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The Transfeminist Playbook

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Dear fellow feminists and allies – and those yet to become one!

The Global Unit for Feminism and Gender Democracy is proud to present an English version of the publication by our partner Trans Network Balkan, the only network and initiative in the Western Balkans run by and for transgender, gender-variant, and non-binary people.

We currently find ourselves in a world where right-wing politics are taking over and restrictive policies are being introduced, usually directed at women and queer communities. Anti-democratic forces often instrumentalise gender as an identity in order to gain political power, thereby further marginalising and oppressing queer communities. In this high-pressure environment of animosity towards “the other”, the Transfeminist Playbook (*Transfeministička kuvarica*) is a much-needed resource for knowledge, solidarity and empowerment in our joint efforts towards a more just society.

The Playbook is a blend of theory and practical guidance for trans, feminist and queer activists in their collective acts of resistance. By having the publication translated from local languages into English, we aim to make it accessible to other grassroots movements and thus expand its reach, fostering international collaboration and much-needed transnational solidarity.

Transfeminism is not separate from feminist struggles; it is an integral part of the broader fight for reproductive justice, bodily autonomy, integrity and human rights.

While anti-gender movements rely on misinformation and misrepresentation of transgender people, we must reinforce a powerful counter-narrative based on knowledge, justice and inclusion. This publication offers precisely that – with real examples from the oft-neglected Western Balkan region.

The Transfeminist Playbook offers **tools for counteracting, resisting and challenging anti-gender rhetoric**. It addresses crucial topics such as building inclusive movements and fostering solidarity through education. Lastly, this Playbook is a call for action!

The Transfeminist Playbook is a reminder of what collective action can achieve. We hope it will inspire readers to continue building inclusive communities that are based on justice and equality despite the shrinking spaces and turbulent times we are currently experiencing.

Naida Kučukalić,
Global Unit for Feminism and Gender Democracy





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The Transfeminist Playbook

Introduction

Dear fellow activists and allies,

We are pleased to introduce you to our Transfeminist Playbook, which aims to provide feminists with communication tools to spread transfeminist messages in an effective, far-reaching way. Activist and author Emi Koyama defines “transfeminism” as a movement organised by trans women and for trans women who believe that their liberation is intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond. Koyama notes that the transfeminist movement “is also open to other queer, intersex, trans men, non-trans women, non-trans men, and others who empathise with the needs of trans women and consider their alliance with trans women to be essential to their liberation.”¹

We bring you the Playbook at a time when anti-gender movements are flaring up around the world and throughout our region, gaining momentum and getting coordinated, with significant resources and a strong infrastructure, and attacking human rights, gender equality, democracy and social justice in order to gain and/or maintain political and economic power. To understand the kind of power we are talking about, we need to recognise that wherever there are oppressive systems based on strict hierarchies (such as patriarchy and capitalism), there is also a small number of privileged people at the top of those hierarchies who have disproportionately high decision-making powers compared to those lower down when it comes to important issues such as the distribution of wealth and resources (knowledge, money, opportunities for advancement, etc.). Since the people currently holding those positions want to stay where they are, they create various mechanisms to ensure that. One such mechanism is maintenance of the current system, i.e. a social order based on inequality – because if equality were to exist among all individuals in society, there would be no ladder for them to remain at the top of. Although anti-gender movements in our region have progressed to varying degrees and their members have achieved varying levels of political power and had various degrees of success in promoting their political agenda, in the course of our work we have identified a common desire

¹ Emi Koyama, “The transfeminist manifesto”, in *Transfeminism: A Collection*, ed. Emi Koyama (Portland: The Feminist Conspiracy Press, 2001), 3–12, 3.

among them – namely, to destabilise societies, achieve political and economic profit, and establish control in accordance with the "natural order" they advocate. Efforts to maintain this "natural order" are reflected in the promotion of pro-natalist policies in cooperation with religious leaders;² the organisation of abortion rights debates on public service television³ that is paid for by all citizens; increased hate speech in parliaments⁴, especially targeting women, LGBTIQ+ people and people with disabilities; an increase in femicide, but also increased transphobia when trans victims⁵ are killed; changes to the curriculum to promote gender stereotypes;⁶ the organisation of debates about trans people in feminist circles;⁷ criticism of gender-sensitive language by the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church;⁸ the promotion of anti-gender narratives by the Catholic Church; attempts to organise a dehumanising debate about trans children in the Croatian parliament;⁹ the organisation of "Straight Pride",¹⁰ and many other events and campaigns.

2 "Milatović upoznao mitropolita Joanikija sa mjerama Vlade donijetim u cilju unapređenja nataliteta", *Vijesti*, 25 March 2022. Available at: <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/ekonomija/596810/milatovic-upoznao-mitropolita-joanikija-sa-mjerama-vlade-donijetim-u-cilju-unapredjenja-nataliteta>

3 "Posle pola vijeka od prava na abortus u Crnoj Gori pravi se pitanje", *Slobodna Evropa*, published on 17 May 2022. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/31855117.html>

4 "Osude novih napada Demokratskog fronta na LGBTIQ u Crnoj Gori", *Slobodna Evropa*, published on 23 Dec. 2021. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-demokratski-front-lgbtiq/3162311.html>

5 "Brutalno ubistvo Noe Milivojev: Transrodne osobe žive u stalnom strahu od nasilja", *Nova*, published on 10 Jul. 2023. Available at: <https://nova.rs/emisije/brutalno-ubistvo-noe-milivojev-transrodne-osobe-zive-stalnom-u-strahu-od-nasilja/>

6 "Srbija i obrazovanje: Šta (ne)će biti u novim udžbenicima iz biologije i da li će 'nastavnica' postati zabranjena reč", *BBC News na sprskom*, published on 21 Nov. 2022. Available at: <https://www-bbc-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-63658998.amp?fbclid=PAAabSKdEUUp8DeigRbsuTKUkJDnHdKcD-8SD2f-UJwEOcL-TLT2qoHTf7NMH3U>

7 "Da se zna: Otkazati transfobično predavanje u Biblioteci grada Beograda", *N1*, published on 7 Apr. 2023. Available at: <https://n1info.rs/vesti/da-se-zna-otkazati-transfobicno-predavanje-u-biblioteci-grada-beograda/>

8 "Srpski patrijarh 'čisti' jezik od rodne senzitivnosti", *Slobodna Evropa*, published on 19 Apr. 2023. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/spc-zene-rodno-osetljiv-jezik/32370740.html>

9 "Prekinuta tematska sjednica o trans djeci zbog neutemeljenih tvrdnji", *kolektirv*, published on 9 Feb. 2023. Available at: <https://kolektirv.hr/prekinuta-tematska-sjednica-o-trans-djeci-zbog-neutemeljenih-tvrdnji/>

10 See the Straight Pride Zagreb website: <https://heteropridehr.com/>

For all these reasons, we deemed it necessary to collate resources that can help create a consensus on the values that feminist movements should represent in post-Yugoslav countries and to devise joint argumentation so that our struggle is more effective and our voice can be heard as clearly as possible.

Our Transfeminist Playbook has two parts. In the first, we formulate the basics of anti-gender movements and try to explain their essence and mechanisms of action, summarising the main arguments they are employing in our region that we have encountered so far. Recognising that this list of arguments is not final, we tried to bring together the ones that are key and that are heard most clearly and frequently. We try to explain them, break them down, and provide alternative ways of responding to them. The second part of the Playbook features case studies from three countries – Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro – in which we analyse specific cases, i.e. actions or campaigns launched by anti-gender individuals. By analysing these cases, we try to identify the main lessons that feminist movements can learn to enable them to respond more effectively to similar situations in the future or prevent them from happening.

The Transfeminist Playbook is intended to provide readers with a sense of solidarity as they read and share the texts in this publication, in the hope that it will encourage much-needed debate within feminist movements and thus contribute to the exchange of knowledge and experiences among feminists with different identities, class affiliations and political convictions – with the ultimate goal of making feminist movements a more solid, combative and proactive opponent to the anti-gender movement.



WHAT KIND OF NARRATIVES ARE WE FIGHTING?

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Anti-gender movements around the world have been gathering momentum and intensifying since the 1990s, when the term **"gender ideology"** was popularised by the Vatican and then taken up by conservative political proponents, the media, the general public, and parts of the feminist movement (often referred to as "trans-exclusionary radical feminism", or TERF for short). The first person to use this term was Dale O'Leary of the United States – a Catholic close to Opus Dei and activist whose goals include the abolition of the right to physical self-determination and abortion. In this context, she associates "gender ideology" with the "culture of death", which is the origin of positioning anti-gender discourse as "pro-life". The discourse of anti-gender proponents is characterised by elements identical to fascist narratives: promotion of a hierarchical system as natural, hostility towards universal citizenship, the construction of conspiracy theories, a radical revision of liberal values, declarative anti-capitalist narratives, clear anti-communism via equating Nazism with communism, the creation of a mythology and cult of the victim (especially characterised by the abuse of children to achieve their political agenda, presented as a way of defending the best interests of the child), and nationalism with elements of both homonationalism and femonationalism.

It should also be mentioned that it is extremely difficult to completely define the term “gender ideology” because, according to anti-gender movement researchers Stefanie Mayer and Brigit Sauer, it evades all attempts to precisely define its meaning and scope. It is precisely this fluidity that gives “gender ideology” the potential to unite a wide range of actors who actually support opposing ideologies. Analysing this discourse, the proponents explain that “gender ideology” functions as an “empty signifier” because it does not denote specific social phenomena or policies, nor an ideological point of view, but a vague (albeit emotionally charged) rejection of the advancement of pertinent concepts such as family policy, gender equality, gender studies, policies related to sexuality, and sex education. In the end, they conclude that the potential of “empty signifiers” lies precisely in the fact that they strive to “bring about a uniform homogeneity of a very heterogeneous reality”, i.e. to unite numerous players who essentially share neither values nor motivation into a strong and stable movement, thus creating an illusion of unity, which can be disastrous when it contributes to the creation of a hostile social environment and/or discriminatory policies.¹

Anti-gender movements are often perceived as resistance to the progress of gender equality, i.e. the rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people. However, numerous studies have shown their goals to be much broader than that.² The anti-gender movement is a transnational movement that aims to establish an alternative political and social system, instrumentalising the gender and human rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people in order to exercise political, economic and social power. Anti-gender politics and discourses are attractive to the political right and fascists precisely because they are an effective way to promote hierarchy. “This language links the defence of the hierarchy of the father, with the defence of the hierarchy of the employer over the worker, and with the defence of the hierarchy over people in general.”³

1 Stefanie Mayer and Brigit Sauer, “‘Gender ideology’ in Austria: Coalitions around an empty signifier”, in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe Mobilizing against Equality*, edited by Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 23–40.

2 Damjan Denkovski, Nina Bernarding, and Kristina Lunz, *Power Over Rights: Understanding and countering the transnational anti-gender movement*, Volume I (Berlin: Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, 2021).

3 Ibid, 18.

Why do they use these topics for their political goals? Because such topics call on the general public to re-examine and redefine their attitudes and behaviours in relation to the body, family, nation, and social relationships in general. It is precisely through their redefinition of these attitudes that oppressive systems (capitalism, patriarchy, racism, ableism and more) are exposed, leading to greater equality, more equal distribution of resources, and a greater degree of participation in decision-making processes about one's own life and society, and thus inevitably to a reduction in the power of those systems. In this sense, gender functions as a "symbolic glue" between the different members of the movement, because anti-gender proponents do not share the same ideological matrix and their motivation for anti-gender action is diverse, depending on both the political context and their political interests.

