional explanations

The introduction highlighted that Norway is characterized by various forms of countercultures, previous forced assimilation – being apologized by both church and state – and church-attending Christian being less anti-immigration, anti-Muslim and nativist than those who report to be merely church members (Pew Research Center 2018, 21; 23; 26). Similar attitudes are expressed by the CoN elite (bishops, deans and members of the National Church Council) (Gulbrandsen 2019, 128; Gulbrandsen et al. 2002, 182). Counterculture expressed as pro-districts attitudes among the CoN elite correlates with being pro-immigration (Gulbrandsen 2020).

This context is in itself important in explaining the relatively weak potential of the Christian Right in Norway. Those who oppose what they see as a leftist-leaning CoN – the previously mentioned leader of Frp, Sylvi Listhaug, being one – do, however, constitute a certain percentage of the population.

I identify four additional explanations for the limited breeding ground of a strong Christian Right movement in Norway: two focusing on the churches themselves – outward orientation and receptivity – and two focusing on the broader Norwegian political discourse: limited polarization and the post-22 July 2011 debate.

While there are exceptions, the outward orientation promoted by the mission movement has made Norwegian conservative Christians become internationalists. While the first missionaries, notably to Greenland, were "state missionaries" Norwegian missionaries from the organisations were never a tool for colonial expansion and control. In brief, prejudices were replaced by partnerships.

CoN has always been a protagonist for the global ecumenical movement and has also fostered stronger church cooperation – and inter-faith cooperation – in Norway, primarily from the end of the 20th century. Through the impulses from the global ecumenical movement, justice and dignity for those

fleeing persecution is affirmed by welcoming them, and Biblical commandments of hospitality are frequently referred to.

As mentioned above Norway is characterized by polarization regarding the promotion – or not – of religion. Various alternative media have provided space, also for some Christians: *reset.no*, *document.no* and Human Rights Service. Norway is not, however, characterized by a deep polarization in the form of what has been termed “culture war”, as is present in Denmark (Lövheim et al. 2018, 151).

Finally, post-22 July 2011 early analysis emphasized that while Christianity has for many become a marker for Norwegianness (Døving og Kraft, 2012, 217), there was also a renewed emphasis on religious plurality (Døving og Kraft 2012, 202–203). Later studies are more sceptical about this acknowledgement of plurality (Notaker 2021). The 22 July terrorist had for 10 year a rather active membership (1997–2007) in Frp and its youth movement.

While the terrorist’s many Biblical references (Breivik 2011) have been subject to relatively few studies (Strømmen 2017), it is fair to say that he was not a Christian in a traditional sense, but preoccupied with Christian identity (Breivik, 2011, 1363).

This is different from the other Norwegian extreme right terrorist, Philip Manshaus, who killed his sister and was overmanned as he shot himself into a mosque just outside of Oslo 10 August 2019. The preceding year Manshaus was active in two conservative congregations, one in mid-Norway – when attending folk high school – and one in Oslo (NRK 2021, 3:30–5:35 and 10:30–12:10). The 10 August terrorist’s longed for traditionalism and moral rigidity, and his Christian revival went in parallel to his hardening into becoming a terrorist.

The presiding bishop of CoN emphasized in his 10 years commemoration speech that the churches need to confront the ideology of the 22 July terrorist. The Christian longing characterizing particularly the 10 August terrorist (NRK 2021, Paulsen 2020, interviewing an ex-member of Manshaus’ chosen church) shows that unconditional and essentialist pro-Christian and anti-Muslim worldviews represent one of extremism’s breeding ground.

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Christian Mobilization in Portugal in the 21st Century

Riccardo Marchi¹

Political system and religious panorama

Portuguese democracy emerged from the military coup that, on 25 April 1974, overthrew the authoritarian regime—the Estado Novo (New State)—that had been in power since 1933. Since its very beginning, the new semi-presidential democracy has been characterized by a parliamentary party system that is quite stable, both on the left, with the Partido Comunista Português (PCP; Portuguese Communist Party) and the Partido Socialista (PS; Socialist Party), and on the right, with the Partido Social Democrata (PSD; Social Democratic Party) and the Centro Democrático Social (CDS; Social Democratic Center). In 1999, the Bloco de Esquerda (BE; Left Bloc entered Parliament, joining the PCP in the radical-left opposition, while changes in the parliamentary center right took place in 2019, with the election of MPs from Iniciativa Liberal (IL; Liberal Initiative) and the populist radical-right Chega (CH; Enough). In the 2022 legislative elections, these two parties significantly increased their parliamentary representation, while the CDS disappeared from Parliament.

As far as the state–Church relationship is concerned, from the 1930s onwards, the authoritarian regime promoted a *de facto* alliance with the Catholic Church—made official by the Concordat agreement signed by the Vatican and the Portuguese state in 1940—around the common ideological pillars of corporatism, anti-liberalism, and anti-communism (Pinto and Rezola 2007, 365–366). To avoid negative reactions from the mostly Catholic Portuguese people who were still mindful of the anticlerical Portuguese First Republic (1910–1926), the post-April 25th democratic regime confirmed the

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Concordat of 1940, bringing only a few changes. In any case, the 1976 Constitution reinforced the principle of separation between the state and the Church through the non-confessional nature of the state and the independence of the Church, which was confirmed by the 2001 *Lei de Liberdade Religiosa* (2001 Religious Freedom Act). From then on, the state has proceeded with a slow legislative alignment process with respect to the Catholic Church and other religious minorities, especially in matters such as tax exemption, access to public media, and the role of religion in the education system (Moniz, Pinto, and Brissos-Lin 2020, 218).

The religious identity of Portugal is still strongly associated with Catholicism, despite some minor changes being underway. According to the 2011 Census carried out by the Instituto Nacional de Estatística (INE; National Statistics Institute), 81% of the Portuguese identified as Catholics, 4% belonged to other religions, and 7% had no religion. The minority belonging to other religions were composed mainly of Christians (85%), with non-Christians comprising 15% of this minority. These Christians were mainly Protestant (22%) and Orthodox (16%), although 47% belonged to other Christian churches. The non-Christians were composed of Muslims (5%), Jews (1%), and believers of other minor non-Christian religions (8%). Despite representing a small minority, the percentage of non-Catholics has tripled in the last 30 years, mainly thanks to citizens coming from the former colonies following the decolonization process and immigrants concentrated in metropolitan centers. As far as the Portuguese Catholics are concerned, the decrease in religious practice, as well as the increasing secularization seen in cleavages on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, is quite significant (Franca, Fernandes, and Cravidão 2018, 11–22). This phenomenon also affects people's identification as Catholics: less than 80% in recent years (Teixeira 2012, 6–7).

The social mobilization of the Catholic right wing

In Portuguese democracy, right-wing Christian activism, especially Catholic, started to emerge with greater vigor in the 1990s due to the abortion debate.²

2 The primary source for this reconstruction of Christian-Right political activism was an interview with António Maria Pinheiro Torres, a leader of this social movement (interviewed on June 26, 2021).

The abortion law had already been altered once in 1984 (Law 6/84), determining that there would be no legal punishment for abortion in three cases: severe and incurable birth defects of the child detected within the first four months, risk of death or severe harm for the woman, and cases of rape within the first three months. This alteration provoked some reaction in the Catholic milieu but not a long-lasting movement. By contrast, in the 1990s, the debate on free abortion mobilized Catholics within the center-right parties in Parliament (the PSD and the CDS) and within Christian organizations, particularly Opus Dei (in Portugal since 1945), Caminho Neocatecumenal (Neocatechumenal Way; in Portugal since 1969), Renovamento Carismático Católico (Catholic Charismatic Renewal; active since 1974), and Comunhão e Libertação (Communion and Liberation; in Portugal since 1987).

Throughout the decade, this Catholic network organized events on this theme, including with MPs as guest speakers, but there was never a structured strategic alliance between the social movement and the political parties. The Catholic activists affiliated with political parties acted as individuals—not as members of factions within parties.

It was only after 2000 that Comunhão e Libertação began a series of conferences to discuss the political situation in the country and the subjects most important to the organization, but this was without much follow-up. The lack of a political project was something that the Christian groups shared with other more conservative groups. For example, the Portuguese chapter of the Brazilian group Tradição Família e Propriedade (TFP; Tradition, Family, and Property) was a short-lived experiment, disbanded due to controversies over its Brazilian leadership, which became the Custódios de Maria (Custodians of Maria). The weakness exhibited by TFP in Portugal also characterized other minor groups associated with TFP: Acção Família (Family Action), Arautos d'El Rei (Heralds of the King), Associação da Nobreza Histórica (Association of the Historical Nobility), and Centro Cultural Reconquista TFP Lusa (Portuguese TFP Cultural Reconquest Center; Zanotto 2007). The Lefebvrian Fraternidade São Pio X (Society of Saint Pius X) was also always very minor in Portugal and not politically active, but it attracted a few young people with its taste for traditional rites such as the Tridentine Mass (the Traditional Rite Mass used from 1570 until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s). The Portuguese Church countered this attraction by holding Latin masses in the São Nicolau Church in the center of Lisbon, until they were permanently prohibited by the Vatican. The weakness of radical groups in the 21st century is consistent with the history of these fringe groups in Portuguese democracy.

Thus, in the 1990s, the debate on abortion mobilized all the Catholic circles, mainly against the radical left and the more progressive sectors of the Parliament. In this period, the pro-life movement concentrated on social issues more than party politics.

However, the pressure from this social movement facilitated the promotion of the first referendum on abortion on 28 June 1998 (Alves et al. 2009, 6; Feio 2021, 132). The referendum campaign was an important testing ground for Catholic organizations in terms of social mobilization. The victory of “No” against the decriminalization of abortion in the 1998 referendum (50.91% “No” vs. 49.09% “Yes” voters) was the high point of right-wing Christian mobilization, but this was without effect, as there was no quorum. On this occasion, 68.1% of citizens with the right to vote did not vote in the referendum. The 31.9% who voted were divided between 50.9% (1,356,754 voters) who voted against the decriminalization of abortion and 49.1% (1,308,130 voters) who voted in favor. However, the more than one million votes obtained by “No” were a sign of the strength of Catholic activism.

With the start of the new millennium, the movement witnessed two opposite dynamics: on the one hand, there was constant growth, greater professionalism, and a structuring of the social movement; on the other, defeats on various fronts emerged.

In terms of the successes, a window of opportunity opened in 2002 with the resignation of António Guterres as prime minister, following the defeat of the socialists in municipal elections. On that occasion, the PSD leader José Manuel Durão Barroso had contacted António Maria Pinheiro Torres and Isilda Pegado, prominent figures in the anti-abortion movement, as he realized the importance of mobilizing Catholics to gain voters for the 2002 legislative elections. The two were added to the PDS electoral list and became MPs during the governing mandates of Durão Barroso (2002–2004) and Pedro Santana Lopes (2004–2005). In the meantime, these two Christian activists founded the *Federação Portuguesa pela Vida* (FPV; Portuguese Federation for Life), an institutional umbrella for various organizations of the pro-life movement, with its president Isilda Pegado and vice president António Maria Pinheiro Torres at the top. Its repertoire of actions—street demonstrations, public petitions, and the creation of ad hoc associations—applied more pressure on the government. In 2004, for example, an FPV petition (217,000 signatures) demanded that the PSD and the CDS respect promises made during the electoral campaign not to alter the law on abortion during their mandate,

despite a left-wing petition (126,000 signatures) to raise the abortion debate in Parliament again (Vilaça and Oliveira 2015, 10–11).

From this moment onwards, the center-right parties began to seek contacts with Catholic activism more intensely. In 2005, José Ribeiro e Castro, a CDS member of the European Parliament from 1999 to 2009, invited the FPV to participate in an international campaign to insert a reference to Christianity into the preamble to the European Constitution, a campaign that resulted in a petition with 82,000 signatures in Portugal. Moreover, in 2005, the CDS brought into Parliament José Paulo Carvalho (first president of the FPV) and Isabel Galriça Neto (spokesperson for “No” in the 1998 referendum). In 2009, it was the turn of Assunção Cristas, invited by the CDS leader Paulo Portas to join the party because of her television performance in the “No” campaign in the second referendum on abortion in 2007. Assunção Cristas became president of the CDS in 2016. All these people were co-opted at an individual level rather than through negotiations between the social movement and the right-wing parties. In fact, these relationships remained quite frail.

This process of institutionalizing the Catholic social movement did not prevent successive heavy defeats, which were signs of the growing secularization of Portuguese society. These defeats included a campaign against the decriminalization of drug consumption (2000), a campaign against Law no. 12/2001 on the *morning-after* abortion pill (2001), and a campaign against a draft law on medically assisted procreation (2006). The heaviest defeat, however, was in 2007: the second referendum on abortion, promoted by the PS, which was approved in Parliament with the support of the center right (the PSD). In the second referendum, “No” won only 41% of the votes, compared to 59% of votes in favor of decriminalizing abortion. At a geographical level, the results confirmed a division between the more conservative north and the more left-leaning south (Manuel and Tollefsen 2008, 122).