'Gender ideology' has come to signify the failure of democratic representation, and opposition to this ideology has become a means of rejecting different facets of the current socioeconomic order, from the prioritization of identity politics over material issues, and the weakening of people's social, cultural and political security, to the detachment of social and political elites and the influence of transnational institutions and the global economy on nation states. (Grzebalska, et al., 2017) ⁴

⁴ Weronika Grzebalska, Eszter Kováts and Andrea Pető, "Gender as symbolic glue: how 'gender' became an umbrella term for the rejection of the (neo)liberal order", *Political Critique*, January 13, 2017. Available at: <https://politicalcritique.org/long-read/2017/gender-as-symbolic-glue-how-gender-became-an-umbrella-term-for-the-rejection-of-the-neoliberal-order/>

Anti-gender actors are mainly divided into three groups: “already existing and sometimes well-established groups, newly established ones, and allies”.⁵ **The old, established players** include all those that existed before the year 2000 and that have significant and well-established positions in national and international circles. These include the Catholic Church and other Christian groups, depending on the context where they operate (e.g. the analyses from the part of this publication dealing with Serbia and Montenegro include the Serbian Orthodox Church and its proxies). This first group also includes many and various think tanks, such as the US-based Heritage Foundation. The second group, consisting of **newly established actors**, has grown in the last decade and includes various “civic initiatives”, new think tank organisations, online platforms, and political parties and institutions. One good example is the French movement *La Manif pour tous*. A key feature of these actors is their ability to mobilise people from outside the original framework of the anti-gender movement and within public space and to organise mass demonstrations.⁶ The third and final group are the **allies**, which include intellectuals, academics, politicians and media personalities, as well as anyone else who supports and amplifies their voices.

Certain initiatives, organisations, and individuals stand out among the group of new actors in the anti-gender movement. By claiming to stand up for women’s and/or LGB people’s rights, they in fact, under the guise of **gender-critical “feminism”**, promote and spread transphobia. Their activism includes advocating restriction and abolition of the rights of transgender people, especially trans women. An overlap of their views on transgender identities with those promoted by right-wing and established anti-gender actors is not uncommon, although it can be regarded as paradoxical since these groups claim to fight the patriarchy and gender inequality. In practice, it is not uncommon for these groups to support and welcome right-wing initiatives that disadvantage transgender people.

5 Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, “The anti-gender movement in comparative perspective,” in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe Mobilizing against Equality*, edited by Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 253-272.

6 Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, “Gender ideology” in movement: Introduction, in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe Mobilizing against Equality*, edited by Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 1-23.

Gender-critical “feminism” is actually a *euphemism for trans-exclusionary attitudes and policies* that are based on essentialist conceptions of gender and that insist that gender is an immutable biological fact that should be the basis for feminists organising and fighting for women’s rights (those assigned feminine sex at birth). Accordingly, groups that promote and advocate such views are known to ban trans women from women’s spaces. A small number of these groups allow access only to trans women who have gone through all stages of medical transition and have changed their bodies in accordance with the gender binary norm. However, a large number of these groups do not recognise the existence of trans women in this case either. The insistence on sexual dimorphism and sex as a biological reality that must be viewed outside of culture and society, and of gender based purely on sex, are the starting points for everything that gender-critical “feminists” say, write and do. They reject the idea that gender identity does not necessarily coincide with gender, and consequently they do not consider trans women to be women. Alongside transphobia, they also promote misogyny. Advocating for the idea of a binary gender norm as something that is naturally given and can be clearly defined actually supports colonialist and racist definitions and ideals of femininity based on the Western model of white women’s bodies as the norm. Western colonial powers forcibly imposed the binary gender norm on numerous cultures that had recognised gender diversity within their traditions. In addition, the binary sex/gender difference can be considered a colonial invention with pronounced racialisation because it dehumanises colonised peoples by excluding them from the Western binary domain of “masculinity”/“femininity”, while at the same time erasing gender systems and forms of social organisation that do not give primary importance to gender difference. Beginning in the 19th century, eugenicists and racists put forward as evidence of racial superiority the pronounced sexual dimorphism, i.e. the clear visual difference between males and females, in white people, whereas in Black people, indigenous groups in North America and other non-white races this difference is less noticeable.⁷ In fact, eugenicists and racists insisted that “the less civilised a race is, the smaller the difference between the two sexes”, believing that prominent sexual dimorphism was only visible in the white race and that it was a feature of its advanced civilisation.

7 Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2018.

In the following part, the word “feminism” is put in quotation marks because policies of exclusion and discrimination against trans people can in no way be considered a feminist legacy or part of the feminist struggle. We believe, as do many other authors, that feminism cannot and must not be relativised by calling every declarative struggle for women’s rights “feminism”, and especially not the struggle of those who would exclude any group of women and people with different gender identities, whether they do so by promoting biological essentialism, or by instrumentalising the struggle for gender equality.

Gender-critical “feminism” can be equated with trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF), although often groups and individuals who hold gender-critical views refute that they are transphobic and claim that they do not support the policies implemented by TERF groups.⁸ The acronym “TERF” was popularised by trans-inclusive cis feminist Viv Smythe in 2008 in an effort to distinguish between radical feminists and those who called the propagation of transphobia “radical feminism”. Over time, this acronym has become established and is now regularly used worldwide. Following the example of the 2012 right-wing campaign “homophobe is a slur”, in 2013 groups that propagate gender-critical “feminism” already launched the campaign “TERF is a slur” and “cis is a slur”, with the goal of eliminating those terms from use, at least in feminist circles.⁹

8 Gina Gwenffrewi, “J. K. Rowling and the Echo Chamber of Secrets”, *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* Volume 9, Number 3, August 2022, 507-516.

9 Cristan Williams, “Women’s Movement, Trans Inclusion In/Exclusion From”, in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies*, edited by Abbie E. Goldberg and Genny Beemyn (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2021), 910-913; Cristan Williams, “TERFs”, in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies*, edited by Abbie E. Goldberg and Genny Beemyn (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2021), 822-825.

TERF groups and individuals believe that their actions do not promote discrimination against trans people and that their views are not transphobic. By claiming so, they very often mislead their interlocutors (especially those who are not fully versed in the topic) and mask the transphobic narratives they are producing, spreading and representing. In this way, they gain an audience that is undecided or is not familiar with transgender topics and the problems transgender people face. In addition, the language used in public speeches is not always formulated in such a way that it can be easily identified as violent and offensive. As such, it is not always immediately recognised as transphobic speech, despite carrying messages that dehumanise or discriminate against transgender people. For example, one of the approaches they use is an “invitation to debate”, in which anyone who does not share their opinion has to prove that transgender people even exist and that social and institutional transphobia is something that truly affects transgender people and prevents them from functioning in daily life without stress and fear of discrimination. In addition, a very common approach is when these groups offer “well-intentioned solutions” such as the complete segregation of trans people in public spaces and in various spheres of life in general. These are not only unfeasible approaches but can also be classified as serious discriminatory ideas and practices that were widely used in the racist policies accompanying segregation and apartheid. Meanwhile, these groups frame such proposed solutions as offering a helping hand, disguising this as proof that they have nothing against trans people. One of the most commonly used tactics is *the use of speech that focuses on care – for women* (“who are put at risk by men who impersonate transgender women”) *or for children and young people* (“who enter the transition process too early and deprive themselves of the opportunity to change their minds”). Those making these claims often state that they have nothing against adults opting for medical transition, even though the measures they propose would have a direct, very negative impact on the lives of all trans people. Expressing concern and then insisting on the introduction of measures, bans and laws that would prevent these hypothetically dangerous situations from happening is actually a *populist* spread of transphobia that a large number of people unfortunately do not recognise as such, precisely because of the way it is introduced to the public.

These and similar tactics are, in the long run, far more dangerous than the rhetoric employed by established members of anti-gender movements. That is because they are manipulative and have the potential to mobilise people who do not trust the established actors or who look with disfavour upon them. The older elements of the anti-gender movement express their intolerance and hatred and call for discrimination much more directly. As a result, some people remain undecided or even speak out against what they hear if they hold values that reject hate speech. However, subtle messages and rhetoric that carefully conceal hatred and intolerance by emphasising concern or the importance of critical thinking (behind which negations of transgender identities and experiences are hidden), can lead people to really start questioning transgender identities as a new and potentially dangerous social phenomenon that endangers women and children. These tactics are particularly well developed online, where transphobia can spread quickly and effectively. The last decade has been characterised by the rapid development of social networks, a drastic increase in the number of internet users, and large-scale global networking. As a result, information is quickly and easily available, but the question is: what kind of information will someone come across when they first encounter transgender issues? That's why it's so important to understand what transphobia is and how it manifests.

Transphobia refers to all forms of violence, discrimination, hatred, disgust, aggressive behaviour and generally negative attitudes towards transgender people, non-binary people, and all people who in any way, for example in their behaviour or appearance, do not fit into the binary gender norm. Transphobia manifests itself in various kinds of violence: verbal, emotional-psychological, social, cyber, economic, sexual, and physical. Transphobia also encompasses institutionalised forms of direct and indirect discrimination, criminalisation, pathologisation, and stigmatisation of trans and non-binary people. Institutional discrimination against transgender people is perpetrated by medical, scientific, legal, educational, religious, and other institutions that, via various mechanisms, disenfranchise and discriminate against transgender people, thus creating and encouraging other forms of discrimination. General social or cultural discrimination against transgender people is practised and encouraged by individuals or social groups that adopt the attitudes of institutions and then, on the basis of those attitudes, communicate and act within their micro-communities (family, peer groups, work teams, etc.) as well as in the media and public spaces (streets, sports fields, catering facilities, etc.). Transphobia can manifest itself in a variety of ways that may be easier or harder to immediately recognise. Explicit hate speech, verbal or physical violence, denial of trans and non-binary identities as well as denial of the existence of gender itself, and inadequate media reporting are just some of the ways trans and non-binary people are oppressed, dehumanised and socially excluded.

General guidelines for transfeminist argumentation

WHO ARE WE COMMUNICATING WITH?

Our key target group for increasing support for transfeminist topics are those people who are not well enough informed on the topic, who are undecided on the specific shades of certain universal values, or are still ambivalent with regard to their values.

It should be noted that these facts are a prerequisite for communication and, as such, it is important to remember that successful communication requires a foundation for solidarity based on principles rather than empathy and identification, and that it is important to have understanding and patience.

It is precisely those people who do not have sufficient knowledge about the subject who are vulnerable to anti-gender tactics. Unknown phenomena and people still generate a certain amount of fear because one does not know what to expect from them: will they be friendly or do they constitute a threat? Anti-gender actors misuse this natural fear of the unknown by attributing various threatening traits to gender-related topics (trans women endanger the existence of "ordinary" women, gay people want to indoctrinate our children, queer people want to destroy the concept of the family, etc.). Combined with existing fears, this creates hostile feelings and attitudes towards these topics and the communities associated with them. And it justifies attacks as defence against a threat. Such feelings and attitudes may seem unacceptable to us and suggest that there is no point communicating with a person in hopes of gaining their support. But we should remember that often such feelings and attitudes do not contradict a person's general values (e.g. that violence is unacceptable towards anyone, that

trans people and women are both discriminated against, that everyone should be equal). During communication, it is important to distinguish values from attitudes (discussed below). In addition, we should remember that the emotional aspect of any story concerning topics relating to personal safety can be a very strong factor – bearing in mind that anti-gender narratives relying on fear and the feeling that safety is threatened can often reduce rational perceptions on a situation.