For the leaders of the Christian social movement, the referendum campaign was a clear sign of cultural changes both in the Catholic Church and in the center-right parties. In contrast to the 1998 campaign, in 2007, the Portuguese Catholic Church—on its own initiative rather than under orders from the Vatican—limited itself to taking a few positions publicly, though without much enthusiasm, as if it already felt culturally defeated. As to the political parties, in 1998, the president of the PSD, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, was an active participant in the referendum initiative, whereas in 2007, the PSD permitted

a referendum to be held that now favored the left. In fact, in contrast to 1998, in 2007, the parties were the main funders of the referendum campaign.³

Despite its defeat in 2007, in the following years, the movement grew in size. In 2012, the movement started organizing the largest annual mobilization of the Christian Right: the *Caminhada pela Vida* (Walk for Life), attracting thousands of people and, after initially only being held in Lisbon, spreading to various other Portuguese cities. In these demonstrations, the presence of young people was notable, attracted less by the Catholic organizations they belonged to and more by the social networks they frequented, such as channels protesting the alleged cultural hegemony of the left and the harassment of Christian students in civic education classes in public schools. The coordinator of the *Caminhada pela Vida* platform, José Maria Seabra Duque, highlighted young Catholics as the driving force behind Christian social networks both in the street demonstrations and in their schools (Costa 2014). However, this cannot be described as a right-wing radicalization of Christian activism. The overwhelming majority of the social movements were not involved in far-right organizations. Indeed, in the 2012 edition of the walk, the media noted the participation of the extreme-right Partido Nacional Renovador (PNR; National Renewal Party) with its own insignia. Although made uncomfortable by this situation, the organizers merely relegated the radical group to the tail of the march. The media frequently associate the PNR with the Catholic right wing, not only due to the party's anti-abortion and anti-*gay-lobby* demonstrations but also because of the closeness of its leader José Pinto Coelho to Opus Dei. The same applies for the right-wing populist party Chega, which participated in the 2021 edition of the walk without, however, attracting much attention from the demonstrators. In this sense, the radical parties did not reap a leading position within the Christian social movement.

Moreover, the practical effects of this social mobilization continued to decline. In 2008, the social movement's opposition to a new divorce law, which allowed either spouse to divorce without the prior consent of the other party, and the creation of the *Plataforma Cidadania e Casamento* (Citizenship and Marriage Platform) had no effect. Similarly, the mobilization against the new law 60/2009 on sex education in schools was unsuccessful, as was the subsequent petition to suspend the law on abortion. The situation worsened still further with the socialist government of António Costa (2015–2022), which was supported—in an unprecedented arrangement for Portuguese democracy—by

3 Interview with António Maria Pinheiro Torres on June 26, 2021.

the radical left of the PCP and BE. In 2016, for example, the Costa government significantly modified the rules governing the funding of contracts of association between the state and private schools, which primarily affected Catholic schools serving the majority of the 20% of Portuguese students in private education. This socialist policy caused a significant mobilization of various players (parents, teaching and non-teaching staff, and directors of private schools), who were already members of organizations or founders of associations of this type, many of them Catholic in nature. But this mobilization was short-lived, as it never attempted a formal connection with the opposition parties (the PSD and the CDS), which, in turn, were uncertain whether to become spokespeople for this protest. The lack of connection between the Catholic social movement and the political parties was at the root of the failure of this mobilization. This movement was an example of the inability of Catholic groups to organize and of political parties to catch the wave (Leitão and Resende 2019, 204).

Minority Christian groups and radicalization

Despite political defeats, over the years, the political activism of Catholic organizations began to spread from the abortion issue to other issues raised for public debate by the left-wing government: medically assisted reproduction (2006), the introduction of the day-after pill (2007), marriage between same-sex couples (2010), and euthanasia (2020). The broadening of the dissenting agenda had two effects from a political standpoint: on the one hand, it promoted alliances with other denominations, namely the Evangelicals; on the other, it fostered the emergence of Christian right-wing parties that later played an important role in the success of right-wing populism in Portugal.

With respect to the Evangelicals, since the last decade of the 20th century, the number of the people professing non-Catholic faiths grew from 2% at the end of the 20th century to over 5% of the population in the new millennium. These believers belong to a variety of religions, many brought by migratory flows, including Islam, Asian religions, and Protestantism, particularly Pentecostal Evangelicals who are mainly from Brazil (Vilaça 2013, 113). The senior Evangelical organization is the Aliança Evangélica Portuguesa (AEP; Portuguese Evangelical Alliance), which has been in Portugal since 1921 and includes almost all the Evangelical churches. From the 1980s, Evangelical churches outside the AEP began to establish themselves, namely the Igreja Maná (Maná Church), active since 1984, and the Igreja Universal do Reino de

Deus (IURD; Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), active since 1989. In general, in Portugal, the Evangelical world has even fewer connections than the Catholics to the parliamentary parties, although they have shown a growing desire for involvement in politics (Vilaça 2015, 72–73), especially given the advancing progressive agenda in Portugal.⁴ The Igreja Maná, for example, has paid a great deal of attention in the last few years to right-wing intellectuals and politicians, including those involved in the Christian social movement and the populist party *Chega*, inviting them for interviews on its television channel Kuriakos TV.

The first contacts between the AEP Evangelicals and the Catholics of the social movement date back to 2007 and were established around the Grupo Cívico Interconfessional (Interfaith Civic Group), made up of Catholics, Protestants, Evangelicals, and some Muslims from the Central Mosque of Lisbon. Their closest collaboration, however, was in 2010, when the Plataforma Cidadania e Casamento (Platform for Citizenship and Marriage), created by the FPV, organized a demonstration of 10,000 people in the center of Lisbon and presented a petition to Parliament for a referendum on same-sex marriage. Under the then socialist government of José Sócrates (2005–2011), the request was rejected by Parliament, despite the 92,000 signatures presented (the minimum required was 60,000). Law 9/2010 permitting civil marriage between people of the same sex had been introduced in Portugal in May 2010 (Brandão and Machado 2012). Today, Evangelicals are a constant presence in pro-life activities and Christian initiatives against the left-wing agenda, especially LGBTQ+ activism and gender education in public schools.

With regard to the political parties, the mobilization around the 2007 referendum began discussion in the social movement on the possibility of starting a political party that was Christian and anti-abortion to capitalize on the strength of numbers shown by the movement. The leaders of the social movement disagreed with the project, as they considered it a mistake to crystallize it into a political party, an approach that had already been shown to have had little impact in other Western countries. This was a strategic, but not a political, divergence. In 2009, despite the leaders' opposition, militants from the social movement founded the Portugal Pro Vida (PPV; Pro-Life Party). The PPV had originally emerged as an anti-abortion party, but over the years, it extended its support to all pro-life policies from conception to natural death.

4 Interview with António Maria Pinheiro Torres on June 26, 2021.

In electoral terms, the PPV's performance confirmed the fringe nature of the project: 0.15% in the legislative elections of 2009 (8,461 votes) and 2011 (8,205 votes), 0.04% (2,659 votes) in 2015, and 0.4% (12,017 votes) in the European elections of 2014. In the 2019 European elections, and with a new name, the Partido Cidadania e Democracia Cristã (PPV/CDC; Christian Democracy and Citizenship Party), the party, led by Manuel Matias, was part of the electoral coalition *Basta*, together with the Partido Popular Monárquico (PPM; Populist Monarchic Party) and two movements that had not yet become official parties, *Democracia 21* (Dem21; Democracy 21) and *Chega*. Their poor results (1.49%; 49,496 votes) undid the coalition, but it represented a turning point for the PPV/CDC, which, maintaining its alliance with *Chega*, contributed to the election of André Ventura, the leader of the populist radical right-wing party, as a deputy in the legislative elections of 2019, with 1.3% (66,442) of the votes.

The exponential growth of *Chega* in terms of media coverage, its militant base (increasing from 700 to 25,000 members between the summers of 2019 and 2020), and electoral performance (between 8% and 9% in 2020 polls and then 7% in the 2022 general elections, with 12 MPs elected) led to the dissolution of the PPV/CDC in the summer of 2020 and the incorporation of its members into *Chega*. Thus, *Chega* became an attractive party for the Christian right wing, whether Evangelicals or Catholics. Its attractiveness was increased by the religious profile of André Ventura, a former seminary student with a penchant for using religious language for political ends. For example, he has constantly mentioned being called by God in his mission to save Portugal. In May 2021, he publicly prayed at the Sanctuary of Fatima, accompanied by the Italian right-wing populist Matteo Salvini, leader of the *Lega*, a partner of *Chega* in the European group Identity and Democracy. Accordingly, *Chega* added two Catholic activists to its new leadership elected in 2021: Rita Matias (daughter of Manuel Matias), a rising star in the party and its youth leader, and Pedro dos Santos Frazão, a member of Opus Dei and also a teacher at the order's college Planalto.⁵

Both Matias and Frazão are currently *Chega* MPs, elected to Parliament in the January 2022 legislative elections. The case of Pedro Frazão illustrates a rule in the political militancy among right-wing Catholics: he joined *Chega* to introduce its Catholic agenda but not through any overt intervention by Opus Dei,

5 In October 2021, the participation of a group of Christian militants from the *Chega* party in the March for Life, with a banner stating "always in defense of life: *Chega*" provoked some resistance from the organizers of the event.

which, in fact, has always preferred to keep its distance from the parties.⁶ This preference of Opus Dei had already been seen in the cases of other prominent members since the 1990s, such as Paulo Teixeira Pinto, the secretary of state for the presidency of the council of ministers (in the PSD government of Aníbal Cavaco Silva), who was formerly connected to the banking sector, and Manuel Brás, a cadre of the ephemeral right-wing Partido da Nova Democracia (PND; New Democratic Party) during the 2009 legislative elections. Despite the political independence of these men from Opus Dei, the media have always made a connection between this ultra-conservative group and Portuguese right-wing parties. This connection has been even more marked in the case of the Evangelicals in Chega. In May 2020, the weekly magazine *Visão* exposed an alleged web of Evangelical churches actively supporting Chega, particularly noting the militants at the forefront of the party who were also Evangelical activists (Carvalho 2020). Indeed, many Evangelicals committed themselves to Chega from the start, sharing video and text materials of fellow Brazilian believers opposing the left-wing agenda (mainly gender politics and LGBTIQ+ mobilization). In this case, in an official statement, the AEP refuted any connection with Chega, which, in turn, reaffirmed its secularity and openness to believers of any religion.

The deepening ties between Catholics and Protestants in the social mobilization and autonomous initiatives of Christian activists has led, in recent years, to the appearance of groups and initiatives relatively autonomous from the FPV and the right-wing parties. In 2019, for example, the presence of an LGBTIQ+ group in a civic education class in a public school triggered a reaction from Christian groups, which, through PSD deputy Bruno Vitorino, went to Parliament to state their opposition to so-called gender ideology. From this reaction emerged the association *Deixem as Crianças em Paz* (Leave the Children Alone), which has been especially active on social networks, proving to be adept at attracting new activists. One of these was the Evangelical activist Maria Helena Costa, today a Chega militant, who is opposed to the latest generation of feminism and gender issues in public education. Another example is *Sail-Defesa da Liberdade* (Sail: Defense of Freedom), a network of Christian lawyers, judges, and other professionals who provide legal support to citizens or groups of citizens who consider their freedom of religion, education, and speech to be threatened (Morais 2022). This organization operates along the

6 Interview with Pedro dos Santos Frazão on 6 October 2021.

same lines as Alliance Defending Freedom—International (ADF), with which it does, in fact, collaborate at events in Lisbon.

Despite these connections with counterpart organizations abroad, Portuguese Christian activists are not so deeply involved in international networks, with the exception of those organizations to which they belong. For example, the European Christian Political Movement (ECPM) has the Partido Popular Monárquico (PPM) as a Portuguese member, despite this monarchist party being at the very fringe of Christian activism in Portugal. Moreover, in January 2021, the Brazilian right-wing network Revista DireitaBR, close to the government of Jair Bolsonaro, organized its congress in Lisbon, with the participation of, among others, Maria Helena Costa, not as a Chega party cadre but as the president of the Associação Família Conservadora (Conservative Family Association). In addition, Chega MP Rita Matias is currently a member of the European Fraternity Christian network, although not as a representative of the party.

Conclusions

Throughout its 30 years of existence, Christian activism in Portuguese democracy has mobilized thousands of people, but it has provided neither a window of opportunity for extremist fringes nor a reliable basis for an autonomous political party. In particular, the right-wing Christian social movement continues to be more comfortable relating to the classic center-right parties than to the new populist radical-right party Chega. This is evident in the absence of any radical reaction in response to the offensive against the Portuguese Catholic Church following the findings of the Independent Commission for the Study of Child Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church (promoted in 2021 by the Portuguese Bishops' Conference). The broadening of activism from the anti-abortion battle to opposition against so-called *cultural Marxism* has promoted a connection between Catholics and Protestant Christians, particularly Evangelicals. Under the social movement umbrella, several Christian micro-structures have been created that operate in the social realm, supporting pregnant women and single mothers, taking in abandoned children, providing family planning and sex education, sharing natural procreation technology (NaPro), and supporting homosexual people uncomfortable with their sexual orientation. However, the Christian Right has been unable to stop the achievements of more power-

ful progressive social movements, especially the LGBTIQ+ movement, due to the lack of an organized advocacy strategy (Mota and Fernandes 2021).

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Religious Actors and Their Political Agenda in Romania

From the Family Referendum to the Rise of the AUR

Ana Raluca Alecu

Introduction

Political and religious freedom returned to Romania after the bloody revolution in 1989 that put an end to the communist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu. Following the adoption of a new constitution in 1991, the country became a parliamentary republic with a semi-presidential regime and features a multi-party system, now dominated by the social democratic and liberal parties.

The Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat; PSD) and the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal; PNL), together with the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România; UDMR), form the current grand coalition government. In the general elections of 2020, the center-left Social Democratic Party secured 28.9% of the vote, followed by the center-right National Liberal Party with 25.1% and the centrist Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România; USR)–The Party of Liberty, Unity and Solidarity (Partidul Libertate, Unitate și Solidaritate; PLUS) Alliance with 15.3%. While extremist parties remained for a long time at the fringe of the Romanian political scene, following the last elections, a new anti-system party called the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor; AUR), featuring a conservative and nationalist agenda, offered a great surprise, becoming the fourth-largest party in the country's parliament.

Religion returned to the public sphere in Romania after 1989, when, counting on the support of the overwhelming majority of Romanians (86.81% declaring themselves Orthodox, according to a 1992 census), the Romanian Ortho-

dox Church (Biserica Ortodoxă Română; BOR) tried to impose itself as a new key actor, with refreshed ambitions to influence the political process. One of these ambitions concerned the reinstatement of religious education in public schools. This request was supported by all the denominations in post-communist Romania, resulting in the introduction of such classes in 1995.

Romania is a secular state, with no state religion but 18 recognized religious denominations, funded by the state according to their number of believers. This gives a fully privileged position to the BOR, given its 86.45% share of believers according to the last census from 2011, followed by Roman Catholics (4.62%), Reformed (3.19%), Pentecostals (1.92%), and others (National Institute for Statistics 2013).

Politics and religion have often intermingled during post-communist Romania, with implied mutual benefits for both (Bîgu 2018, 89). Beside the subsidies granted by the state, political positions are offered to members of the Church hierarchy in the Romanian parliament, while the Church acts as an electoral agent promoting certain political parties' agendas.

Family referendum

Against this rather complex background, in 2018, a broad-based coalition of NGOs and various religious groups (using the name Coalition for the Family [Coaliția pentru Familie; CpF]), counting on the full support of several denominations in Romania (most notably the Evangelical and Orthodox churches), was soundly defeated in its attempt to change, by referendum, the neutral definition of family in the Romanian Constitution, based on an agenda "aiming for a *de facto* constitutional ban on same-sex marriage" (Cinpoș 2021, 420).

It is important to note that the main churches in Romania, such as the Orthodox and Catholic churches, were not formally part of the Coalition for the Family, but, as noted by (Cinpoș 2022, 215–238), "members of the clergy declared publicly their support for the initiative, assisted in the collection of signatures and subsequently encouraged people to participate in the referendum." The Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church publicly declared its support for the initiative of the Coalition for the Family to amend the Constitution: "The Synod has taken note with appreciation of the citizens' initiative to amend Article 48 of the Romanian Constitution in order to specify that the family is constituted by the freely consented marriage between a man and a woman." This initiative of lay people belonging to several denominations was

supported by the Romanian Orthodox Church, as, according to a statement of the BOR (Ionescu 2016), "it expresses its teaching on the family and its constant legal position." On the Catholic side, the Catholic bishops of Romania, reunited in a plenary assembly, stressed that "we welcome with hope the decision to launch the referendum to be held on 6 and 7 October 2018 to revise the Constitution" (Dancă 2018), while also recalling that the Association of Catholic Families Vladimir Ghika and the Catholic Action in Romania were part of the Coalition for the Family.

This initiative marked a first in this overwhelmingly Orthodox country, where the vast majority declare themselves Orthodox and where the Orthodox faith has usually been considered an essential part of the *Romanian identity* throughout the centuries, with 74% of Romanians stating that being Orthodox is important for truly being a national of the country (Pew Research Center 2017). For the first time, otherwise competing denominations stood together for the same cause, actively participating in collecting signatures and encouraging people to vote in favor of amending the Constitution.

On October 6 and 7, 2018, at the Coalition for the Family's initiative, Romania organized a referendum on whether to narrow the constitutional gender-neutral definition of family. The referendum failed to attract the threshold required for its validation, and, since then, the Coalition for the Family's influence has begun to gradually fade—and, along with it, its initial post-referendum plans to reposition itself as a prospective pan-Christian conservative party.

A legislative proposal for the organization of a referendum on the definition of family was proposed by the CpF in October 2015. Under Romanian law, the Constitution can be changed after a proposal is made by either the president, the government, a quarter of the members of parliament, or at least 500,000 citizens. Parliament must then vote in favor of the revision, which must then pass a nationwide referendum. In less than a year, the Coalition succeeded in collecting over three million signatures (although only 500,000 were needed) and submitted them to the parliament along with the initiative. After an evaluation by the Romanian Constitutional Court, the process was allowed to go on, and the parliament then voted in favor of the referendum. Voters were called to answer the following question with "Yes" or "No": "Do you agree with the Law for the revision of Romania's Constitution in the form adopted by Parliament?" In its current form, the Romanian Constitution defines family as "the free-willed marriage between spouses," using a gender-neutral formula (Art. 48), while the proposal to be voted on in the referendum was that family

is based on marriage “between a man and a woman, and on the parents’ right to ensure the growth, education and upbringing of their offspring.”

The turnout was far below 30%, the threshold for a referendum to be binding, despite a decision by the government, which had largely backed the referendum, to allow two days of voting rather than one. Just 21.1% of the voting population took part (with 91.56% agreeing with the proposed change to the Constitution), so the referendum failed, leaving the existing definition of family in place. While factors such as opposition to the topic of the referendum and personal opposition against its initiators were cited as the main reasons for absenteeism by researchers who conducted interviews on the subject, other reasons, more of a political than a religious nature, were also invoked. One such reason concerned the limited involvement of parties in the campaign for the referendum (although they were active at the collecting signatures stage) (Stănescu 2020), while others viewed the referendum as an attempt by the government party to divert public opinion from the real problems that the country was facing (Gherghina et al. 2019, 14).

The Coalition for the Family appeared to the Romanian public as an umbrella organization bringing under the same flag dozens of NGOs, foundations, associations, and federations fighting for similar causes: anti-abortion, anti-LGBTIQA+, anti-sex education, pro-traditional family, pro-natalism, and anti-vaccination. While founded in 2013, it has only become visible in the Romanian public space since 2016. The coalition billed itself as an “independent civic initiative,” unaffiliated to any specific religion or denomination, counting among its members predominantly Evangelical—but also Orthodox and Catholic—NGOs, some of them established (with premises and public actions) and some of them small (with few public apparitions). These member organizations enjoyed within the CpF a certain degree of autonomy, pursuing sometimes different agendas and organizing separate events.

More importantly, the Coalition secured the support of both right- and left-wing parties, signing electoral protocols with three political forces: the Social Democratic Party, the National Liberal Party, and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats. However, the referendum was opposed internationally by, among others, Amnesty International and the advocacy group ILGA Europe (Norocel and Băluță 2021).

At the conceptual level, the Coalition featured a multi-layered discourse championing traditional family and values, while at the same time displaying a powerful rhetoric focused intensively on subjects such as the so-called *gender ideology*, from which the natural family and children should be protected, and

inventing straw men by invoking the danger of *Christianophobia*. Its marketing strategy (an aggressive social media presence, a savvy flexibility in accommodating different denominations, a competitive and bold approach in public debates, and a strong TV coverage), while mirroring similar strategies professed by Evangelical movements, in particular, in recent years, set a new standard in marketing religion for a post-socialist audience and imposed a new type of competitor in the otherwise overwhelmingly Orthodox country's religious services market.

While the CpF's rhetoric echoed that of similar religious anti-gender movements in other Central European countries (e.g., Croatia, Slovakia, and Slovenia), its member organizations would at first glance suggest a grassroots Romanian Christian-Right movement. However, as analyzed by (Paternotte and Kuhar (2017), given that very similar organizations with similar agendas have tried to modify the constitutions in other European countries, specifically in the vicinity of Romania, a more cautious answer on the national and international dimensions of the Coalition for the Family is required.

One of these countries is Croatia, where in 2013 a similarly named organization, On Behalf of the Family, succeeded in gathering over 700,000 signatures for a proposed amendment to the Constitution that would regard marriage as a union between a man and a woman, thus creating a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage. The initiative succeeded, with the support of the Catholic Church, conservative parties, and other denominations. Another country with a similar scenario is Slovakia, where in February 2015, a referendum on banning same-sex marriage, proposed by the Alliance for Family, failed to attract the threshold required. A few months later, in December 2015, Slovenia organized a referendum on a bill that would legalize same-sex marriage, and a majority of voters voted against. The referendum was pushed by opponents of the bill, such as the Children Are at Stake group backed by the Catholic Church.¹

While these similar scenarios, names of organizations, and agendas may not be sufficient to seriously question the labelling of the Coalition for the Family as a grassroots initiative, the Coalition's supporting organizations certainly tilt the balance toward regarding it as just one example, among several, of a more general push to alter the constitutions of several Central and Eastern Eu-

1 For the presentation of similar situations in relation to Romania, I am particularly indebted to Paternotte and Kuhar (2017).

ropean states (as well as elsewhere) in order to impose a conservative and religiously oriented agenda.

Among the supporting organizations that offered legal counseling and lobbied for the CpF's agenda an important place is occupied by the World Congress of Families (WCF), a US coalition established in 1997 that promotes Christian-Right values and is active worldwide, regularly organizing large international *pro-family* conventions (e.g., at Verona and Chişinău) with the support of local right-wing politicians. Its relation with the CpF is by no means non-transparent, being officially branded as a *supporter*, as proven by the WCF's submission of a petition supporting the CpF referendum, signed by 100 conservative activists from 22 countries (Barthélemy 2018). Other supporting organizations include the Alliance Defending Freedom, an American conservative NGO advocating for religious freedom, marriage, and family; the Liberty Counsel,² a religious liberty NGO that offered support to a similar organization in Croatia; and the European Center for Law and Justice (ECLJ), an international NGO dedicated to the protection of human rights worldwide (Barthélemy 2018).³

While the result of the referendum undoubtedly disappointed the CpF's supporters, the Coalition did not abandon its political ambitions but instead tried to better its position along the lines of the Christian conservative World Congress of Families. This strategy did not prove successful, and gradually, as the COVID-19 pandemic began to take over the public sphere, the Coalition for the Family remained only a media presence, mainly preaching along pan-Christian lines.

2 According to (Ciobanu 2017), "Romania's Coalition received legal assistance from the international chapters of several U.S.-based conservative Christian groups, including the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) and Liberty Counsel. In the U.S., both have been designated as anti-LGBTQ hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center. The international chapters of both organizations submitted pro-referendum legal opinions to Romania's Constitutional Court while the body assessed whether the civic initiative could be considered by parliament."

3 The actions of US-funded organizations trying to influence the social agenda in Romania are by no means limited to the support offered to the CpF. A recent investigation looked into how a growing number of US-funded *pregnancy crisis centers* (PCCs), many established by Evangelicals, are fueling the anti-choice movement in Romania (Strzyżyńska 2022). These PCCs offer support for women with unplanned pregnancies and are mistakenly taken for abortion clinics. The investigation states that "among 22 PCCs identified in Transylvania [a historical province of Romania], at least 14 were receiving funds from US charities" (Strzyżyńska 2022).

When analyzing the Coalition for the Family's post-referendum behavior, two levels of discussion might prove useful. At the level of the entire organization, one of the first moves of the CpF was to give up its website but to remain active on social media, while in the meantime dramatically cutting back on its TV appearances. A second, bolder approach was to announce plans to enter Romanian politics as a prospective pan-Christian conservative party, while blaming the mainstream political parties for failing to support the Coalition's plea at the referendum. The Coalition felt betrayed, and its leaders strongly blamed the mainstream political milieu.

Promoting the Civic Platform Together was the main new project begun by the Coalition after its referendum failure. Created in 2017, the Civic Platform Together, a platform consisting of over 500 NGOs and 130,000 supporting members, was promoted heavily only after the referendum, most probably because the CpF's name may have been associated with its recent failure. Not surprisingly, the president of the CpF, Mihai Gheorghiu, became president of Civic Platform Together, and the Platform remains central to its public presence today.

A more interesting development can be seen at the level of the organizations and NGOs gathered by the Civic Platform Together. A list once available online featured, besides several organizations from the Coalition for the Family, many new ones, overwhelmingly Orthodox rather than Evangelical. This hints at a possible identity change and a visible shift toward a more Orthodox stance. One striking feature of the new members is the lack of information concerning them. A brief analysis into the content that they share online suggests that they are very small organizations or associations. No details about their domains of activity are provided, besides the information suggested by their names. While these new members remain surrounded in mystery, more can definitely be said about the organizations and associations inherited from the ill-fated Coalition for the Family.