Finally, it should be remembered that many of these people worry about human rights issues and precarious living conditions, and that can easily lead them to believe the words of someone who promises them safety and security of any kind. If we ensure that our communication respects these fears and problems and we make the topics we are talking about accessible and understandable, properly presenting them as factually opposite to what anti-gender movements represent them to be, we create an opportunity for the adoption of transfeminist values and attitudes.

HOW DO WE KNOW WHO BELONGS TO THE MOVABLE MIDDLE?

The term “movable middle” applies to all people in the previously described category, i.e. all those who, for any reason, do not have a clearly defined attitude or value commitment to a given topic. When we talk about transfeminist narratives, it is important to ascertain the attitudes to trans topics within different social groups and the levels of knowledge we are dealing with. Recent research conducted by organisations in our region can provide answers to these questions. For example, in 2023 Spektra, a transfeminist organisation in Montenegro, conducted the first survey dealing exclusively with attitudes of the general public towards transgender, gender-variant, and intersex people. The research revealed the following:

- There is stable support of between **15–20%** for transgender people. That means one in every four to five people supports trans people. The active participation of trans people in socially important issues has risen (20.8%) through this support, as well as a tacit under-

standing of how the struggle of a certain group can benefit the whole of society (23.6%).

► On a scale of 1 to 10, respondents rate their knowledge of trans people with an average score of 3.4 – i.e. not particularly good.

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► **Only 20.2% of people** correctly define the term “transgender person”, while 28.6% do not know, and everyone else gives answers that incorrectly define trans people.

► **17.2% of people** recognise the existence of a range of gender identities outside the male/female framework. This category mainly includes young people (18–35 years old), people with higher educational qualifications, and women.

► **A third of respondents** understand the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity.

► **69.1%** do not fully understand the difference between gender and gender identity. 80.01% do not understand non-binary identities, while 71.9% believe that non-binary people do not exist.

► About a third of respondents do not know how they would feel if a close friend or family member came out as a trans person, while a quarter do not know whether they would support them.

► **42.8%** of respondents do not feel comfortable talking about transgender people, while 36.5% are not sure (women, young people and the highly educated feel more comfortable). About a third do not want to name the reason for their discomfort, while the rest do not know or cite prejudice towards and lack of support for trans people.

► **45.3%** do not recognise how fighting for the human rights of one group directly benefits the whole of society, while 31.1% do not know whether or not they recognise this.

► Support for the right to physical self-determination can be identified through support of trans people's rights to gender reassignment (24.6%) and abortion rights (51.3%), while the percentage of those who are unsure is between one-fifth (for abortion) and one-quarter (for gender reassignment). However, 50% believe that people should have the right to make decisions about their own bodies, while a fifth are unsure.

A survey conducted by ERA, the regional LGBTIQ+ organisation for the Western Balkans and Turkey,¹⁰ shows that it is more likely that citizens of the Western Balkans will **not perceive transgender people as a danger to women (54.0%)**. However, there is still a large proportion of people who believe the opposite (35.0%), while **11% are unsure**.

As part of a 2021 survey conducted by the Centre for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID), a special set of questions dealt with the "attitude of Serbian citizens towards the issues of gender change and gender identity" (CeSID, 2021: 35).¹¹ This research showed that when asked *What is your attitude towards people who have decided to change their gender?*, the largest percentage, i.e. 43% of respondents, have a negative attitude, while the smallest percentage, 6% of respondents, state that they have a positive attitude. Of the total number of respondents with a negative attitude, 18% say that they have a very negative attitude towards people who have decided to change their gender, while the other 25% have only a negative attitude. **Some 35% of respondents have a neutral attitude, while 16% answered that they do not know and that they cannot assess their attitude.** When we look at the age and educational structure of the respondents as well as their place of residence, we see that the percentage of those with a negative attitude is higher among older respondents and those who have a lower level of education and/or live in rural areas.

¹⁰ ERA, *Attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ people in the Western Balkans, Analytical Report of Public Opinion Poll*, ERA – Equal Rights Association for Western Balkans and Turkey, June 2023. Available at: <https://lgbti-era.org/equality-has-no-alternative/>

¹¹ Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju (CeSid), *Ka boljem razumevanju prava LGBTI osoba i njihove pozicije u društvu*, 2021. http://www.cesid.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CeSID_Srpski.pdf

All of the above data show that at least 30% of people, and in some cases more, do not have any particular attitude and have some degree of openness towards learning more about transfeminist topics.

These are predominantly younger, highly educated women, so they should be

the main target group for our communication — although we should not, of course, write off other groups. This target group is also not homogeneous, so more in-depth research is needed to effectively design the messages.

WHAT IS THE BASIS OF ANTI-GENDER COMMUNICATION AND OF TRANSFEMINIST COMMUNICATION?

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Communication of any kind requires us to clearly identify values, attitudes and behaviours. This can greatly help us to better understand the people we are communicating with, which allows us to shape and convey our messages more effectively.

Values are deep-seated beliefs and principles that guide a person's decisions, actions and judgements. They represent what individuals or societies consider important, desirable or morally correct. Values can encompass a wide range of concepts, including honesty, integrity, justice, freedom and compassion. They serve as the basis for shaping attitudes and behaviours.

Attitudes are the evaluative judgements, feelings, and dispositions that individuals have towards people, objects, or ideas. These judgements can be positive, negative, or neutral and they affect a person's perception and reaction to different situations. Attitudes can be shaped by personal experiences, social influences and cultural norms. They play a crucial role in determining how individuals approach and interact with the world around them.

Behaviours are the visible actions or reactions that individuals exhibit in response to internal or external stimuli. These actions can be physical, verbal or non-verbal and encompass a wide range of activities, from simple gestures to complex tasks. Behaviours are influenced by a combination of factors, including values, attitudes, emotions and external circumstances. They provide insight into how individuals express their beliefs, attitudes and intentions in practice.

From the above, we conclude that values are the most stable element and that successful communication requires that the person we are communicating with can connect with our message in terms of values. In this sense, transfeminist movements and anti-gender movements actually rely on opposite values in their communication. In their pursuit of equality and acceptance of diversity, transfeminist movements rely mostly on the values of openness and universalism, while anti-gender movements rely on the values of conservatism and power in order to preserve unequal social orders.

The theory behind this grouping of values derives from the 2023 study "Understanding Homophobia: The relationship between human values and attitudes towards homosexuality in the context of anti-gender mobilisations" by Irene Cvetkovik. In the study, Cvetkovik defines four groups of values: conservatism, power, universalism, and openness.¹²

The key conclusions of the research are as follows:

The dominant position of **conservatism** as a value has influenced the rise of homophobia. One of the possible interpretations of this finding is that homosexuality is regarded as a deviation from traditional norms, the preservation of which is the basis of this specific value. People who value conservatism may feel a greater affiliation with anti-gender movements and are more likely to agree with their narratives and arguments because the anti-gender movement is founded on the fight against a "gender ideology" in opposition to tradition and religion.

The dominant position of **power** as a value has also influenced the rise of homophobia, though not as strongly as conservatism. Power implies the search for social status and prestige, which in turns implies acceptance of the dominant cultural and moral norms. The tendency of anti-gender actors to promote homophobic and transphobic attitudes can be interpreted as their attaching greater value to power, i.e. strengthening a sense of superiority and dominance (male superiority, masculinity crisis).

12 http://coalition.org.mk/archives/portfolio_page/otvoreno_skrieni_opresii

*The initiatives of anti-gender groups have been mobilised by the suggestion of a great threat coming from the “homosexual agenda”. They build on the idea of a threat posed by the LGBTIQ+ community and activists. They incite fear and anxiety about possible social destabilisation and loss of parental authority (children in school will be taught to accept homosexuality) as well as reduced safety of children and women (especially through the portrayal of trans women as violent “women with penises” who endanger the most vulnerable members of society – women and children). The success of anti-gender mobilisation is a result of the dominance of conservatism and power as **values motivated by anxiety**.*

The dominant position of **openness** as a value heightens positive attitudes towards homosexuality. *Homopositivity* implies apparently conflicting social and cultural norms: accepting the idea of freedom and the right of individuals to live as they wish, while also supporting the implementation of legal and political changes to create a system that does not exclude LGB people. It is precisely this opportunity for critical reflection and social and political change that meets resistance within anti-gender initiatives. **Valuing openness is the opposite of valuing conservatism.** The conflict of values is mainly revealed in the dynamics between changes in stability (system and culture) and between the past and the future (as a vision or desired context).

The dominant position of **universalism** as a value heightens positive attitudes towards homosexuality. Unlike the value of openness, the **value of universalism does not have a significant impact on the dimension of “adoption”, i.e. support for the right of same-sex couples to adopt children. Valuing universalism is the opposite of valuing power.** The conflict of values is mainly revealed in the dynamic of caring for oneself vs. caring for others. One of the key anti-gender points of the argument is the idea that gender equality (including progress in the rights and status of LGBTIQ+ people) is a long-overdue goal that has now gone too far at the expense of white heterosexual cisgender men (masculinity in crisis).

*Values such as openness and universalism, whose motivation lies in freedom from anxiety, open up the potential for positive and supportive attitudes towards homosexuality. **What is missing in our context is a choice of policies and mobilisation strategies that are not based on fear/anxiety but on hope, critical thinking, and the potential for innovation and change.** In other words, these strategies need to be framed by a motivation to take risks and experiment in order to build new paradigms of societies and cultures that are inclusive and based on the idea of equality and social wellbeing.*

HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE OUR MESSAGES EFFECTIVELY?

Based on all of the above, we propose the following guidelines for the effective and strategic communication of transfeminist messages, with broad potential for mobilisation:

- ▶ The least effective method to argue against anti-gender narratives is to respond with facts and data. This method calls for rationality instead of addressing the anxiety and fear that are the main emotional components anti-gender actors use to communicate.
- ▶ Tell stories that contain emotional key points, that build images, and that people can and will relate to. This approach supports the visualisation of transfeminist topics, making them less abstract and more familiar and preventing further alienation from interlocutors.
- ▶ Focus on potentially shared values and experiences and find common ground with interlocutors in order to identify common oppressions and common goals.
- ▶ Focus on personalities in your stories, give a human face to the story, with a connection to everyday events and challenges.

► Share positive stories and give good examples that show how we all benefit from diversity in society. Sometimes it is not easy to talk about “success” stories when we face so many challenges and are used to talking about the problems in society, but we should remind ourselves and others of the power of survival and our shared right to a decent, dignified life and to celebrate diversity.

► Self-victimisation can be extremely perfidious, although often unconscious. It is important to recognise it as self-sabotage and an oppressive mechanism imposed by society. We should avoid such self-victimisation when talking about our problems. It can come across as suggesting that a specific identity is the only one or the central one and can emphasise divisions into “us and them”. Every person is a complex individual, and our gender identity is only one aspect of our personality. By airing this complexity, we fight dehumanisation and the reduction of trans people to an exclusive single identity. We can celebrate our oppressed identities without letting ourselves be diminished.