Most returned to their traditional themes (pro-life, anti- LGBTIQ+ and anti-vaccination) or added new additions to their old themes of interest, such as COVID 19-skepticism. Others displayed mimetic and opportunistic behaviors, shifting almost entirely from their traditional themes to new ones (overwhelmingly COVID 19-skepticism and anti-COVID 19 vaccination) when realizing that an anti-COVID 19 vaccination stance was a great opportunity to make themselves heard once again, given its more polarizing nature. However, more importantly, some began to display messages of support for the AUR, the new anti-system party founded in September 2019, some of whose founding

leaders came from the CpF's ranks, thus giving the Coalition for the Family one more chance to manifest its pan-Christian ambitions at the political level.

The AUR: A sudden success on the political scene

Bringing together radical religious conservatives, anti-vaccination activists, COVID-19 deniers, and hardcore nationalists, this new party, echoing Poland's populist and nationalist Law and Justice Party, secured a surprise result in Romania's 2020 parliamentary elections. It became the fourth-largest party in the country's parliament (with over 500,000 votes, over 9% of the total), with an agenda mirroring the Coalition for the Family's anti-gender and religious agenda, albeit with a more pronounced nationalist and pandemic-oriented twist.

With a savvy political campaign focused on social networks, combined with numerous meetings with the diaspora, echoing the ones used for marketing the CpF's initiative to amend the Constitution, the AUR secured 47 seats in the Romanian parliament out of a total of 466 and placed some of its leaders as senators and deputies. The AUR's president is currently George Simion, a self-declared admirer of the Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán but also a well-known unionist, supporting the unification of Romania with the Republic of Moldova. Other leaders include the journalist Claudiu Târziu, a member of the National Coordination Council of the Coalition for the Family at the time of the signature collection for the referendum, and the strategist Sorin Lavric, now a member of the Senate, who instantly became famous among the Romanian public after declaring that "no man seeks in a woman cleverness, depth or lucidity" and that "the Roma people are a *social plague*" (Adevărul 2020).

The party hails itself as "the only opposition party" in Romania having as its goal the unity of Romanians and featuring four main values: *family*, *nation* (and love of nation, defined as the community of all those who share a common language, culture, and history, whether or not they are within the borders of the Romanian state, and who live in harmony with other nations), *the Christian faith* (there is no direct reference to Orthodoxy, despite the accent placed on the importance of the BOR in building the nation), and *freedom* (defined as God's most precious gift to man). According to the AUR's Claudiu Târziu (4 Media 2022), "AUR is speaking to all Romanian citizens, regardless of ethnicity and denomination. It is not by chance that the AUR has two national vice-presidents of Roman Catholic denomination, Marius Lulea and Robert Alecu, as

well as leaders of local organizations and parliamentarians from all denominations and all minorities recognized in Romania.” While not missing a chance to boast of having members from denominations other than Orthodox (mainly Catholics), the AUR has retained a very special relationship with the BOR that can be traced back to long before its electoral success in 2020. That special relationship has included moments when AUR leaders campaigned with Orthodox priests at their side (sometimes in the courtyards of Orthodox churches in the diaspora), the promotion by the BOR of AUR leaders’ initiatives (e.g., books and civic projects), and, most importantly, a strong connection with some neo-Legionary Orthodox associations tolerated by the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Gradually, as the shock surrounding the exceptional election results for the AUR began to fade, the party’s descriptions both in the mainstream press and by political actors have shifted from being an *anti-system* party, which succeeded in securing the support of a Romanian diaspora disenchanted with the political milieu at home, to being a *far-right* party with similarities to the Iron Guard (the fascist party from the inter-war period) at the local level and the Polish PiS (Law and Justice) and the Hungarian Fidesz at the international level. The latter claims were supported by several articles documenting the strong support given to the AUR by several *neo-Legionary and Orthodox brotherhoods*, such as the Gogu Puiu Association, the Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu Foundation, and the Sfântul Mare Mucenic Gheorghe Orthodox Brotherhood, which organized youth camps and commemorations of important Iron Guard leaders, attended by high-profile members of the BOR’s clergy (e.g., Înalț Preasfințitul Teodosie, Archbishop of Tomis in southeastern Romania), along with AUR leaders such as Călin Georgescu.⁴ All of this was with the unofficial blessing of the Romanian Orthodox Church, although there was a firm public condemnation of the AUR by a BOR spokesperson (Bobei 2022): “Populist seizing of noble Christian–conservative themes xenophobically and philistinically detached from Europe’s spiritual context only undermines these fundamental themes, which is why the Church disavows any form of excess that arises around them.”

Is the AUR the party that the CpF would have wanted for itself but failed to create? A preliminary answer would be positive. If, in particular, doctrinal points of view are taken into account, both the AUR and the CpF can be (and

4 A fully documented investigation into this topic can be found in (Marincea 2022a and 2022b). Similar views are expressed in Grădinaru (2020), an interview with the historian Oliver Jens Schmitt.

have been) described as populist, nationalist, pro-life, pro-family, and anti-LGBTIQA+. The answer would still be yes if we recall that some CpF leaders (e.g., Claudiu Târziu) became leaders of the new party, so shifting to the AUR did not seem to be problematic, at least for some CpF members. Moreover, the AUR is the kind of new party, with a surprisingly large support and success, that the CpF would want for once more pushing its initiative to amend the Constitution.

But can the AUR offer a new chance for the Coalition for the Family's supporters to promote their conservative religious agenda? Although no research has been carried out on how many CpF supporters voted for the AUR in the last elections, we can safely assume that since some of the CpF leaders migrated to the AUR, some of their supporters followed. If so, these CpF supporters might get a chance to see their agendas promoted by the AUR, as two surveys on Romanians' voting intentions (INSCOP and AVANGARDE) in February 2022 placed the AUR in second position after the Social Democrats (Hotnews 2022s and 2022b). Nevertheless, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and AUR's equivocal position on Russia and the invasion, the party descended to third place in the Romanian electorate's voting preferences and maintained that position throughout early 2023. This serves as evidence that in a country where numerous individuals believe that Russia is attempting to interfere in its internal affairs through media platforms, espousing such contentious views remains a risky business. Additionally more recently, the party has seen its stability and credibility affected by a scandal leading to several very public resignations, with critics pinpointing the blame at the party's leader, George Simion. Still, according to the most recent surveys of Romanian voting intentions at the future general elections in 2024 (CURS, INSCOP, INSOMAR), the prospects look again rosy for AUR, as two surveys (CURS and INSCOP) place AUR on the second place, in one case together with the Liberals, at 19%, and in other case alone on the second position with 20% (Hotnews 2023, Digi 24 2023), while the third (INSOMAR) sees AUR in poll position, with 27% (Evenimentul Zilei 2023).

While the failed attempt to change the Constitution and the sudden shift from being a very visible religiously oriented agenda setter to an organization now condemned to semi-obscurity will undoubtedly be seen as an end of the road by some, the merits of this attempt, as well as the Coalition for the Family's attempt to become new religious actors in Romania's public scene, should not be overlooked. The Coalition for the Family succeeded for the first time in the country's modern history in bringing under the same umbrella dozens of NGOs, foundations, associations, and federations fighting for similar causes,

thus being broadly representative and accommodating multiple specific agendas.

Moreover, the Coalition succeeded in securing support from otherwise competing denominations, and this was the first time when all the main religious denominations in Romania acted together for a common goal. It also secured the support not only of political parties (both right wing and left wing) but also of international organizations, and, more importantly, it secured substantial public support.

Moreover, the Coalition for the Family set the stage for the emergence of the AUR, introducing to the public debate themes that were later developed in the latter's political doctrine.⁵ From this perspective, the AUR can be seen as absorbing the lessons offered by the failure of the more religiously diverse and anti-LGBTIQ+ oriented Coalition for the Family and wisely adapting its otherwise strongly nationalist and pro-family agenda to better suit the new social and political context, dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the Coalition for the Family challenged the assumed separation of church and state in present-day Romania by trying to amend the Constitution, the AUR now legitimizes, from the benches of Parliament, a discourse targeting gender, migration, and minorities, to a level that echoes more and more the radical anti-gender religious campaigns in Central European countries such as Poland and Hungary.

Setting the AUR aside, is there likely to be an opportunity for the Coalition for the Family to return to the public eye with a new initiative in the not-so-distant future? The answer is, depending on the aspects considered, both positive and negative. A short answer would be yes, if the Coalition for the Family were to continue to profess its mistrust in the capacity of modern science, mainly expressed in its anti-vaccination stances. Such an approach, enforced by the pandemic but professed even before it, would have a high likelihood of gathering supporters for its cause. On the negative side, the denominations and the political parties are unlikely to rally behind the Coalition for the Family

5 As noted by Mărgărit (2019), the Coalition for the Family's attempt also played an important role for the LGBTIQ+ community "by forcing the supportive groups to coagulate their energy, formulate pertinent and efficient strategies, and persuade other groups of the civil society, including academia, that indifference to the LGBTQ rights may be dangerous for the future of human rights and democracy."

one more time after its first failure.⁶ Finally, as some of its leaders have already migrated to the AUR, some of its supporters may have gone with them.

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Indirect Path to Power

The Far-Right Catholic Agenda in Spain

José Barrera-Blanco, Mónica Cornejo-Valle, and J. Ignacio Pichardo

Between 2005 and 2009, Spain provided the first European setting for Catholic mobilization against same-sex marriage, sex education, and voluntary interruption of pregnancy. These three social achievements were considered expressions of what some Christians name *gender ideology*. These anti-gender campaigns failed in their main objectives at this time: in 2023, both abortion and same-sex marriage are legal. However, the anti-gender rhetoric has reached the public sphere and is part of public debates in Spain today. In this chapter, we explore the successes and failures of Catholic conservative strategies around gender in Spain in the last two decades by analyzing (1) the evolution of the religious context, (2) the internationalization and professionalization of lay activism, and (3) recent transformations in the right-wing electoral landscape. These three factors inform the political opportunity framework in which religious, civil, and political actors create coalitions in their attempts to transfer Catholic doctrines into public policies.

The Spanish state has been a parliamentary monarchy since 1975, following 40 years of a fascist dictatorship ruled by General F. Franco with the support of the national Catholic Church. Since 1975 (the end of the dictatorship), the Catholic Church has lost a great part of its political influence (Spain is no longer a confessional state), and two parties have dominated the political landscape: the moderate conservative People's Party (PP) and the moderate leftist Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). The Spanish far right (parties and activists) disappeared from the public sphere in the democratic period, as they were considered as legacies of the dictatorship. However, a new far-right party arrived in a regional parliament in 2018, after the Catalanian independence movement challenged the Spanish state in 2017.

Despite the Catholic Church's loss of influence, Spain remains a country with a majority of Catholics, a huge minority of citizens without religious affil-

iation, and poor diversification of the religious landscape. State surveys show that 60% of the population identify as Catholic, although two-thirds of them are lapsed Catholics (CIS 2021). According to the same sources, other religious groups make up only 4% of the population, and they are more focused on religious freedom than on implementing big political agendas. Compared with the religious minorities, the Catholic Church enjoys a hegemonic role in Spanish society. In addition, the Church has far more hospitals, schools, universities, NGOs, worship places, and media than all other religious denominations together. However, the Catholic Church's influence on public opinion is limited, even among Catholics. Due to memories of the Church's collaboration with Franco's dictatorship and a certain latent anticlericalism in Spanish culture (Behar 1990; Cornejo-Valle 2008), Spaniards do not support the participation of religious institutions in public politics. Along this line, surveys show a great moral divide between the official positions of the Catholic hierarchy and the majority of Catholics in matters such as contraception, female priesthood, same-sex marriage, and divorce (Univision 2014, 13). One of the most relevant aspects of the Spanish case is that the Catholic hierarchy has enough resources to be heard but lacks social support to easily succeed.

Turning a religious issue into a public concern: The mobilization of Catholics around gender

In 1994, the Spanish Episcopal Conference (SEC) published a note opposing the European Parliament's Resolution on equal rights for gays and lesbians (1994), labeling it as the "legitimization of a moral evil" (SEC 1994). Following the Vatican's new rhetoric against gender, sexual, and reproductive rights during the UN Conferences in Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995), the first time that gender was pointed out in Spain as a harmful ideological project of "homosexual lobbies" and a "certain feminism" was in 2001 in a pastoral instruction entitled *La familia, santuario de la vida y esperanza de la sociedad* (The Family: Sanctuary of Life and Hope of Society; SEC 2001). Two years earlier, the Spanish Family Forum (SFF), an umbrella platform of pro-family associations, was created to lobby against same-sex unions and sex education. Although the SFF defines itself as non-denominational, both its language and areas of mobilization are obviously rooted in Catholicism. *Gender ideology* was depicted by activist Michael O'Brien as "one of the devil's most powerful deceptions" (*Actual*

2015), and it has become a new source of concern and political mobilization in the Spanish Catholic milieu.