► Regardless of our understanding of oppression based on different identities, it is important to avoid using identity as a “weapon” in our argumentation. Narratives that support the division into “us and them” are counterproductive and will only strengthen the gap between us and our interlocutor.

► Effective stories have a clear structure: characters, story flow, values, common ground, and a call to action. A story purely for the sake of a story, which does not send a clear message to the interlocutor of what is required of him or her, will not achieve the objective.

► As important as it is to talk about ourselves and to follow the principle of “nothing about us without us”, it is also important to build a network of people who speak about us in a positive way. This creates an image of wider support and we

are perceived as part of society – which, of course, we are. Stories and images that show us with our families, friends, colleagues, comrades and everyone else who is part of our lives demonstrate that we are not alone and isolated. Such stories also emphasise the importance of support and togetherness, which also builds a sense of empathy and identification, because it is important for everyone to belong and to feel understanding, support and love.

► If you use an antagonist in the narrative in order to show what you are fighting against, it is important that you portray them as a “common enemy” – not only the enemy of trans-feminists but of society as a whole. It is also important not to present the person themselves with a hostile attitude towards us as the problem, but to address the *values* that the person represents as the problem – one that leads to oppressive behaviour and strengthens the oppressive system.

► Use language that is as understandable as possible, adapting it to your “audience”. Ask yourself: Would a child of primary school age understand this? That doesn’t mean you should adopt a patronising tone, rather you should speak in a way that everyone can understand. Everything you have to say can be said in a simple and understandable way. Theories and arguments only work if they can be understood by the person they are intended for.

► Although telling personal stories increases understanding of the topic, care should be taken not to rely entirely on personal stories in your argumentation, as this can lead to the fetishisation of our lives and promote only certain models of personal stories as desirable. It is also important that the personal stories nurture diversity and different life stories, as well as the various approaches to telling them.

A few key aspects for each message include:

- ▷ Identifying the target audience (we can't address every audience the same way) and understanding their attitudes, values, and behaviours
- ▷ Identifying the goal we want to achieve with the message
- ▷ Formulating the message in a clear and understandable way, with clear values and a call to action (if the message does not ask something clear of the person receiving it, it may not effect a change in attitudes and/or behaviour)
- ▷ Testing the messages. This step is often skipped because the messages sound effective to us, without taking into account our own biases and subjectivity.
- ▷ Continually analysing the success of specific messages
- ▷ Repetition to make sure the messages are "received"

Each message has four layers:

1. The information we send, which is basic and obvious, may contain facts, values, and/or emotional content.
2. What you think about yourself: what we say sends a strong message about how we think of ourselves (with respect, as victims, or something else).
3. What you think of the person you are talking to: what we say also sends a message about what we think of the person listening to our messages (whether we view them with respect or in a patronising way, and whether we think they are educated, progressive, narrow-minded or something else).
4. What you expect from the person you are talking to: our message always conveys our expectations of the person listening – that is, whether we expect them to act and change something about themselves or their environment.

Anti-Gender Arguments: How Can We Respond?

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There are several ways to respond to anti-gender arguments in a given context. One way is to provide **counter-arguments**, which aim to dispel the myths perpetuated by anti-gender arguments, to delegitimise them and point out that they are meaningless. Another is to provide **alternative arguments**, which aim to provide constructive and positive attitudes and images as an alternative to the dehumanising anti-gender narratives.¹³ Below, we provide some of the most common anti-gender arguments and our suggested responses. The list is not exhaustive and depends very much on the context, and so our proposed answers depend on that context.

¹³ Council of Europe. (n.d.), Develop tool – Step-by-step guide to human rights based narratives, Develop tool., *Council of Europe*. Available at: pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/human-rights-speech/develop

ANTI-GENDER ARGUMENT based on biological essentialism: gender is a fictitious category; women are discriminated against on the basis of sex only.

COUNTER-ARGUMENT: Gender is no more a fictitious category than sex. As a biological, material thing, sex often seems more real than gender and to be something that does not change. However, gender is an existing social construct, which modern medicine and biology define as a spectrum, not a binary category that can be divided into “male” and “female”. Most theories that point to drastic differences between men and women (ranging from emotional and intellectual differences to physical ones), and which were once considered scientifically based, have now been refuted. Of course, there are specific characteristics of different bodies, including male, female, trans, and intersex bodies, but the reference to biology as something set in stone is scientifically unfounded. In nature, of which humanity is unquestionably a part, there are many examples of variations in the body in the sense of both sex and gender. For example, today biology describes nine categories of sex,¹⁴ and sees no differences between male and female brains.¹⁵

AN ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENT: Discrimination against women on the basis of their reproductive role is a characteristic of the patriarchy, which actually controls and discriminates against all of us, regardless of our gender. Discrimination based on sex does not erase discrimination based on gender. The two phenomena are inextricably linked, since they imply violence against the body and against the way our bodies and personalities express themselves. Denoting gender discrimination as something exclusively experienced by women actually aids the patriarchy and those who seek to uphold it in order to retain their positions of power because that keeps women in a subordinate and (self-)victimised position. The patriarchy affects all of us in different ways and that is something we need to talk about: feminism and gender equality are not a purely “feminine” issue but an issue for the whole of society.

¹⁴ Claire Ainsworth, “Sex redefined”, *Nature* 518 (2015): 288–291. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/518288a#/spectrum>

¹⁵ Lise Eliot, “Neurosexism: the myth that men and women have different brains”, *Nature* 566 (2019): 453–454. Dostupno na: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-00677-x>

ANTI-GENDER ARGUMENT: Trans activism erases women.

COUNTER-ARGUMENT: Transgender rights activism does not erase women. Rather, it advocates for the eradication of discrimination against both trans people and women because it fights against the patriarchy, misogyny and all attitudes and behaviours that reinforce strict gender roles and norms. Trans activism seeks to improve the position of transgender people and solve the pressing problems of the trans community.

AN ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENT: Not only does trans activism not erase women, it is actually empowering for their struggle and existence. Trans activism celebrates the diversity of women and others, and takes into account intersectionality and different dimensions of identity, emphasising that many different personal characteristics can affect a person's opportunities in life. In this way, trans activism promotes inclusivity and exposes and criticises ideas that are based on patriarchal and racist premises. How does this work for trans activism? Trans activism challenges all dominant societal attitudes about who deserves and who does not deserve a dignified life. If a dignified life – encompassing freedom from violence, security, access to quality health care and education, respect for workers' rights, and the right to work – is reserved only for those deemed "acceptable" by society, that means we are living in a conflicted, authoritarian society that upholds hierarchical norms as the right and proper way for things to be. This directly harms both men and women. It is precisely through trans activism that this concept is challenged, as it questions normative views of the body, gender, sexuality, family and nation. Trans activism redefines all these concepts, making them more humane, more equal, and more dignified for all.

ANTI-GENDER ARGUMENT: Trans rights give rapists and aggressors easier access to women's spaces, including women's prisons.

COUNTER-ARGUMENT: Experience in many countries shows that trans women in detention face a high risk of discrimination and violence from other inmates or prison staff. Placing trans women in men's wards puts them at direct risk of being raped, as well as of psychological and/or physical violence, some of which ends in fatality. In addition, the lack of documented cases of abuse by trans women in the prison system points to the fact that such abuses are unlikely, especially in highly patriarchal environments.

AN ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENT: The basis of this argument is the claim that the main tool of patriarchal violence is the *penis* and *the male body*. These arguments do not recognise the body of a trans woman as a female or trans body; they have biological essentialism at their core. Although we are fully conscious of the legitimacy of a deep fear of rape and physical violence in all spheres of society, we believe it is important to reject the idea that the male body and the penis are the *cause* of violence against women. We must treat the actual cause, not the symptoms. All bodies are meant for life, for enjoyment, for feeling – not for violence. Those who use the body for violence, whatever their gender, are a product of the patriarchal regime and of their political and life choices, which are not dependent on the person's gender. In order to stop reducing our personalities to our sexual organs, thus simplifying and dehumanising individuals, we need to enter into conversations that question our own and collective defences of the patriarchy, which does not permit us to understand the diversity of bodies. Only by stepping out of such frameworks can we oppose violence in all spaces, including safe spaces.

ANTI-GENDER ARGUMENT: Identity politics diverts from the class struggle.

COUNTER-ARGUMENT: The class struggle and the struggle for acceptance by people with a certain identity are not separate but intertwined. Precisely this interweaving is implied by the concept of intersectionality – the fact that we all have multiple identities and experiences, and that because of them we find ourselves caught in a network of power relationships where we all experience oppression in one way or another and we all have some privileges in relation to someone else. The claim that the class struggle should be prioritised is reductionist. Historically, this claim was used to silence women who called for the inclusion of feminist issues in the class struggle.

AN ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENT: The struggle of trans people is also part of the class struggle and should be seen as such. When we recognise that people who are oppressed because of their identity, as trans people are, and who are therefore disproportionately affected by poverty and homelessness as well as violations of workers' rights, we see that it is necessary to include the issues of trans people and all other marginalised groups in the class struggle.

ANTI-GENDER ARGUMENT: Trans women are socialised as men and have lived with male privilege and therefore do not have female experiences.

COUNTER-ARGUMENT: Socialisation within patriarchal societies includes the imposition of specific binary gender roles on children by the family, educational institutions and generally all social institutions that have an impact on us throughout our lives. Regardless of the existence of certain patterns related to our upbringing that we encounter in the context of socialisation, our personalities and identities are also influenced by many other factors. Not all women, nor all men, have the same experience of socialisation, and accordingly we cannot speak of a single unique female or male experience. Transgender people also do not have the same experiences when looking at their relationship to their gender identity. Cisgender white heterosexual men certainly have social privileges in cases where their gender expression and behaviour fit into the given norms. When individuals deviate from gender norms, they lose access to those privileges and are faced with a choice: conform to patriarchal expectations or endure discrimination.

AN ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENT: Some transgender people come out at a very young age and as a result suffer various forms of violence from early on, first within the family and later at school. The parents of such children usually try to correct the gender expression and gender roles that their offspring appropriate, perhaps not realising that is an act of violence against them. Trans girls are particularly vulnerable to violence, most often from fathers who expect them to display a male gender role they cannot or do not wish to adopt. Out of fear of violence and ridicule, some children accept gender roles that do not suit them and try to fit into society although they are aware that they are different from other children. Trans children often have a traumatic childhood full of violence precisely because of the socialisation imposed on them.

ANTI-GENDER ARGUMENT: Trans women are not women because they don't have women's experiences related to menstruation and childbirth.

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COUNTER-ARGUMENT: Experiences of the menstrual cycle are certainly not the same for all women, because the length and circumstances of the cycle are not identical in all individuals, nor do all women experience the physiological changes in the same way. Also, some women do not have a menstrual cycle because they were born without a uterus or have had their uterus removed for health reasons. And as far as giving birth is concerned, many women do not wish to give birth at all or may be unable to give birth for various reasons. All of this does not make them less of a woman than those who do have a menstrual cycle or who have given birth. This anti-gender argument harms all women because it reduces them to their physiological characteristics and/or reproductive function, effectively creating a connection between the female body and imposed social norms. Society accordingly imposes a sense of inferiority and shame on women who do not wish to or who cannot give birth. Emphasising women's biological bodily functions and linking them to women's gender identity normalises gender roles that put women at a disadvantage in society. Giving birth and caring for children are obligations that society considers every woman should fulfil, imposing specific social expectations on women because they belong to them by "nature". These expectations entail a lot of unpaid labour.

AN ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENT: Experiences of physiological processes and bodily functions can connect us but they do not have to be determinants of an identity category such as gender. Equating the female body with the female experience is actually impossible because no woman's body and experiences are the same as all the rest. Also, insisting on the connection between biological sex characteristics and the female gender normalises socially constructed gender norms and supports the idea that women are biologically predisposed to certain roles in society. This undermines feminist efforts and sabotages the struggle for gender equality.

ANTI-GENDER ARGUMENT: Criticism of trans people is a reflection of democratic practice and freedom of speech.

COUNTER-ARGUMENT: All freedom of speech ends where that speech violates someone's dignity, health, quality of life and human rights. The understanding of freedom of speech as a concept without restriction is one of the basic postulates of right-wing and fascist policies, which actually aim to promote only the freedom of those who have the most power and capital at the expense of those who lack such advantages. One of the basic principles of a democracy is the equality of the people living within it and their right to autonomy, integrity and dignity. We therefore cannot say that a form of "criticism" that demands exclusion of or discrimination against transgender people is justified by the principles of democracy.

AN ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENT: Democratic practice implies looking at how diversity actually enriches society and considering how we can improve social conditions that lead to discrimination against any group of people, including trans people. Criticism of the very existence of a certain group of people is the exact opposite of democratic practice; it is a practice that aims to destroy democracy and the concept of a society of solidarity.

ANTI-GENDER ARGUMENT: Trans children do not exist, and greater visibility of trans people leads to an epidemic of trans children.

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COUNTER-ARGUMENT: The experiences of trans adults who became aware in early childhood that their gender does not match the sex they were assigned at birth are the best indicator that trans children exist. Increased visibility and availability of information about (trans)gender diversity over the last decade, as well as institutional recognition of transgender identities and gender dysphoria, have led to more adolescents and young children choosing to come out earlier. In recent years, there have been several scientifically unsubstantiated and unconfirmed anti-trans theories and concepts such as “rapid-onset gender dysphoria” that attempt to delegitimise the existence of trans children, but to no avail. To highlight the illegitimacy of this concept, one can cite its problematic origins: the aforementioned concept first emerged in 2016 on several websites that are known for spreading transphobia. In the following year the concept made its way into the academic literature. However, scientific criticism soon emerged of the concept and of the methodology used to present the transphobic arguments in the first place. The editor of scientific journal *PLOS One*, in which the transphobic study appeared, later apologised to the trans and non-binary community “for the omissions that occurred during the initial evaluation of the study”. Neither the World Health Organization (WHO), nor the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) or the American Psychiatric Association (APA) recognises the legitimacy of this concept.

AN ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENT: The freedom to explore one's own gender identity should be enjoyed by every person, regardless of their age, including children. If a child wishes to express their gender identity in ways that differ from social expectations, they should be allowed to do so. Otherwise, the child may experience parental and societal pressure as a form of violence. Medical treatments that aim to make a person express their gender in accordance with the sex assigned at birth have been scientifically rejected as unsuccessful and unethical. From an early age, children are forced into gender roles and behaviours that are considered socially acceptable according to the child's gender and biological sex. In this way, children are taught that only binary gender norms are socially acceptable, and because of that they usually need a great deal of courage to break through those norms, despite their strong need and desire to live in accordance with the gender they feel as their own. In some cases, children just want to explore their gender, and that doesn't necessarily mean that they are transgender. Prohibitions on such behaviour do not make sense: if a child is transgender, this fact cannot be changed, and if they are not transgender, they will certainly come to that conclusion by themselves. Children should therefore be encouraged to explore and express their gender the way they wish and to question traditional gender roles. This way, we will make their childhood safer and more pleasant. Also, raising new generations with more freedom than the patriarchy allows, regardless of whether the children end up being transgender or simply explore and experiment, is one way to effectively combat the patriarchy.

ANTI-GENDER ARGUMENT: Transgender identity is a novelty; young people come out as transgender in order to follow trends.

COUNTER-ARGUMENT: There is ample evidence of the existence of transgender people throughout history in different cultures around the world. The term “transgender” itself is more recent, appearing in the second half of the 20th century, but the concept of transgression of binary gender roles and of behaviours and identities that do not fit into binary categories is much older. We have evidence for this dating back a few thousand years. The reluctance or inability of some people to fit into binary gender categories or to adopt a gender identity that is not the same as the sex assigned at birth is nothing new, nor did it come from the West. In the post-Yugoslav region, there are numerous examples of people who, throughout the 20th century, lived in a gender role contrary to what was expected. Examples include Serbian World War I hero Stojan Komita, born in 1900, and writer and lawyer Ljuba Prener, born in Slovenia in 1906. Today, many young people are coming out because the conditions for it are more favourable than they were two, three or more decades ago. In the mid-2000s, the same theories about people of homosexual orientation simply following trends were also being touted in our region. Now those theories are being expressed about transgender people, and it is clear that they are being promoted by people who are not at all familiar with the topic.

AN ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENT: Coming out as a transgender person is not easy, mainly due to the high level of discrimination against trans people in all spheres of society. Research shows that manifestation of transphobia is especially pronounced among adolescents. Many trans people are forced to drop out of school or to complete their schooling part-time due to violence from their peers. Social transition is a great challenge for every trans person, precisely because of the fear of rejection by family and friends. Coming out also implies the beginning of life with one’s true gender identity and gender expression, as well as the use of appropriate pronouns and a new chosen name. All of this brings relief for the trans person, but at the same time it can cause a large amount of stress because they have to explain all these changes to other people. These explana-

tions require a lot of emotional investment, and very often end in the other person's refusal to accept what they hear. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that anyone would engage in the whole process of taking on another identity in order to simply follow a trend and risk being rejected by everyone.

ANTI-GENDER ARGUMENT: Anyone can claim to be whatever they feel like.

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COUNTER-ARGUMENT: There is no limit to anyone claiming to be anything. When it comes to discussions about gender and gender expression, it is important to keep in mind that someone's statement in relation to their own gender simply does not concern anyone else and that what is important is that people have the legal possibility for their gender to be recognised, because we live in a society where gender is an extremely important category. When individuals are legally invisible in terms of their gender identity, they face not only discrimination and violence but also barriers to essential rights and services, such as employment, health care, pensions, and international travel. For example, without an ID that aligns with their gender expression, a person presenting as female but holding an ID marked "M" may encounter significant obstacles such as being denied access to their bank account or even being unable to open an account or send and receive mail. Such experiences often lead to intense distress and can result in violence. Having the right to define our own identity is a basic prerequisite for a dignified life, but also for availing ourselves of the rights we need on a daily basis and in everyday situations.

AN ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENT: Isn't it nice to think of a society where we have the freedom to define ourselves rather than having that done by the state, by someone sitting across from us, or a stranger online?

ANTI-GENDER ARGUMENT: Celebrities come out as transgender or non-binary to attract attention and gain publicity.

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COUNTER-ARGUMENT: Visibility of transgender people has been on the rise over the past decade, so it's no surprise that many celebrities now come out and talk about their trans or non-binary identity. In the same way that it used to be unthinkable for athletes in the West to come out as gay whereas in modern times it is much more acceptable and many of them do so, now it is much more acceptable for trans and non-binary people in the world of music and film to come out than it ever has been before. Although the act of coming out brings them media attention, it can actually have a negative impact on their career, and often the publicity brings only harm. The media report on them in a sensationalist manner, often highlighting details that degrade these individuals or present them in a negative light.

AN ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENT: Transgender and non-binary celebrities are exposed to discrimination just as much as non-celebrities and are very familiar with the feeling of loneliness that comes from living in a world that is generally extremely hostile to our community. Some of them decide to make use of their prominent position and come out to spread awareness of transgender issues and the problems that trans people face. Many of us find role models in such celebrities and decide to come out thanks to the example set by such prominent trans and non-binary people.

ANTI-GENDER ARGUMENT: Trans men change their gender due to the inferior position of women in society and their fear of male violence.

COUNTER-ARGUMENT: The experiences and numerous testimonies of publicly outed trans men unequivocally indicate that their entry into social and/or medical and legal transition is motivated solely by the fact that their inner sense of gender identity does not align with the gender assigned to them at birth. For a trans man to be recognised as a man in society, he must undergo a medical and legal transition so that his name and gender designation on identity documents match the male gender with which he identifies. Medical transition involves a minimum of one year of psychiatric evaluation (usually longer), then lifelong hormone therapy, and finally surgical interventions. Legal transition – meaning the updating of personal documents to reflect one’s gender – often requires prior medical transition. For instance, in Serbia completing a legal transition can take at least two years, while in some countries it is either legally unregulated or outright prohibited, making legal transition impossible. The inferior position of women in society is unquestionable, as is the fear of male violence, but this is not enough for any woman to expose herself to such a complicated procedure that would significantly affect her psycho-physical condition thanks to the physical changes caused by hormone therapy and surgical procedures. In addition, social transition and all the challenges and problems it brings should be considered – the most difficult of which are certainly related to transphobia. The social status of transgender people is unenviable, regardless of whether they are trans men or trans women.

AN ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENT: Trans men are exposed to transphobic and often misogynistic attacks and comments no matter what stage of transition they are in. The fear and risk of gender-based violence as well as violence motivated by transphobia are present even after they have gone through all stages of transition. Accordingly, it is clear that trans men in transphobic societies face a large number of problems that women also face, which is another reason for expressing solidarity and mutual support in the fight for the common goal of a society without gender-based discrimination.

ANTI-GENDER ARGUMENT: Trans women in sports are more likely to win because of the “male” puberty they have gone through.

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COUNTER-ARGUMENT: Trans women wishing to participate in women's categories in competitive sports must meet a number of conditions. Those conditions, in addition to going through a medical transition, include correcting testosterone levels. They also require invasive therapeutic treatments that affect a person's psycho-physical condition and make it difficult to train. One of the advantages that trans women supposedly have is the physical characteristics of their body, although not all trans women have the same physical characteristics. In addition, if we look at physical characteristics as an advantage that unfairly brings better results, then this such characteristics should be considered in all sports, regardless of the division into gender categories, as is the case, for example, in boxing, where weight categories have been introduced. However, in many sports there are no such subdivisions with significant differences between male and female competitors, e.g. height in basketball. If we compare the average height and body composition of women from Scandinavia with those from Japan, we notice a significant difference in physical build. However, sports divisions are not organised by geographical or regional differences in physical characteristics. Therefore, divisions in sports are not unambiguously anatomically related to differences between biological sexes; historically, they can be clearly linked to the earliest theories of sex and race present in Europe and the United States.

AN ALTERNATIVE ARGUMENT: As a social institution, sport has a long tradition of discriminating against women. This discrimination ranges from bans from competing at all, through lower salaries, to the inability to hold important positions within sports federations and major sports institutions. We should highlight in particular the historical discrimination against non-white women, who have always been labelled as a threat to women's sports, in a similar way as trans women today. For example, the different physical characteristics of Black women compared to white women from the West is still presented today as an unfair advantage in sports, even though it is clear to everyone that it takes more than physical prowess to perform well in sports. Emphasising physical advantages is just another excuse to discriminate against trans women – an assertion supported by the recent decision of the International Chess Federation to ban trans women from competing in women's tournaments. Banning and excluding trans women from competitions is detrimental to all women because that is based on the idea that the body of a white Western woman is the norm against which we should measure and evaluate who can compete in the women's category. Many famous female competitors lost their medals during the 20th century due to the sex tests they were subjected to. Although the accuracy of the tests was later challenged by science, the careers and lives of those women had already been destroyed.