However, the anti-gender actors and discourse were irrelevant until the arrival of the national government of PSOE in 2004, when the government announced a set of reforms on sexual and reproductive rights that included same-sex marriage, sex education, abortion rights, gender identity recognition for trans persons, and fighting gender-based violence. The Spanish Episcopal Conference reacted with a communication campaign based on the spread of conspiratorial thinking and moral panic around family values, which mobilized the SFF and other Catholic lay associations (Cornejo and Pichardo 2017b). They organized large street demonstrations against same-sex marriage and abortion laws between 2005 and 2009.

The conservative People's Party (PP), which is considered as moderate, also joined these demonstrations in an attempt to eventually take advantage of the contention against the socialist government. This strategy can be understood in terms of a *radical flank effect* (Cornejo and Pichardo 2017a, 2018). The government's management of the economic crisis led the PP to win the national elections in 2011 (Martin and Urquizu-Sancho 2012), but the anti-gender campaigns did not have an impact in terms of policies and public opinion: most of the aforementioned reforms remain in force and are widely accepted, with 76% of the population supporting same-sex marriage (Ipsos 2021) and 83% favoring legal abortion (Ipsos 2021a). Nevertheless, Spain was the first European country where the Christian Right mobilized massively against *gender* (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017; Cornejo and Pichardo 2020), becoming a laboratory where Christian activists from other countries could learn, create, and test repertoires of contention for later political opportunities.

The ambiguous role played by the Spanish Catholic Church

The beginning of Pope Francis's pontificate in 2013 changed the Vatican's strategies against sexual and reproductive rights, with a renewal of tone and rhetoric but not of doctrinal stances (Sgró Ruata and Vaggione 2018). An explicit language of moral condemnation was replaced by more ambiguous language, focusing on a pastoral approach to homosexuals, divorcees, and women who abort. This discursive moderation has also taken place within the Spanish Church, with the closest sectors to Pope Francis gaining power to the detriment of the most conservative wing. In fact, Mgr. Carlos Osoro

and Mgr. Juan José Omella, considered moderates, were named archbishops of Madrid and Barcelona, respectively, and cardinals in 2016 and 2017. These nominations were depicted by the Spanish press as a “warning” from Pope Francis to “those belonging to the old regime” (Vidal 2016). The two cardinals were elected SEC vice president and president, respectively, in 2020. Most probably, the failures of the 2005–2009 campaigns also contributed to the change of strategy, involving a moderation of messages and language and the diversification of the Catholic agenda.

Far from the previous strategy of contention, in recent years, the Spanish Episcopal Conference has shown greater political independence, criticizing both some of the new leftist government bills (on euthanasia and education) and far-right statements on migration and the situation in Catalonia. In fact, since the beginning of the conflict in Catalonia, the SEC has asked for a dialogue between national and regional administrations, which is nowhere near the right and far-right narratives demanding the punishment of the separatist leaders. A sign of retracement has been the reallocation of the traditional Mass for the Family in December—which had become in previous years an annual protest against gender policies—from public to religious space. From 2007, this massive event had been held in Colón, the central square of Madrid, but after the designation of the moderate Mgr. Carlos Osoro as archbishop of Madrid in 2014, the celebration moved to inside the city’s cathedral. Despite this moderation, previous anti-gender rhetoric continues in the public speeches of some bishops and in the daily activity of Catholic lay associations and far-right political parties.

With regard to non-Catholic Christians, some Spanish Evangelicals have also joined the anti-gender demands. The Federation of Evangelical Entities of Spain (FEREDE) opposed the abortion law (2009) and the LGBTIQ+ anti-discriminatory bill (2017), and *Protestante Digital*, the most read Evangelical online journal in Spain, publishes news about *gender ideology* and anti-gender activism on a daily basis. However, these are not big public actors for our topic (and their positions on it are heterogeneous), and, as we have noted before, their main target is to improve their position through religious rights activism.

International networking and the professionalization of lay activism

As several authors have pointed out, religion is an emerging dimension in the configuration of contemporary citizenship (Hudson 2003; Parker and Hoon

2013; Nyhagen 2018). During his pontificate, Benedict XVI claimed the right of Catholics to participate in public debates based on their faith-oriented convictions. Consequently, lay anti-gender activists have put this claim into practice by forming a political identity based on the defense of the Catholic Church's teachings on gender and sex. However, in Spain, where religious doctrine has little influence on public opinion, lay activists push to translate their religious issues into secular language, deliberately erasing religious identity from the demands and repertoire of mobilization. According to the logic of what has been called a *strategic secularism* (Vaggione 2005, 2012; Cornejo-Valle 2021; Cornejo-Valle and Blázquez-Rodríguez, 2022), even when bishops themselves have been visible contenders, demonstrating in the streets, activists have insisted on the secularity of the campaigns. Thus, in 2005, when the visibility of the Catholic hierarchy was quite obvious, the former general secretary of the Confederación Católica Nacional de Padres (National Association of Catholic Parents) said that whether or not the bishops participated in the demonstrations, "they are not Catholic Church demonstrations" but rather the expression of "all the Spanish society, all the families" (J.H. 2005).

HazteOir (Make Yourself Heard), an anti-gender lobby created in 2001, has followed this strategic secularism tactic with success. The use of cyberactivism and the aesthetic of young internationally connected entrepreneurs have allowed them to move away from the old-fashioned image of Catholic conservatives. HazteOir's agenda has been updated to include current affairs, and its repertoire of contention is innovative among right-wing activists, including online signature petitions, ad hoc rebranding for specific campaigns, and creative performances in the public space. In fact, this association became widely notorious in 2017 thanks to its campaign involving a bus driving across Spain with the following transphobic message: "Boys have penises, girls have vulvas. Don't let them fool you."

Given the campaign's media success, HazteOir launched buses with similar messages in other countries and cities, including New York City, Santiago, Bogotá, and Boston. Innovation, creativity, and controversy have allowed it to push its own agenda and become a predatory group within the ecosystem of the Christian Right. HazteOir has had conflicts with some lay associations and local dioceses (Bastante 2009, 2015) for its attempts to stand out and gain notoriety during demonstrations, appropriating the success of broader protests and recruiting young activists. At the same time, its leaders maintain good relations with media corporations, political parties, bishops, and anti-gender organizations from other countries. Each year, the association celebrates an

annual ceremony called Premios HO, where it awards public figures that it considers are defending family and life. Significantly, among the personalities awarded this prize, we can include the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban, activist Alberic Dumont (*La Manif pour Tous*), media tycoon Mauricio Casal, and bishop Mgr. Juan Antonio Reig Pla.

HazteOir has worked on international networking since its foundation, and it is linked to the Phoenix Institute, an American conservative think tank. Since 2012, when it hosted World Congress of Families (WCF) VI in Madrid, it has reinforced its transnational strategy. The WCF is a global meeting that connects organizations, businesspeople, political parties, governments, and religious institutions in the fight against gender and sexual rights. One year later, in 2013, it launched its international brand CitizenGO, a tool to internationally expand and export its cyberactivist strategies and campaigns to more Christian-Right groups and individuals. The CitizenGO.org website has different versions for 20 geographical regions in 12 different languages (including Croatian, Polish, and Hungarian), each with its own domestic signature petitions: stopping abortion rights in Brazil, putting pressure on the Polish Children's Ombudsman, and criticizing a TV show in Slovenia and asking for it not to be broadcast. Through internationalization, this Spanish association has managed to recruit partners such as activist Brian S. Brown (president of the US National Organization for Marriage), politician Luca Volonté (former Italian MEP), media manager Alejandro Bermúdez (Peruvian director of the Catholic news agency ACI Prensa), and Alexey Komov, the right-hand man of Konstantin Malofeev, a Russian oligarch who was sanctioned by the US and the EU in 2014 for the alleged funding of separatist militias in Eastern Ukraine. The role played by HazteOir–CitizenGO at the international level, including their networking efforts, has been pointed out by some media as among the reasons explaining the rise of the far right in Spain during the last years (Ramsay and Provost 2019).

CitizenGO is also present in United Nations Economic and Social Council debates as an NGO with a consultative status, hosting events with the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations. This NGOization process is common in anti-choice (self-named pro-life and/or pro-family) activism, involving the transformation of the social movement into specialized work entities able to participate in decision-making processes (Moran Faundes 2017). In Spain, the anti-choice association Red Madre (Mother Network) receives public funds and works with regional and local administrations as a service for pregnant women. It also collaborates with certain dioceses, giving

talks in Catholic schools and parishes. This strategy is complemented by presentations of lay activists with their professional identities (doctors, psychologists, judges, teachers, etc.), who seek to hide their religious motivations by using technical language.

The rise of Vox: A new political opportunity for the Christian Right

In the same year as CitizenGO's launch, Vox was founded: a new party led by former People's Party officials who were critical of the conservative government formed in 2011 for not fulfilling electoral promises regarding taxes, abortion, and anti-terrorist policy. HazteOir broadcast Vox's first press conference on its YouTube channel, which meant the beginning of a close relationship between both organizations.

In his speech at World Congress of Families XIII, the CitizenGO and HazteOir president Ignacio Arsuaga said that influencing political parties, elected officials, and "the establishment" was the direct path to power, but "my favourite path is the indirect path to power: by controlling the environment of those who are in the direct path to power, you also control them."¹ Vox's direct success has been the indirect success of its partner associations. HazteOir works as a Super PAC organization, supporting and funding events to promote Vox's agenda, while Vox acts as the loudspeaker for their ideas and demands in national, regional, and local parliaments. Consequently, some activists of HazteOir and other Christian lay associations such as Abogados Cristianos (Christian Lawyers), Familia y Dignidad Humana (Family and Human Dignity), and Federación Española de Asociaciones Provida (Federation of Pro-Life Associations) have become electoral candidates of this political party.

After four years of political irrelevance, Vox surprisingly obtained 12 seats and 11% of the vote in the Andalusian regional elections of December 2018. A year later, they won 54 seats and 15% of the vote in the national elections, although it was the Left who achieved enough seats to form the government in 2019. This emerging scenario with a growing Far-Right came about immediately after the conflict for the territorial independence of Catalonia, and the unexpected electoral rise of the far right has been explained as a nationalist

1 The full speech is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nylHdHwOwo&t=45>.

reaction against the separatist claims of a part of the state (Turnbull-Dugarte 2019; Arroyo Menéndez 2020). However, even if the trigger had no link with the anti-gender agenda or discourse, it opened a brand-new political opportunity for the Christian Right. Along this line, as soon as Vox was in the political position to negotiate with the PP for regional governments, it accepted the proposals of Catholic lay associations. It thus demanded the removal of LGBTIQ+ anti-discriminatory laws and policies against gender-based violence and requested funds for anti-choice organizations and the publication of a public list of educators teaching about sexual and gender diversity.

The great media attention that Vox has received has brought expressions such as *gender dictatorship*, *gay lobby*, and *culture of death* into the public debate. This can be understood as a backlash against the recognition of feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements and their demands in Spain in the context of a polarizing public opinion: from 2017 to 2021, the proportion of young women declaring themselves feminists grew from 46.1% to 67.1%, while the proportion of young men who think that gender-based violence is an ideological invention grew from 11.9% to 20% (Rodríguez et al. 2021).

Despite the relation between anti-gender discourse and the nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric of international far-right parties (Ericson 2018; Graff and Korolczuk 2022), this link has been managed very discretely in the Spanish context. As Cornejo-Valle, Ramme and Barrera-Blanco (2023) points out in their comparative study of the Spanish and Polish anti-gender agendas, the secular and plural meanings of nation in Spain make difficult to entangle it with ethnicity, gender and religion. But certainly, there is a xenophobic rhetoric that Vox also shares. In this sense, it constantly calls for the deportation of irregular immigrants and criticizes Muslim associations. However, it considers Latin American immigration from a different point of view. From an ethno-pluralist approach, Vox understands Latin American immigration to be more compatible with Spanish identity and culture, based on a glorified common past that includes the evangelization and Hispanicization of the Americas. Hence, even if there is some trace of religious bias in the Spanish far-right xenophobic rhetoric (which is clearly Islamophobic), this bias is not entangled with the anti-gender agenda. On the contrary, Vox strategically uses femo- and homonationalist discourses to link migration to violence against women and LGBTIQ+ people. In addition, other Christian activists in the anti-gender movement seem to accept the migration-friendly doctrine of the Vatican or at least do not express a xenophobic discourse.

At the same time that Vox expresses some of the more significant political demands of the Church (the *gender ideology* agenda), the relationship between the party and the Church is ambiguous. On the one hand, Vox separates itself explicitly from Pope Francis I, referring to him as *Citizen Bergolio*, while celebrating official meetings of Vox's president Santiago Abascal with Cardinal Robert Sarah, one of the most critical voices against Francis I. The meeting was organized by Gabriel Ariza, director of the ultra-conservative religious website Infovaticana (Bastante 2019). On the other hand, some bishops support Vox's campaigns, as they consider the party to be the best representative of Christian values (in terms of *natural family*, *life*, and *Christian civilization*). An example is the bishop of Córdoba, who publicly declared his joy at Vox's unexpected results in the Andalusian regional elections of 2018: "Andalusia is the pioneer of a social change that we expect in [the whole] Spanish society" (Cruz 2018). In addition, some Vox congressmen have a church background, such as Agustín Rosety, who was episcopal delegate of the Cadiz diocese and former vice president of the Catholic foundation Educatio Servanda.