Identities and Terminology¹⁶

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Gender is a set of physical characteristics on the basis of which society assigns us a single category: male or female. These characteristics are: sex chromosomes, sex glands and hormones, external and internal sex organs, as well as secondary sexual characteristics. Gender is no longer viewed as an immutable, binary category in either medicine or biology. Instead, it is recognised as a spectrum and understood as a social construct.

Traditionally in medicine male sex means XY sex chromosomes, higher testosterone levels, testicles, prostate and penis, as well as a greater degree of hairiness, facial hair, and a “male body type” – narrower hips, wider shoulders, more developed musculature.

Medicine describes female sex as having XX sex chromosomes, higher levels of oestrogen, ovaries, uterus and a vagina, as well as a lower degree of hairiness, lack of facial hair and a “female body type” – wider hips, narrower shoulders, breasts, less developed musculature.

¹⁶ For the purpose of educating institutions and the general public, and in consultation with the transgender and intersex community of Montenegro and the region, the transfeminist organisation Spektra has developed terminology that respectfully and adequately addresses the lives and realities of transgender and intersex people.

Some men have no facial hair or only sparse facial hair, have wider hips and narrower shoulders, more fat, less developed musculature, higher voices, and smaller than normal penises. Some men are born with 45XO, 47XXY, 45X/46XX or 46XY/47 chromosomes. Some have testicles that have developed to varying degrees, with some remnants of ovaries, while some have vaginas. Some people are born with XY chromosomes but their body has a “typical female appearance” from birth.

Men who are born with different variations of the sex characteristics described above are called **intersex men**. Sometimes, doctors decide at the birth that such a baby is of “undefined” sex and think it best to assign them the female sex and therefore perform “sex correction” operations. In many cases, when these babies grow up they realise that they feel like men (often without even knowing what was done to them at birth) and enter the process of gender adjustment.

Some men are born as babies that get described as female and later in life realise that they feel like men. These people are called **trans men**. Some trans men choose to go through the process of gender reassignment; some don’t but choose to live as men without making the physical changes.

Some women have facial hair, narrower hips and wider shoulders, less fat, more developed musculature, deeper voices, and vaginas that look different. Some women are born with 45 XO, 47XXY, 45X/46XX, 46XY/47 chromosomes. Some have ovaries that are developed to varying degrees or have internal testicles, while some have penises. Some women are born with XX chromosomes but from the moment they are born their body has a typical male appearance.

Women who have some of these variations in sex characteristics are called **intersex women**. Sometimes, doctors decide at the birth that such a baby is of “undefined” sex and that it is best to assign them the male sex and therefore perform “sex correction” operations. In many cases, when these babies grow up they realise that they feel like women (often without even knowing what was done to them at birth) and enter the process of gender adjustment.

Some women are born as babies that get described as male and later in life realise that they feel like women. These people are called **trans women**. Some trans women choose to go through the process of gender reassignment; some don’t but choose to live as women, without making the physical changes.

The **gender reassignment** process may include taking hormone therapy or undergoing some of the surgery options (breast removal/breast implantation; reproductive organ removal and/or genital reconstruction – making a vagina or penis). Individuals may choose to undergo all of these things or they may opt to do none of that but simply live in society in accordance with the way they feel. The decision to enter the process of gender reassignment depends on many factors, not exclusively on the person's desire to adapt their body. Sometimes a person decides not to enter the process of gender reassignment because of the high level of violence they have experienced and the fear of intensifying it, or because of their difficult financial situation and fear of becoming unemployed, their inability to access adequate health care, other health reasons, a lack of support in their environment, their fear of further discrimination, or for other reasons. The decision to enter the transition process and any other interventions is a very complex one that depends on the specific circumstances of each individual. Therefore, it is very important for health professionals to cultivate an affirmative approach that takes into account the individual needs of the person and helps them make an informed decision that benefits their health and quality of life.

GENDER IDENTITY is an inner feeling by which a person perceives their gender. It implies one's own sense of identity as masculine, feminine, or some combination of the two.¹⁷ Gender identities can be the same or different from the sex assigned at birth.¹⁸

A person can be born as a female baby and feel like a woman. This person is a **CISGENDER WOMAN**. A person can be born as a male baby and feel like a man. This person is a **CISGENDER MALE**.

¹⁷ Morrow, D. F. , Messinger, L. (2006). *Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression in Social Work Practice*, ISBN 0231501862

¹⁸ Campaign, Human Rights. "Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Definitions".

TRANSGENDER PEOPLE are people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differ from socially conditioned gender norms related to the sex assigned at birth.¹⁹

A person who is born as a female baby but feels like a man is a **TRANS MAN**.

A person who is born as a male baby but feels like a woman is a **TRANS WOMAN**.

A person who is born as a baby of either sex but feels neither male nor female, or who feels both male and female, or defines themselves completely outside of binary (female-male) norms is a **NON-BINARY PERSON**.

INTERSEX PEOPLE are people whose sex characteristics do not belong to a clearly defined male or female category or to both.²⁰

A person who is born as a baby with different sex variations, as described above, and who feels like a woman is an **INTERSEX WOMAN**.

A person who is born as a baby with different sex variations, and who feels like a man is an **INTERSEX MALE**.

A person who is born as a baby with different sex variations, and who feels neither female nor male or both female and male, or who defines themselves completely outside of binary (female or male) norms, is an **INTERSEX NON-BINARY PERSON**.

INTERSEX PERSONS whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned to them at birth are called **INTERSEX TRANS PEOPLE**.

¹⁹ Altilio, T., Otis-Green, S. (2011). *Oxford Textbook of Palliative Social Work*. Oxford University Press. p. 380. ISBN.

²⁰ Ghattas., D.C. (2015): *How to be a great intersex ally: a toolkit for NGOs and decision makers*. ILGA Europe, OII Europe

Thus, an intersex person may be assigned the female sex at birth but their gender is male. Such a person is called an **INTERSEX TRANS MAN**.

On the other hand, an intersex person may be assigned male sex at birth, but the person's gender is female. Such a person is called an **INTERSEX TRANS WOMAN**.

GENDER EXPRESSION is the way we express our gender identities. People of all identities can express themselves in different ways. Some women of any gender identity and/or sex characteristics (cisgender, transgender, intersex) express themselves in a way society perceives as "feminine", some in a way society perceive as "masculine", some mixed, and some depending on their feelings, mood and situation. The same goes for men (cisgender, transgender and intersex).

Whatever gender expression a person has, it does not determine their gender identity or say anything about them as a person.

SEXUALITY is completely separate from gender and gender identity.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION implies emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to one sex/gender, no sex/gender, two or more sexes/genders.²¹

These people can be heterosexual (straight), homosexual (gay/lesbian), bisexual, pansexual or asexual, or not define their sexuality at all.

HETEROSEXUALS feel emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to a gender and/or gender expression other than their own. For example, a woman of any gender identity, gender expression and/or sex characteristics who is attracted to men, be they cisgender, transgender and/or intrasexual, is heterosexual.

²¹ American Psychological Association. *Answers to your questions: For a better understanding of sexual orientation and homosexuality*. Washington, DC: Author, 2008.

HOMOSEXUALS feel emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to the same gender. For example, a man (whether cisgender male, transgender, and/or intersex) who is attracted to men, regardless of their gender identity, gender expression, and/or sexual characteristics, is homosexual.

BISEXUAL PEOPLE feel emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to two genders (male and female). For example, a man (cis, trans, inter) who is attracted to both men (cis, trans, inter) and women (cis, trans, inter) is bisexual.

PANSEXUAL PEOPLE feel emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to multiple genders and/or gender expressions. For example, a woman, man, or non-binary person (of any gender identity, gender expression, and/or sex characteristics) who is attracted to people regardless of gender/gender expression is pansexual.

ASEXUAL PEOPLE may feel emotional and/or romantic attraction to other people, but this attraction is usually not realised through sexual practice.

It is important to bear in mind that a person defines their sexual orientation according to their own perception of themselves and that there is no pattern by which we can assume someone's sexuality. Sexuality encompasses many aspects of life, such as attraction to a person, sexual practices, and one's own sexual identification. Until recently, researchers have focused their research on only one of those aspects or dimensions to make it easier to categorise people. However, this over-simplifies reality. For example, a person can identify as heterosexual, while at the same time testifying to occasional relationships with partners of the same sex/gender.²²

22 Christine E. Kaestle, "Sexual Orientation Trajectories Based on Sexual Attractions, Partners, and Identity: A Longitudinal Investigation From Adolescence Through Young Adulthood Using a U.S. Representative Sample", *The Journal of Sex Research*, 56:7 (2019): 811-826.

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Anti-gender narratives



***Case studies:
Croatia,
Serbia,
and
Montenegro***

INTRODUCTION

The spread of anti-gender narratives is a global phenomenon that has not bypassed the Western Balkans region. Here, in recent years, we have witnessed the first attacks on trans people as well as more frequent and persistent attacks on women and the LGBTIQ+ community as a whole. In addition to the old, established actors, new actors have emerged over the last decade that do not exclusively use the already known anti-gender rhetoric. These newcomers also create new narratives that harmonise with the current economic and political situation and with current social events. What they all have in common, however, is that they create and convey these narratives in a distinctly populist way, trying to present them as a means of defending religion, family and nation. Within the framework of the countries in which they operate, they present themselves as defenders of certain national values and interests, which they always define as their own, using narratives that share exactly the same premises on a global level. Key elements of their views include misogyny, homophobia, transphobia and xenophobia, while forming the core of the anti-gender movement are gender conservatism, anti-feminist beliefs and right-wing values. These are the foundations on which anti-gender actors worldwide build their political strategies and rally mass support.

To illustrate the workings of anti-gender policies and movements in our region, we conducted a survey that includes an analysis of anti-gender narratives in Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro. For each of the three countries, two case studies related to events that have taken place in the last few years were analysed. As part of the research, we identified some of the most vocal actors of the anti-gender movement by country and identified the mechanisms that enable the operation of anti-gender policies and the implementation of campaigns aimed at abolishing the basic human rights for which women and LGBTIQ+ people have been fighting for decades.

Anti-Gender Policies in Croatia 2022–2023

Amir Hodžić & Erin Vlahović

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This paper analyses two examples of the anti-gender movement in Croatia in the last few years. The analyses were carried out by reviewing the available online content and included key actors and events; activities and objectives; strategies and mechanisms of action; characteristics and levels of use of the so-called “gender ideology” discourse; and reactions to these anti-gender narratives and campaigns. The main features of the analysed cases are:

- Causing fear and panic
- Focusing on the issue of gender identity and the principle of self-determination
- Manipulation of the concepts of parental rights and protection of children and families
- Suggestion or intimation of paedophilia
- Greater links to far-right political parties
- Regular use of online resources for activism
- Lack of visible involvement by Catholic Church hierarchies
- Active participation of anti-gender actors from the 2012–13 period

Given the lessons learned, key starting points for future strategic countermeasures to anti-gender policies and actions include:

- Continuous, intersectional work on the protection and monitoring of realised rights
- Securing the support of the wider LGBTIQ+ community, the feminist movement, the media, professionals, and political actors
- Communicating accurate, truthful and scientific data to the public
- Use of EU and international mechanisms to support and create pressure
- Empowering young people and their parents to engage together
- Increasing the media presence of trans, inter, and gender variant (TIRV) persons and activists
- Further education and sensitisation of the public and professionals
- Production and distribution of relevant materials

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Intensification of transphobia in the public and political space in the Republic of Croatia 2022–23: the case of the Zagreb Straight Pride initiative – from a tasteless joke to a political party

Introduction: Alin Kavur, a former child actor in a popular TV series of the 1980s, logged in to Facebook in June 2022 and posted the following comment about the 21st Zagreb Pride March: “I’m really interested in how the Zagreb city authorities would respond if I were to hold the first heterosexual parade on Ban Jelačić Square, displaying a banner reading ‘Smogov loves the vagina’, 1st heterosexual parade Zagreb”.¹ While it was possible to read this comment as a clumsy attempt at a bad joke, three months later, in early September 2022, the Zagreb Straight Pride initiative held a press conference where it presented specific political goals:

¹ „Do you remember Dada from Smogovci? Ovih dana na Facebooku objavljuje status od kojih je nekome slabo”, *Glas Istre*, published on 1 Jun. 2022, <https://www.glasistre.hr/zanimljivosti/sjecate-li-se-dade-iz-smogovaca-ovih-dana-na-facebooku-objavljuje-status-od-kojih-je-nekome-slabo-799804>

The initiative is asking for parental consent to be required for any sex education, whether heterosexual or homosexual, while also calling for laws to prohibit gender transition, puberty blockers and gender reassignment surgery for children under 18 years of age.²

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In addition, the press conference cited an expert meeting held the day before at the University Hospital Centre Zagreb's Clinic for Psychiatry and Psychological Medicine that discussed the issue of the "potential social impact that the increase in the number of transgender children and young adolescents in Croatia could have", a meeting initiated by psychiatrist Herman Vukušić. A year later, in early October 2023, at the first press conference of the newly formed political party Hrvatsko Bilo (Croatian Pulse), Vukušić again informed the public about "the issue of the increase in the number of transgender people among children and young people in the Republic of Croatia". This case study examines the chronology and links between these events by analysing key actors, main themes and discourses, strategies and mechanisms of action, as well as reactions to such anti-gender policies and narratives.

The announced Hetero Pride parade was cancelled a week before it was to have taken place, with the explanation that "due to the large number of citizens who plan to participate, there is a high risk that some groups of people will join our gathering and try to violate public order and peace in various ways", so it was decided that "our activities going forward will consist of forums in cities, while those in Zagreb will be held in closed halls under controlled conditions, without disturbing public order and peace. This will ensure a much higher degree of safety for the participants".³ Nevertheless,

2 "Zagreb Straight Pride protests about transgender people: Žele regulirati dobnu granicu promjene spola", *Danas.hr*, published on 2 Sept. 2022, <https://danas.hr/hrvatska/zagreb-straight-pride-buni-se-zbog-transrodnih-osoba-zele-regulirati-dobnu-granicu-promjene-spola-b1610f5e-2abb-11ed-824d-cabba01c4813>

3 Ivan Jukić, "Otkazana prva hetero parada ponosa u Zagrebu: Sve zbog kršenja javnog reda i mira", *24 sata*, published on 2 Oct. 2022, <https://www.24sata.hr/news/otkazana-prva-hetero-parada-ponosa-u-zagrebu-sve-zbog-kršenja-javnog-reda-i-mira-863902>

the initiative brought together some of the actors who over the next year continued to implement their transphobic agendas along with other strategies of social influence.

Events and Actors

In October 2022, a panel discussion entitled “Let’s Protect Children! Let’s say NO to gender ideology!” was held in which the participants included not only the originator Kavur, but other people who over the next several months tried to garner the votes of the politically far-right part of the population by publicly spreading disparaging and discriminatory views against trans and gender-variant experiences of young people. These were Ljiljana Dragić, president of Hrvatska Mati (Croatian Mother’s Association), an entity listed as the organiser of the planned but never executed Straight Pride parade and founded in December 2021 by part of the leadership team from the Children are the Future initiative to advocate for abolishing the “parent-educator” demographic measure; Darijo Žepina, a former member of the security police and former secretary general of the political party Domovinski Pokret (Homeland Movement); and the aforementioned Herman Vukušić, a psychiatrist who has publicly advocated transphobic views. Then, the following month, there took place a round table discussion entitled “Gender Ideology in Croatia: Myth or Reality?”, at which the aforementioned trio was joined by Željka Markić, president of the association U ime obitelji (In the Name of the Family) and Ivan Mihanović, one of the March for Life coordinators and vice president of the Vigilare association. This event thus connected actors from the newer and older generations of the Croatian anti-gender movement.

These discussions paved the way for one of the key events in the recent creation of a hostile public environment towards trans children and youth: the joint thematic session of the Committee on Health and Social Policy and the Committee on Family, Youth and Sports of the Croatian Parliament on the topic “Increase in the number of transgender children and

young people in the Republic of Croatia: possible causes and clinical consequences”, held in February 2023. The session was organised by Hrvatska Mati, with presentation time allocated to both Vukušić and Markić. Furthermore, in May of that same year, the University of Split’s Catholic Faculty of Theology and the Croatian Catholic Medical Association organised an international scientific conference entitled “Theology and Medicine in the Face of the Challenges of Gender Reassignment”, at which Vukušić participated with a talk on “The reality of gender ideology as a mixture of quasi-scientific ideas aimed at the anthropological annulment of man and woman and their family community, with a brief overview of the history of its occurrence and harmful public health consequences”.

Political Organizing

Parallel to this creation of anti-trans narratives in public, state and academic spaces, the process of consolidation and political organisation of some of the actors of the now somewhat forgotten, but instrumental Zagreb Straight Pride initiative took place. In addition to the aforementioned Hrvatska Mati, the second prong of the new trident of Croatian crusaders against the so-called “gender ideology” is Hrvatski Ratnik (Croatian Warrior Association), founded in March 2022. It grew out of the activities of the civic initiative “Now would be ENOUGH!” and “brings together citizens, families, believers and other communities – all those who promote universal human values of patriotism, faith and family”.⁴ One of the goals of the association is “encouraging and engaging in the development of military education and training of young people in military skills and the art of war”,⁵ and the president of the association is Goran Šebalj, a political activist and Croatian veteran who also announced the establishment of a National Civil Guard:

⁴ „O nama”, *Hrvatski Ratnik*, published on 1 Mar. 2022, <https://hrvatskiratnik.hr/o-nama/>

⁵ „O nama”, *Hrvatski Ratnik*, published on 1 Mar. 2022, <https://hrvatskiratnik.hr/o-nama/>

*There must be something written down so that it doesn't go beyond the framework of the law and it doesn't turn out that I am working on some kind of paramilitary group, but in fact I'm working on a spiritualised army of the Croatian people.*⁶

In January 2023, the association Hrvatsko Bilo was founded, "on the foundations of healthy patriotism". Elected president and deputy president, respectively, were the aforementioned Žepina and Vukušić, who stated one of the association's goals to be "preserving the family as the foundation of society and overcoming the various threats, from material to ideological, that threaten this foundation of every community".⁷ Eight months later, in September, the political party Hrvatsko Bilo held its founding assembly, with the associations Hrvatska Mati, Hrvatski Ratnik and Hrvatsko Bilo serving as its founders. Nada Šikić, a former member of the centre-right party Hrvatska demokratska zajednica (HDZ) and Minister of Labour and the Pension System in the short-lived government of Tihomir Orešković in 2016, was elected president, and Žepina her deputy. While the details of the newly formed party's programme are not yet publicly known, the already mentioned pioneering press conference in October 2023 indicated that one of their focuses will be **attempts to bring about a lower level of wellbeing and health care for trans and gender-variant children and youth**. Thus, it was announced that "as early as next week, they will request a meeting with the Minister of Health and the Minister of Science, with a request that the Republic of Croatia join the advanced circle of developed European countries that, as we have said, prohibit any medical interventions in the gender reassignment procedure for persons under the age of 18".⁸ In addition, *activist initiatives* were mentioned that seek to exclude Vukušić's lecture on the topic "The Rise of Transgender Children and Adolescents in Croatia: Myths and Facts" from the programme of the 18th International Children's Conference. The annual Croatian Psychiatric Days event was held a few days after this press conference.

6 Miroslav Filipović, "Tko su ljudi za koje Plenković tvrdi da ruše vlast: 'Džihadi Marko' je u zatvoru, a u prvom planu tip s ekstremističkom idejom", *Net.hr*, published on 15 Sept. 2022, <https://net.hr/danas/hrvatska/tko-su-ljudi-za-koje-plenkovic-tvrdi-da-bi-nasilno-rusili-vlast-aace5bba-341b-11ed-803a-fe1c58e69b93>

7 "O udruzi", *Hrvatsko Bilo*, published on 21 Jan. 2023, <https://hrvatskobilo.com.hr/o-udruzi/>

8 "Konferencija za medije predstavnika stranke Hrvatsko Bilo", *Hrvatski Ratnik*, published on 8 Oct. 2023, <https://hrvatskiratnik.hr/konferencija-za-medije-predstavnika-stranke-hrvatsko-bilo/>

Discourses against so-called “gender ideology”

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This chronology outlines the process of organising a new Croatian radical right-wing political option that uses as one of its leading narratives the denial of trans life and the experiences of young people, thereby causing moral panic and fear of *the spectre* of the so-called “gender ideology” that lurks for Croatian children and the Croatian heterosexual, patriarchal family. Such a discourse contains topics and arguments that mostly follow the pattern applied by anti-gender actors in the debates around the 2012–14 school-based health education programme. Common elements include highlighting the threat to *Croatia, our children* and the need to protect them, and consequently the protection of *the natural, heterosexual family*, as well as the further operationalisation of the discourse of “child protection” into the suggestion and intimation of paedophilia.

About ten years ago, the anti-gender movement opposed the introduction of the so-called “gender ideology” in Croatian schools. It used this label to mark the content of sex education modules on sex and gender discrimination, masturbation, sexual orientation, child sexual abuse prevention, and pornography, claiming that education on these topics sexualises children and promotes same-sex sexuality. The anti-gender initiatives of the time were called “Don’t touch their childhood!” (2012) and “Don’t touch the children!” (2014), and in their leaflets it was stated that “sex education imposed by the authorities of the Republic of Croatia” in preschool age includes activities such as “educators encouraging children in kindergarten to masturbate in public in a group” and “parents being taught to sexually stimulate their children”, and that the 4th grade of primary school (10–11 year olds) includes a “lecture with a detailed and explicit description of the homosexual act”. Also, the emphasis was on the right of parents to decide on their children’s education (and their upbringing), as well as on invoking the “silent majority” that is under constant pressure from an “aggressive minority” and politicians “indoctrinated by gender ideology”.⁹

9 Amir Hodžić and Aleksandar Štulhofer, “Embryo, teddy bear-centaur and constitution: Mobilizations against ‘gender ideology’ and sexual permissiveness in Croatia,” in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*, edited by Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (London: Rowman&Littlefield, 2017), 59–78.