Ambiguity is a common aspect of the position of the Spanish Christian Right regarding certain specific issues, such as the anti-vaccine movement, which is not particularly powerful in Spain (more than 90% of the population over 12 years old were already vaccinated against COVID-19 at the beginning of 2022). One of the most prominent far-right bishops in Spain, Mgr. Cañizares, denounced how COVID-19 vaccines were made from aborted fetal cells ("El cardenal Cañizares" 2020). This fueled a minoritarian Catholic anti-vaccine movement in social media that was led by several Catholic influencers, including some Catholic priests who are prominent in the Spanish alt-right online communities like the tweeter „Father Jesús“, among others. Meanwhile, both HazteOír (and its international brand CitizenGO) and Vox are campaigning against mandatory vaccination, defending the freedom of not having the vaccine, but they avoid criticizing the vaccine itself or those who decide to have it.

Conclusions

The coalition between the Church hierarchy, civil associations, and political parties failed in the first anti-gender campaigns (2005–2009), leading to a subsequent differentiation of each of their strategies. While the SEC moderated its strategy of contention and the People's Party removed explicit opposition to sexual and reproductive rights from its agenda, lay organiza-

tions have taken on the leading role among conservative Christians through controversial protests with international outreach and an organizational professionalization that allows them to participate in decision-making processes.

Gender ideology did not once more become a recurring expression in the public debate until 2018, when the far-right party Vox achieved surprising success in several elections motivated by other, non-gender-related conflicts. However, since its foundation five years earlier, the party had been collaborating with lay organizations and adhering to Church moral doctrine of defending *natural family and life*. At this time, the political opportunities for a coalition with the Catholic Church are limited due to Vox's statements on migration and the strategic turn of Francis's pontificate. Vox does not ally with the SEC, but it has replaced it as the head of the crusade for *traditional values* against the new feminism and the LGBTIQ+ movement in the context of a growing polarization of public opinion on gender and sexuality issues. The media attention and political power gained after the party's electoral rise has provided a new political opportunity for the Christian Right: old anti-gender claims become parliamentary proposals, and activists turn into legislators. The replacement in terms of leadership secularizes the aesthetics and inaugurates a new stage of anti-gender campaigns where the message spreads beyond the conservative religious milieu, as other of Vox's issues are juxtaposed to it, such as *globalism*, insecurity, and national history. The COVID-19 crisis has damaged the government's popularity, and Vox is improving its results in each regional election. During 2022 and 2023, Vox has achieved to be part of the governments of 4 regions and 140 local councils together with the PP. In view of its rise in regional elections and polls, their main target was to win 2023 national elections, but after deploying an aggressive and radical campaign both parties didn't achieve enough seats to form government. This new electoral failure has been understood by the conservative mainstream media as the result of the polarization generated by Vox, which has mobilized progressive voters against the arrival of the Far-Right to power for the first time since Franco. It has also caused an internal crisis in Vox: the leaders closest to classical conservatism have left the board and the most anti-migration and illiberal faction has taken control of the party. The place of far-right Catholic activism in this new scenario is yet to be defined. Thus, scholars will have to pay attention in future research to the ability of anti-gender actors to entangle their agenda with nationalism and xenophobia in a coherent way, which may be key to understanding the new chances of religious conservatism in Spain.

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Ukraine's Far-Right Movements and Their Connections to the Religious World

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Introduction

Recent years have demonstrated the attractiveness of right-wing ideas for many countries of the world. According to Cas Mudde, in 2019 and 2020, about two billion people lived in countries where the far right was in power, including India, the USA, Brazil, Poland, and Hungary (Mudde 2022, 102). Western Europe has not been an exception. Daniel Koehler declares that there has recently been a significant far-right surge, as seen in the electoral success of nationalist and right-wing parties, which are represented in the parliaments of 39 European countries (Koehler 2016, 87). Although in many cases, these parties have gained only minor influence or nominal representation, in a number of countries, the right has made significant gains, including the French National Rally (formerly the National Front), the Austrian Freedom Party, and the German Alternative for Germany. In many cases, an important part of the identity of right-wing forces is a religious component, such as the Hindutva (*Hinduness*) ideology of the right-wing People's Party of India, the pan-Catholicism of the Polish Law and Justice party, and the support of Trump by white Evangelicals. Therefore, the issue of the relationship between right-wing movements and religious communities is extremely interesting and important today, particularly in the Ukrainian context. In Ukraine, the fight for national liberation against Russia has been escalated by the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022, which has led to the active transformation of the religious field, together with the strengthening of patriotic and sometimes nationalistic discourses.

Examples of these processes are the legitimization in the broad public discourse of the Azov Battalion, which, after September 17, 2014, became the Azov

Regiment, and the national heroization of Stepan Bandera, who was awarded the title of *Hero of Ukraine*. These processes involve not only representatives of local authorities (renaming streets in honor of the leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists [OUN]), state authorities (giving Bandera the title of Hero of Ukraine), and parts of society (taking part in the so-called *Bandera marches*) but also church representatives, who mention Bandera in their sermons as “an immortal and bright symbol in the struggle for the Ukrainian state” (Ivasiuk 2020) and call on Ukrainians to take him as an example (“Ivano-frankivski seminarysty” 2019).

The methodological framework of our research is Rieffer’s model of religious nationalism. She suggests distinguishing the subtypes of interweaving religious and nationalist discourses through the following categories:

- *secular or antireligious nationalism* (not impacted by religious factors);
- *instrumental pious nationalism* (using religion as an amplification factor);
- *religious nationalism* (primarily built on religious identity and rhetoric). (Rieffer 2003, 224)

The second category, *instrumental pious nationalism*, deserves special attention because it is exactly this type of connection between religion and nationalism that is most often employed in the situation of the post-Soviet space, including Ukraine (Rieffer herself regards this type as inherent in the religious situation of post-Soviet Russia). The peculiarity of instrumental pious nationalism is that religion is not a major category but rather an additional element for community unification; thus, it becomes a useful resource for national leaders to influence society and gain the trust of their electorates. Moreover, within this type, religion serves as a legitimization resource for new state institutions and for maintaining the authority of the state and leaders in times of crisis.

It occurs mainly due to influences such as language, the sacralization of ancient and modern history, and the justification of political plans. In particular, the appeal to religious grounds on the part of political and national leaders can often be traced to crisis times, when economic, military, and social institutions lose their power and religious and national rhetoric comes in useful. Instrumental pious nationalism differs from religious nationalism in the level of involvement of the religious factor in nation-building processes. At the instrumental pious nationalism level, religious institutions and the religious sphere do not have such a level of involvement in the political system; instead, the po-

litical system itself uses the dominant religion to unite and develop the national movement.

The far right and religion in Ukraine: “God! Ukraine! Freedom!”

Ukraine is a parliamentary–presidential republic, where the parliament has been the main source of power since 2014. Before the last elections in 2019, no one party had held a majority (226 out of 450 national deputies), which motivates politicians to cooperate, sometimes abandoning good or bad law projects. One of the structural reforms of 2014 was the decentralization process, which gives more space for local decisions and independence for community representatives. Ideally, such a reform also gives more space for developing local political leaders, as well as widening local authorities’ possible impact on various decisions.

The first parties that can be attributed to the right wing appeared in Ukraine in Soviet times (1990–1991): All-Ukrainian Union “State Independence of Ukraine” and Ukrainian National Assembly–Ukrainian People’s Self-Defense (Ukrainian Rebel Army [URA-UNUU]). In the first years of independence, the Social National Party of Ukraine (since 2004, the All-Ukrainian Association “Svoboda” [Freedom]) and the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists also emerged. For a long time, these parties could not achieve significant electoral success. According to Eduard Andriushchenko, the main reasons for the unpopularity of right-wing movements in the 1990s and early 2000s were their irrelevance against the background of the difficult socio-economic agenda and their lack of appeal to the nationally oriented electorate, which favored the center right, particularly the Rukh (Movement). During this period, right-wing parties remained a regional, Western Ukrainian phenomenon (Andriushchenko 2015, 91–92).

Christianity was the main religious reference point for many Ukrainian right wingers (though not the only one, as powerful positions among the far right have always been occupied by neo-pagans). The main support that these movements received was from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC KP), the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC). At the same time, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) was seen as an *enemy power*. There were tight relations between these right-wing movements and Christians churches. For example, the UOC KP had representatives from

URA-UNUU, and the UGCC had representatives from the All-Ukrainian organization Trident, named after Stepan Bandera. URA-UNUU mostly provided paramilitary support to the UOC KP, starting with their storming of Kyiv Pechersk Lavra on June 18, 1992, and ending with paramilitary support for the capture of *disputed* churches and protection services for the Kyiv Patriarchate. For the members of Trident, Christianity was the basis of their worldview: the most popular slogan was “God! Ukraine! Freedom.” From the beginning, the organization provided courses for chaplaincy, and morning and evening prayers were a mandatory part of the training. Much attention was paid to lectures on religious topics, and the organizational oath was taken on the Bible (Andriushchenko 2015, 140–141).

Electoral success awaited the right-wing parties only in 2012, when Svoboda received 10% of the vote in the parliamentary elections (“Rezultaty vyboriv” 2012). Their growth in the political life of Ukraine took place against the background of the events of the Euromaidan and the anti-terrorist operation in the east of the country. The main two parties that attracted people were Svoboda and Right Sector, which united Trident, Patriot of Ukraine, and other smaller organizations. In February 2014, a new Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine was formed, which included four representatives of Svoboda (Oleksandr Sych, Andrii Mokhnyk, Ihor Shvayka, and Ihor Tenyukh) and one of the previous leaders of Trident (Serhii Kvit). Svoboda alumni Andrii Parubii and Oleh Makhnyskyi headed the National Security and Defense Council and the Prosecutor General Office. Since the events of late 2013–early 2014, and against the background of the occupation of Crimea, there have been changes in the public perception of the right wing, and their legitimization among broad sections of the population has begun.

Religion and nationalism in the Ukrainian context: “To be Ukrainian means to be Orthodox?”

Today, more than 100 faith communities are represented in Ukraine, embracing 35,453 religious organizations, 93 religious centers, and 301 religious administrations.¹ Christianity, represented primarily by Orthodox churches of different jurisdictions (the main churches are the Ukrainian Orthodox Church

1 See the report on the religious organizations network: <https://dess.gov.ua/statistics-2020/>.

of Moscow Patriarchate [UOC MP], the Orthodox Church of Ukraine [OCU], and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Kyiv Patriarchate [UOC KP]) and others, remains the predominant religion and is closely linked to national identity and the process of Ukrainian state formation. Overall, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant religious organizations constitute about 97% of the whole religious landscape. Orthodoxy forms the largest group (its different branches make up about 55% of Christians), with Protestantism in second place at around 30% and Catholicism third with approximately 15% (19,860 Orthodox communities, 10,774 Protestant communities, and 5,280 Catholic communities). The largest Catholic community in Ukraine (and the second-largest religious community overall) is the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), which, as of 2021, comprised around 8.8% of the population (*Osoblyvosti* 2021). UGCC followers are located primarily in the western regions of Ukraine.

There are a variety of other religious communities in Ukraine, though considerably fewer than in many other European states. The Crimean Tatars are a Muslim ethnic group indigenous to the Crimean Peninsula. Together with immigrants from the Muslim regions of the former Soviet Union (primarily the Volga–Ural Tatars, Azerbaijanis, and representatives of the peoples of North Caucasus and Central Asia), Muslims make up around 0.9% of the population, according to the most recent census. Current estimates indicate a Jewish population in Ukraine of between 56,000 and 140,000—or approximately 0.2% of the population.²

There is another important organization called the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations of Ukraine (AUCCRO), which unites almost 95% of the religious organizations.³ Its main task is to provide a platform for inter-religious dialogue, but it is sometimes hard to form any mutual decisions, as consensus is the decision-making method of the Council. The defense of so-called traditional values is usually coordinated through the AUCCRO, which unites 16 major religious organizations, including Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants, as well as Jews and Muslims.⁴ Of almost 50 public

2 On the number and composition of the population of Ukraine, see the results of the all-Ukrainian population census of 2001: <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/results/general/nationality/>.

3 See the official website in English: <https://vrciro.org.ua/en>.

4 On the AUCCRO, see Krawchuk (2014). One of the AUCCRO's aims is to serve as a forum where religions can coordinate their positions so that they can speak with one voice on various social issues and conduct a dialogue with civil authorities.

documents (statements, declarations, and letters) issued by the AUCCRO between 1996 and 2021, around one-third are dedicated or directly refer to the need to protect family values. Moreover, 25 documents argue against *gender ideology* and state recognition of same-sex marriage, which are presented as a threat to the “national security of Ukraine” and to public morality (Vasin 2021, 139, 237, and 259). If we compare this focus on family, sexuality, and reproduction to the space dedicated to questions of injustice, inequality, poverty, migration, and ecology (less than a dozen documents in total), we see an important asymmetry between the former and the latter.

Thanks to the religious pluralism and a high level of competitiveness between religious organizations, and because the Ukrainian state does not formally back any of the larger churches, a system of religious *denominationalism* has been established in Ukraine, that is, a system in which all religions have equal rights and compete with one another. This situation stands out through its liberal nature and the scale of religious pluralism, and it is very similar to the model that has developed in the USA (Brylov et al. 2021, 8).

The Pew Research Center published data on the religious landscape in Central and Eastern Europe, Ukraine included, in May 2017, showing that 51% of Ukrainians believed that being Orthodox also means being a true national representative of your country (Pew Research Center 2017). Ukrainians defined their religious identity through national, cultural, and family traditions (46%), peculiar properties of faith (12%), both of the aforementioned factors (12%), and other factors (7%). Moreover, 12% explained their being Catholic or Orthodox as primarily due to the national–cultural factor. Another strong position was religious exclusivism. Generally, this is tending to decline, but 33% of the respondents believed that only their faith paves the way to heaven. Orthodox-dominated countries showed higher national pride, with people being more likely to state that their culture is better than other cultures. More religious people were prone to be proud of their nationality: 48% of Ukrainians very proud of their nationality said that religion has importance.

The use of nationalism in religious rhetoric is remarkably attractive for political and religious leaders in the post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine. What is happening can be best understood as *instrumental pious nationalism*, even though there is much more religious pluralism. In Ukraine, ethnic nationalism dominates and is actively instrumentalized by different religious organizations.

The use of ethnic–national rhetoric and the politicization of religion by Ukrainian religious leaders, as well as their attempts to instrumentalize re-

ligion, are features of religious rhetoric used to mask anti-state activities, for instance, in the conflict in Ukraine. All of this embeds religion into the national idea. In the Russian case, it cleaves society by differentiating the conflicting groups; in Ukraine, the power balance shifts to certain privileged religious organizations.

At the same time, since the beginning of the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, almost all religious organizations in Ukraine have taken strong pro-Ukrainian positions. Ministers and religious leaders of all faiths have coordinated systematic assistance to victims of the war, built personal connections with government leaders, established humanitarian corridors for evacuation, accommodated refugees, delivered in-kind humanitarian aid, and much more (Brylov and Kalenychenko 2022).

The far right and the Orthodox world

Even in the Orthodox world of Ukraine, religious leaders are focused on using national–ethnic rhetoric to gain the attention of some social groups. There are typical roles played by „*pro-Ukrainian*“ (e.g., the OCU and the UGCC) and „*pro-Russian*“ (the UOC MP) churches. However, the first group has several representatives. For example, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine is used by several far-right organizations that declare their own contributions to its creation and its protection from the influence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate. Such organizations include Tradition and Order, C14, Brotherhood (led by Dmytro Korchynskyy), National Corps, Orden, Katehon, Sisterhood of St. Olga, and All-Ukrainian Union Svoboda.

The completely different direction of pro-Russian nationalism can be seen in the rhetoric of some UOC MP leaders. This also has connections with social and political organizations such as Opposition Platform “For Life,” the anti-vaccination movement, and the Union of Orthodox Journalists, as well as with national deputy Vadym Novynskyy and religious figures such as Metropolitan Agafangel (Savvin) in Odesa, Metropolitan Luca (Kovalenko) in Melitopol and Zaporizhzhya, Metropolitan Pavlo (Lebid) in Vyshgorod and Chornobyl, and Archbishop Iona (Cherepanov) in Obukhiv. The situation has changed, and it remains in the process of deep change following the Church Council of May 27, 2022, convened by Metropolitan Onufriy, which gathered not only bishops but also local priests and believers from different regions of Ukraine. The Council’s

published resolution⁵ called for full independence from the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as for the decentralization of regional eparchies and possible dialogue with the OCU. These changes have not yet been formally reflected in church regulations, but they have created many conflicts inside church society, as well creating outside misunderstandings relating to the new direction of the church's development.

One of the examples of this was the direct call from one of the priests of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine to fight LGBTIQA+ people marching in the Kyiv Pride parade. This event, as well as other social issues such as the implementation of the Istanbul convention, abortion, and school education, causes many conflicts. In the summer of 2019, one of the priests called for an attack on LGBTIQA+ people "to protect family and traditional values of Ukraine" (Kuzmenko 2019). Overall, the rhetoric of *traditions* and *Christian values* is more often used to promote right-wing political elements and can serve as a right-wing marker in public narratives.

The case of the UGCC

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is the biggest non-Orthodox church in Ukraine, with many international connections.⁶ On some issues, the UGCC is very much in line with the right-wing political agenda (as is the case in other countries, Russia included), while on other questions, there exists a profound discrepancy between the UGCC and the right.

In 2006, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) proposed the creation of a "strategic alliance" between the Orthodox, Catholic, and pre-Chalcedonian Churches in defense of "traditional moral values such as family, childbearing, and marital fidelity," which would resist liberal Christianity and secularism (Hilarion Alfeev 2006). Five years later, in his first post-election press conference, the head of the UGCC, Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, declared that the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church would "feel very comfortable" belonging to such an alliance (Shevchuk 2011). However, the idea of an alliance has never transformed into an institution, while relations between the UGCC and the ROC have sharply degraded since the annex-

5 For the full text of the Council's decision, see <http://kdais.kiev.ua/event/postanova-27052022/>.

6 For a brief introduction, see Avvakumov (2016).

ation of Crimea. However, the UGCC, like the majority of churches of various denominations, has been sticking to a conservative agenda.

In its public discourse, the UGCC, like other churches, seems to be prioritizing issues of reproduction and sexuality over other social issues. The Synod of the UGCC Bishops published “A Pastoral Letter on the Dangers of Gender Ideology” in 2016 (Synod Yepyskopiv 2016), while the senior clergy have been consistently vocal against same-sex marriages. Compared to other All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCRO)⁷ members, the UGCC has more specialized institutional and human resources working in the domain of *traditional values*, such as the School of Bioethics and the Institute of Marriage and Family Life, both at the Ukrainian Catholic University, and a cohort of Western-educated specialists in moral theology and bioethics based all around the country. In 2020, three UGCC Commissions (Family, Laity, and Justice and Peace) were united into one, entitled Family and Laity. The disappearance of a reference to issues of justice and peace—in the middle of the conflict in the east of Ukraine—may also be a sign of the asymmetry mentioned earlier, in which reproduction and sexuality are prioritized over questions of social justice.

On many issues, however, the UGCC takes positions that are at odds with the radical right. One of these is the question of European integration. The UGCC consistently argues that Ukraine—built on a Christian foundation—naturally belongs to Europe and should join European institutions (Shevchuk 2013). The liberal tendencies of the EU in the domain of ethics are considered to be a correctable moment of immaturity, as it were, rather than something that should force churches to resist European integration. Moreover, Shevchuk has been critical of the “extreme radicals who oppose a united and reconciled Europe” and of populists who have come to power in European countries (Shevchuk and Levantovych 2017). Ecology is another issue where the UGCC has been very pronounced in its support, both at the official level—through its declarations and activism in the Ecological Bureau—and in many grassroots initiatives.⁸ The UGCC has a vibrant department of pastoral care for migrants, which is, however, focused on supporting UGCC members in the diaspora rather than helping internally displaced persons and

7 For the official website of the AUCCRO, see <https://www.vrciro.org.ua/ua>.

8 For the official documents, see the bureau's website: <https://www.ecoburouggc.org.ua>. The UGCC has recently sponsored the Ecumenical Social Week, an international forum on integral ecology. See Dukhovych (2021).

immigrants, who are taken care of by Caritas and other charities. The UGCC supported the vaccination campaign against COVID-19 through declarations, public vaccination of senior hierarchs, and the opening of its churches as vaccination centers. Shevchuk has criticized COVID-19 conspiracy theories (Shevchuk 2020), while the Ukrainian Catholic University fired a philosophy professor who was a militant anti-vaxxer (“Vykladacha UKU” 2021).

Internationally, various hierarchs and institutions affiliated with the UGCC are close to US conservative Catholic actors such as the Knights of Columbus and George Weigel. However, these links are built more on the foundations of the traditional religious freedom movement and anti-communism than on a specifically right-wing agenda. Domestically, the UGCC maintains relations with most mainstream parties. It usually gets along better with parties that are based in Western Ukraine, where most Greek Catholics live. Although on issues of *traditional values*, the Church's position coincides with that of the right-wing movements, the UGCC attempts to resist being instrumentalized by them (“UHKTs ne pidtrymuye” 2013). In rare cases where UGCC clergy express xenophobic or anti-Semitic views, they are reprimanded by the Church hierarchy.⁹

As we have already mentioned, the UGCC cooperates with some right-wing movements (in particular, Trident) at the level of chaplains. An example of such cooperation is the activity of Father Petro Burak, a cleric of the UGCC and a military chaplain of the separate tactical group Volyn. After 1994, he served as the main chaplain for Trident and then started his service as chaplain for the newly created Right Sector. After the Right Sector created its combat unit, the Volunteer Ukrainian Corps (VUC), Fr. Burak became the chaplain of the Fifth Battalion of the VUC. According to him, “I am not the only one. There are many of us. The creation of a volunteer corps chaplaincy service was even declared” (Malko 2015).

At the same time, the UGCC is in conflict with some right-wing forces. According to Taras Wozniak, a similar conflict exists between Svoboda and the UGCC. Wozniak claims that this conflict began in 1994, when the support for the progenitor of Svoboda, the Social National Party of Ukraine, fell almost six times (from 10–15% to 2%) due to the recall of the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. As a result, after Svoboda came to power in Lviv, pressure be-

9 One of the most famous cases was that of the priest Mykhaylo Arsenych. See “Za ekstremistsku promovu” (2013).

gan on the Ukrainian Catholic University and persons associated with it, such as Fr. Borys (Gudziak) and Myroslav Marynovych (Kabachii 2012).

Conclusion

The connections of far-right movements with the religious world in Ukraine are today undergoing serious transformations, primarily related to the Russian invasion in Ukraine. As expected for movements prone to violent practices, military units with a high share of supporters of far-right ideas (e.g., the Azov Regiment, informally closely associated with the right-wing National Corps) have proved to be among the most capable units. Suffice it to mention the long defense of Mariupol and the Azovstal plant, which was led mainly by the Azov Regiment (Honcharenko 2022). Accordingly, many of those who were previously considered far right are now perceived as heroes and defenders of Ukraine. Against the background of such sentiments, it is natural to strengthen and expand ties between right-wing movements and those religious organizations that focus on Ukrainians' patriotism. This is more visible for UGCC and OCU believers, who are becoming closer due to national–patriotic rhetoric, in contrast to the neutral position of the UOC MP. By contrast, the UOC MP has started its own process of changes, while being seen by part of Ukrainian society as the *church of the occupiers*. If it were to take a pro-Ukrainian position, it would be another change to the religious landscape.

Despite the desire of most religious organizations to distance themselves from the representatives of the far-right camp, they are united by the discourse of the *protection of traditional values*¹⁰ and their opposition to *gender ideology* and strengthening the position of the LGBTIQ+ community in the public sphere. Frequently, such rhetoric of *traditional values* is united with a pro-Russian position due to the desire to *save the sinner from the world of sin*. It would be of great importance to check the correlation between the far-right vision and the defense of *traditional values*, the *Christian world*, etc., as the manner of *protecting traditional values* could develop in different political directions.

We can also mention certain common narratives, primarily related to *traditional values*, in most Ukrainian Christian organizations and right-wing movements. At the same time, contacts between the church leadership and the far

10 It is no coincidence that one of the largest right-wing organizations in Ukraine is called Tradition and Order.

right are non-public, although due to the active role of right-wing and far-right movements in resisting Russian aggression, we can expect the expansion of official cooperation. The relationship between the political right and religious circles can largely be described as an example of the above-mentioned instrumental pious nationalism, aiming largely at the use of religious slogans for political purposes. Thus, religious organizations are faced with the dilemma of following the reactionary model as it was before or taking a more active role as part of Ukrainian civil society.

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The Christian Right in the UK

Andrea C. Hatcher

Introduction

This chapter analyzes the Christian Right in the United Kingdom. Both of these terms are misnomers because although there are right-leaning protagonists who draw on Christian discourse to frame their ideology and Christian adherents to ground their support, there is not a Christian Right in the sense of an established religio-political movement (Walton, Hatcher, and Spencer 2013). Nor is the United Kingdom all that united, with its constituent parts—England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland—diverging in their churches, politics, and church–state relations. With its historic and contemporary tensions between Catholics and Protestants, Northern Ireland especially presents a microcosm of how culture wars can create opportunities for right-wing movements and parties. Looking toward the continent, Brexit severed legal ties with the EU, while historical and cultural attachments face pressure from cross-Atlantic groups seeking influence. Rather than as a movement, the Christian Right in the UK currently manifests as disparate actors and groups who connect less with each other than with transnational networks promoting Christian nationalism in Europe and the US (Stewart 2019). As of yet, British actors and groups have succeeded only in sustaining themselves, not in coalescing a movement. It remains to be seen whether institutional and cultural hindrances will remain a check on the development of a Christian Right in the UK.

Political and religious landscape

The UK is a parliamentary democracy with a unitary structure. Although there are some devolved powers in the regional bodies of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, central power is organized in the UK Parliament. Religious author-

ity is institutionalized in this system via the Church of England, with the King being both Supreme Governor of the Church of England and Head of State. Twenty-six bishops of the Church of England sit in the House of Lords. Although they are non-partisan, the Lords Spiritual sit on the government's side of the chamber and exercise legislative powers. The UK is a multi-party system with two major political parties: the Conservative Party (right) and the Labour Party (left). The Conservatives have governed alone since 2015, with five prime ministers since then—the turnover prompted by the contested and singular issue of Brexit.

The picture of religion in the 21st-century UK has been one of decline. Between the 2001 and 2011 censuses, there was a 10% growth among those who claimed *no religion* and a drop of 13% among Christians in particular (White 2012). This decline has winnowed away weaker adherents, so those who remain hold their religious identity more strongly, an assessment borne out by a longitudinal study from 1998–2018 in which the proportion of *very or extremely* religious individuals held steady at 7% of those surveyed, while the *very or extremely* non-religious more than doubled to 33% (Voas and Bruce 2019). Moreover, those with the highest levels of religiosity were found in non-Christian faiths (Voas and Bruce 2019).

Christian decline has occurred among the institutional churches (Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Church of Scotland /Presbyterian), while there has been a pattern of growth within nonconformist churches, which comprise about 36% of the Christian population in the UK (Brierley 2021). For example, the number of Pentecostal churches in the UK grew from 2,500 congregations in 2000 to 4,200 in 2020, with some experts thinking the real figure could be twice as many because of the pop-up nature of these churches (Brierley 2021; Aldred and Ogbo 2020). There is some evidence to think that the political orientations of Black Majority Churches differ from those of institutional churches, particularly in their openness to political activity. However, they are limited by lack of resources (Hatcher 2019). Still, with less than 8% of the population regularly attending Christian churches, active Christians represent small numbers of the British population and are thus not fertile ground for an established Christian Right (Brierley 2017; Voas and Bruce 2019).

Protagonists

The first set of actors necessary for a Christian Right are religious elites, including denominations/networks, churches, and individual clergy who act to leverage their religious positions into political influence. These can give motive to a cause by anchoring a political issue in a religious context, and they can connect political actors to congregational adherents who become the rank and file of a movement. The vacuum of religious elites willing to carry out this role in the UK is readily apparent. The Reverend Nicky Gumbel, vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), has gained international notice for his promotion of the Alpha course around the globe. His parish represents a growing evangelical wing of the Church of England and has consequently sponsored a series of church plants in London, the UK, and around the world. HTB has become its own church network. From this position, it would appear that Gumbel has the name recognition and resources to politicize his religious outreach, but he has been adamant in his refusal to directly engage in political issues. Indeed, the consensus among all religious elites is that the American Christian Right is *un-British* (Hatcher 2017).

Second, there is an absence of political leaders willing to provide, through their positions in parties or government, opportunities for religious actors to access the political system via electoral campaigns or policymaking. Some members of parliament are open about their Christianity and describe the role it plays in their lives, both personally and politically. Nadine Dorries, a Conservative MP since 2005, for example, is known for her vocal opposition to abortion. In her time in Parliament, she has tabled bills and pushed amendments to lower the time limit for abortion availability from the current legal period of 24 weeks. These have been overwhelmingly defeated, but they have garnered her attention from media outlets and lobbyists who see her as a ready voice to advance their agenda on this issue. However, largely owing to the shrinking numbers of Christians in the UK, no political party—right or left—has found it advantageous to engage in active outreach to Christians because of the risk of alienating the larger swathe of the British public who are not Christians, are not religious, or do not think it appropriate for there to be an overt relationship between partisanship and religion.

Finally, there must be linkage actors such as think tanks and advocacy groups to sustain a movement by fundraising, messaging, and generally keeping issues alive in the consciousness of the public and decision makers. To the extent that there is Christian-Right activity in the UK, it is among these

groups. What follows is by no means a comprehensive review, but it highlights two of the commonly identified Christian-Right groups in the UK (Kettell 2016; Walton, Hatcher, and Spencer 2013).

Founded in 1990, the Christian Institute (CI) helps “Christians to understand the arguments about key contemporary issues, seeking ‘to demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up from the knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:5)’” (Dobson 2016). This organization promulgates its views by producing scorecards on how MPs vote on *key issues*, a tactic borrowed from the Christian Coalition in America. These scorecards emphasize *culture war* issues of abortion, marriage, assisted suicide, family, and religious liberty, although the CI varies in how it campaigns on these issues. The CI’s activism is principally oriented around its Legal Defence Fund, which solicits funds to file lawsuits and “intervene in strategic court cases where precedents could be set which may affect Christian religious liberty” (Christian Institute n.d.). Recent cases concern alleged discrimination against Christians for their views on same-sex marriage. With 10,000 followers on Twitter, 6,000 on YouTube, and an email subscription list, the CI reaches modestly into Christian Britain.

Christian Concern (CC) might be the most nationally prominent of these organizations. Owing to the charisma of its leader, Andrea Minichiello Williams, as well as its connections to Christian-Right groups in the US, CC has been successful at centering itself on the issues of abortion, sexuality, and gender. These, along with access to street preaching, form a core of religious liberty claims that CC and its subsidiary organization Christian Legal Centre file lawsuits to advance. The structure of these groups has evolved to support its mission and the expertise of its founder. Minichiello Williams, a trained barrister, was head of the Lawyers’ Christian Fellowship (LCF), a 150-year-old self-labeled evangelical legal network that actively promotes the spiritual lives of its members. Its public activities grew under Minichiello Williams, who created Christian Concern as the policy arm of the LCF. Her work partnering with MP Nadine Dorries on an abortion bill gained national attention, and she left the LCF in 2008 to found Christian Concern as a separate organization. CC currently maintains the broad mission to “speak and influence, challenge and protect, mobilise and equip,” which projects its efforts into the policy, political, media, and legal spheres; however, its most effective current work is channeled through the Christian Legal Centre and its steady docket of religious liberty claims (Christian Concern n.d.).

Strategies and audiences

Legislative strategies have never been central to any action plan of a would-be Christian Right. When culture war issues, such as abortion time limits, marriage equality, or assisted suicide, have come up for parliamentary debate, not only have individual Christian conservative or Conservative MPs been unsuccessful in persuading their colleagues to support their positions on these individual issues, but they have also been unsuccessful in forming a stable, ongoing coalition to advance a coherent agenda. For example, when in 2008, Nadine Dorries proposed an amendment to lower the time limit on abortion from 24 weeks to 20 weeks (a text purportedly written by Andrea Minichiello Williams), the measure failed on a vote of 332 to 190. There were similar outcomes for her proposals regarding abstinence advocacy and abortion counseling. Even the parliamentary group Conservative Christian Fellowship does not maintain a defined agenda, and a blog on its website rejects the proposition that “Christians need to unite around a political movement”—hardly the makings of a Christian Right (Burrowes 2020).

Similarly, winning elections is an unlikely pursuit. In fact, the most obvious partner for Christian-Right activists, the Conservative Party, now pushes a *one-nation conservatism* that is more pluralistic and less inclined to tolerate the exclusionary views of religious conservatives (“What Is One Nation Conservatism?” 2019).

Thus far, then, these groups have waged single-issue campaigns as issues such as equal marriage and assisted suicide have arisen on the parliamentary agenda. These campaigns might include a web-based approach to produce some position papers, generate media soundbites, mobilize *clicktivism* among followers, and thus draw the attention of decision makers (Kettell 2016). This strategy might be successful at raising awareness, subscribers, and perhaps funds, but it has not changed policy on any of the heated issues because neither the wider public nor politicians are the target. Rather, the audience are those who are already attentive to such groups or issues and are then catalyzed by rhetoric that is confirmative not persuasive.

The founding of the CI’s Legal Defence Fund and CC’s Christian Legal Centre, along with the transition of the Lawyers’ Christian Fellowship from a devotional to an activist group, has centered legal strategies at the core of the Christian Right in the UK. In this, the Christian Right in the UK looks most like its American counterpart, which has long co-opted the judiciary as politics by other means. In the claims raised (e.g., discrimination against religious

beliefs) and the arguments made (a rights-based approach to society), legal strategies have raised the profile of these Christian-Right groups and garnered them substantive victories that have eluded them in other spheres.

Ideologies and narratives

In the ideology of a Christian Right, religion becomes inextricably linked with conservatism so that the one becomes the justification for the other. In recent years, some political actors have enfolded Christianity into their narrative, harkening back to a cultural conservatism in debates over immigration, Muslim growth, and especially Brexit. In the call for Brexit, Nigel Farage, head of the UK Independence Party, rejected British multiculturalism: “My country is a Judeo-Christian country, so we’ve got to start standing up for our values” (Warren 2017). Farage’s political prominence diminished after Brexit, but the invocation of Christian values for this central political issue found resonance. Even a more mainstream politician, Michael Gove, a member of the Conservative government and a leader of the Vote Leave movement, justified Brexit as an inherently Protestant position, based on the individual rather than communitarian ethic that had historically led the British Empire and countered Catholic Europe (Gove 2017). The point is that exclusionary Christian rhetoric, at times inflammatory and at times tempered, is being used to strengthen a narrative of cultural conservatism at the heart of nationalist ideas. The irony is that this tactic appeals to cultural Christians but not so much to those with high levels of religiosity (mostly British Evangelicals), whose vision of Christianity is not monocultural but global (Smith and Woodhead 2018).

In the courts, the Lawyers’ Christian Fellowship, the Legal Defence Fund, and the Christian Legal Centre draw on a rights-based jurisprudence that claims Christians have been discriminated against for practicing or voicing their faith: for example, a nurse fired for violating a uniform code by wearing her cross pendant; street preachers removed and fined for proselytizing in public spaces; and a baker fined for refusing to bake a cake advocating same-sex marriage. All of these cases were in some way framed in terms of religious liberty or free speech to be protected against claims of equality that challenged them. This emphasis on a legal strategy signals attempts by these Christian-Right groups to gain a broader reach, for appeals to liberty are universal, grounded not in a sectarian religious belief system but in a framework of human rights (Kettell 2016; McIvor 2020). But at the heart of such legal claims

is a persecution narrative—that secular society is tolerant of all views other than those of sincere (i.e., conservative) Christianity, which it even seeks to purge from civic life. This persecution narrative, and the threat perception that it fuels, sustains the work of these groups (Wyatt 2021).

Effects

For the Christian Right in the UK, the judicial process has broadened its platforms across employment tribunals, local magistrates, the UK Supreme Court, and the European Court of Human Rights. And there have been key victories, such as the Ashers bakery case referred to above in which the UK Supreme Court ruled that the refusal to bake a cake was not an act of discrimination against the gay man who had ordered it but a legally protected refusal to promote a message in violation of the baker's sincerely held religious beliefs. More recently, a group of church leaders challenged various lockdown orders that banned church (among other) gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Scottish government enacted severe criminal penalties for those in violation. The Scottish High Court heard arguments and quickly ruled that the government's restrictions were excessive and struck them down. The result was to permit the opening of not only churches but also mosques and synagogues, thus bringing nonsectarian benefit. However, the victory was significant for Christian-Right advocates not only for the outcome but also because the ruling was grounded in a freedom of religion supported by both the European Court of Human Rights and UK constitutional common law (Dunne 2021). Thus, it appears, the narrative of these Christian-Right legal groups has been well-established in courts of law. Even the lost cases have been fruitful in creating a frame of persecution and inserting the interests of these groups into public discourse.

As of yet, individual legal victories have not formed a groundswell, although efforts to do just that draw from the American Christian Right, which seeds strategies and funding to some of these UK groups. Christian Concern especially leverages its American connections. Its founder, Andrea Minichiello Williams, lived for a time in the American South—the birthplace of the American Christian Right—and refers to this as a transformational moment in her life and career. Her organization receives funds from American donors and support in kind from the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), a pioneer of

Christian-interest litigation, which has a European office to further similar work internationally (McIvor 2020).

This common cause with American actors and strategies is one area of success by which these groups have been able to sustain themselves. Certainly, the persecution narrative has generated a persecution industry, bringing together campaigners and legal aid groups to beef up fundraising, draw media attention, and generally support their existence (Wyatt 2021). Across America and Europe, the National Conservatism Conferences draw governmental and cultural leaders to promote a right-wing populist ideology that, among other principles, asserts, “public life should be rooted in Christianity” (“National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles” 2023). Their 2023 conference in London featured not only back-bencher MPs but also Home Secretary Suella Braverman and Michael Gove, who has served in a variety of Cabinet positions as well as Conservative Party leadership candidate. Although these efforts have not yet come together in a comprehensive movement with a coherent political agenda and real political outcomes, they have alerted the public, politicians, and scholars to look for a Christian Right in the UK, making them cast a wary eye toward the expansive reach of the transnational networks of Christian nationalism.

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