In this case study, the so-called "gender ideology" is operationalised as a *conspiracy theory*, as a plan of the "transgender lobby" to indoctrinate and confuse Croatian children and encourage the transition process, or as summarised in the *banner* of the heteroprider.hr website: "Let's protect children! Let's say NO to gender ideology." The organisers of the Zagreb Straight Pride initiative explain that "we want our voice to be heard, and to protect our families and children" from "the worrying trend that teaches children from an early age through gender ideology that gender change is a normal phenomenon" and "the worrying increase in children and teenagers who are now confused about their gender, which is a consequence of the influence of the so-called 'gender ideology' on young generations".¹⁰ It further states that "they (left-wing activists) together want to change the roles of men and women, create chaos in society and destroy families as we know them and to which we are accustomed", and that "we are obliged to fight by all means to pass laws that will protect underage children from the bad influences of aggressive activism".¹¹ Psychiatrist Vukušić, who is an expert in the field of "the impact of psychological trauma on the health of veterans and victims of the Homeland War" and stress in the workplace, is even more militant in his approach, stating "when it comes to the protection of children's well-being, I am not only ready to go to court but also to war for the second time".¹²

Anti-gender actors have not only targeted "aggressive lobby associations" and the "extreme left", but have also levied accusations at state structures. These include criticism for publishing over the past ten years a series of documents regulating the process of legal gender recognition in Croatia, and for ratifying in 2018 the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention, which, as they state, "enabled the introduction of gender ideology

10 „Organizatori Zagreb Straight Pridea: Moramo zaštititi djecu od LGBTIQ+ propagande”, *Sloboda.hr*, objavljeno 31.08.2022, <https://www.sloboda.hr/organizatori-zagreb-straight-pridea-moramo-zastititi-djecu-od-lgbtiq-propagande/>

11 „Organizatori Zagreb Straight Pridea: Moramo zaštititi djecu od LGBTIQ+ propaganda”, *Sloboda.hr*, objavljeno 31.08.2022, <https://www.sloboda.hr/organizatori-zagreb-straight-pridea-moramo-zastititi-djecu-od-lgbtiq-propagande/>

12 When Jokić asked Vukušić for a correction, he replied: "Za zaštitu djece spreman sam po drugi puta ići u rat", *Narod.hr*, published on 12 Sept. 2023, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/jokic-od-vukusica-zatrazio-ispravak-on-mu-odgovorio-za-zastitu-djece-spreman-sam-po-drugi-puta-ici-u-rat>

into Croatian laws and institutions"¹³. Also, anti-gender internet portals call out and pick apart those people on the **"List of experts who have experience in working with transsexual people"**,¹⁴ **describing them as "a strong 'transgender' lobby that has taken over Croatian psychiatry"**.¹⁵

In addition, this narrative includes questioning financial interests, stating that "gender ideology today is an entire industry that generates billions of dollars in profits annually in America alone",¹⁶ and asking the question "how much taxpayers' money was spent on the gender transition by the Croatian Health Insurance Fund?".¹⁷ A feature of the transphobic discourse of the recent Croatian anti-gender movement is the invocation of trans-exclusive radical feminist (TERF) and trans-exclusive gay and lesbian organisations, as illustrated by this statement from Vukušić: "The starkest warnings about their harm to young children's minds come from representatives of the LGB population, who see (trans)gender ideology as the Holocaust of the gay population".¹⁸

13 Stjepko Vladić, "RH: Epidemic of 'gender reassignment' among young people: Tko su stručnjaci koji im to omogućuju?", *Narod.hr*, published on 18 Oct. 2022, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/rh-epidemija-promjene-spola-medu-mladima-tko-su-strucnjaci-koji-im-to-omogucuju>

14 Stjepko Vladić, „RH: Epidemija 'promjene spola' među mladima: Tko su stručnjaci koji im to omogućuju?", *Narod.hr*, objavljeno 18.10.2022, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/rh-epidemija-promjene-spola-medu-mladima-tko-su-strucnjaci-koji-im-to-omogucuju>

15 Stjepko Vladić, „Kako je sestra Borisa Jokića stvorila jaki 'transrodni' lobi koji je preuzeo hrvatsku psihijatriju?", *Narod.hr*, objavljeno 04.11.2022, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/kako-je-sestra-borisa-jokica-stvorila-jaki-transrodni-lobi-koji-je-preuzeo-hrvatsku-psihijatriju>

16 „Argumenti: U javnosti postoji određeni zavjet šutnje o rodnoj ideologiji”, *Heteropridehr.com*, objavljeno 15.11.2022, <https://heteropridehr.com/argumenti-u-javnosti-postoji-odredeni-zavjet-sutnje-o-rodnoj-ideologiji/>

17 Stjepko Vladić, „U RH 'lista stručnjaka' koja se nije mijenjala od 2015. traži 'promjenu spola' za stotine djece i mladih”, *Narod.hr*, objavljeno 26.09.2022, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/u-rh-lista-strucnjaka-koja-se-nije-mijenjala-od-2015-trazi-promjenu-spola-za-stotine-djece-i-mladih>

18 „Jokić od Vukušića zatražio ispravak, on mu odgovorio: Za zaštitu djece spreman sam po drugi puta ići u rat”, *Narod.hr*, objavljeno 12.09.2023, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/jokic-od-vukusica-zatrazio-ispravak-on-mu-odgovorio-za-zastitu-djece-spreman-sam-po-drugi-puta-ici-u-rat>

Reactions

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Reactions to the rise of transphobic discourse in Croatia's public sphere began in August 2022, a month before the first press conference of the Zagreb Straight Pride initiative. These reactions were centred on Vukušić's interview in the newspaper *Glas Istre*. The KolekTIRV association and the Our Everyday Sexism initiative filed complaints against Vukušić's transphobic and discriminatory remarks. However, the Ombudswoman for Gender Equality concluded that his views did not constitute discrimination or harassment under the Law on Gender Equality or the Law on Combating Discrimination¹⁹. On the other hand, in the coming months, the **Ombudswoman reacted to the "public stigmatisation of transgender persons and experts dealing with the population mentioned"**,²⁰ cooperated with the KolekTIRV²¹ association, reacted positively to complaints about hate speech in the media coverage of the Narod.hr portal (launched by U ime obitelji) about a transgender Croatian citizen in the case of international adoption of children,²² and participated in the panel discussion on "Homophobia and Transphobia in the Media in Croatia".²³

One of the key stakeholders in this area, KolekTIRV, which advocates for the rights of trans, intersex and gender variant persons, publicly published their mutual correspondence²⁴ as well its reaction

19 Helena Mostarkić Gobbo, „Psihijatar Herman Vukušić za Glas Istre otvorio tabu temu: Možeš ti gay osobu pretvoriti u žensko ili muško, ALI BIOLOGIJU NE MOŽEŠ POBIJEDITI“, *Glas Istre*, objavljeno 06.08.2022, <https://www.glasistre.hr/istra/psihijatar-herman-vukusic-za-glas-istre-otvorio-tabu-teme-811561>

20 „Pravobraniteljica za ravnopravnost spolova: Dr. Vukušić nije diskriminirao kad je rekao 'transrodna žena nije žena'“, *Narod.hr*, objavljeno 14.09.2022, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/pravobraniteljica-za-ravnopravnost-spolova-dr-vukusic-nije-diskriminirao-kad-je-rekao-transrodna-zena-nije-zena>

21 „Pravobraniteljica reagirala na javnu stigmatizaciju transrodnih osoba i stručnjaka koji se bave navedenom populacijom“, *Pravobraniteljica za ravnopravnost spolova*, objavljeno 08.12.2022, <https://www.prs.hr/cms/post/877>

22 „Pravobraniteljica se sastala s predstavnicima/cama udruge kolekTIRV“, *Pravobraniteljica za ravnopravnost spolova*, objavljeno 07.12.2022, <https://www.prs.hr/cms/post/876>

23 „Narod.hr širi transfobni govor mržnje“, *Seksizam.hr*, objavljeno 27.01.2023, <https://seksizam.hr/transfobija/narod-hr-siri-transfobni-govor-mrznje/>

24 „Pravobraniteljica na tribini 'Homofobija i transfobija u medijima u Hrvatskoj', *Pravobraniteljica za ravnopravnost spolova*, objavljeno 29.06.2023, <https://www.prs.hr/cms/post/1018>

to the aforementioned Vukušić interview,²⁵ issued a public reaction to the transphobic media campaign,²⁶ and refused to participate in both the round table organised by the association Hrvatska Mati and the aforementioned thematic session of the Croatian Parliament.²⁷ Through statements to the media, members of left-wing political parties, the Deputy Club of Mogumo, the SDP and the Workers' Front, as well as several experts in trans-specific health care, clearly articulated the social harmfulness of creating moral panic about the experiences of trans and gender-variant children and young people, and the inappropriateness of giving legitimacy to Vukušić and Markić as persons relevant to this topic. Several experts with many years of experience in working with young trans people, such as Marina Grubić and Nataša Jokić Begić, have stressed in statements to the media that **"being transgender is not a disease"**,²⁸ that in their work they adhere to "the guidelines of the World Health Organization and a strict protocol",²⁹ and that **"all research in the world, including ours, systematically shows that in people who have strong gender dysphoria, life improves significantly after the harmonisation of bodily characteristics to gender identity"**.³⁰ In addition, several people from the expert list (Nataša Jokić Begić, Iva Žegura), along with representatives of relevant associations (Rainbow Families, Zagreb Pride) and health institutions (Teaching Institute of Public Health, Dr Andrija Štampar; Psychiatric Clinic, Sveti Ivan) presented at the session of the Health Committee of the City Assembly of the City of Zagreb held

25 „Reakcija udruge KolektIRV na transfobne izjave psihijatra Hermana Vukušića“, *KolektIRV*, objavljeno 08.08.2022, <https://kolektirv.hr/reakcija-udruge-kolektirv-na-transfobne-izjave-psihijatra-hermana-vukusica/>

26 „Elektronska prepiska s dr. Hermanom Vukušićem“, *KolektIRV*, objavljeno 26.09.2022, <https://kolektirv.hr/elektronska-prepiska-s-dr-hermanom-vukusicem/>

27 „Reakcija KolektIRV-a na lažne novinske napise o 587 djece koja su zatražila pomoć zbog spolne orijentacije“, *KolektIRV*, objavljeno 10.11.2022, <https://kolektirv.hr/reakcija-kolektirva-na-novinske-napise-o-587-djece-koja-su-zatrazila-pomoc-zbog-spolne-orijentacije/>

28 „Prekinuta tematska sjednica o trans djeci zbog neutemeljenih tvrdnji“, *KolektIRV*, objavljeno 09.02.2023, <https://kolektirv.hr/prekinuta-tematska-sjednica-o-trans-djeci-zbog-neutemeljenih-tvrdnji/>

29 „Psihologinja Marina Grubić u Nuz: 'Transrodnost je biološki uvjetovana, to nije bolest'“, *Narod.hr*, objavljeno 19.02.2023, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/psihologinja-marina-grubic-u-nuz-transrodnost-je-bioloski-uvjetovana-to-nije-bolest>

30 Ljerka Brattonja Martinović, „Majka transrodnog djeteta: 'Nitko se tako ne osjeća zato jer želi biti cool. Ponosna sam da je moje dijete imalo hrabrosti...'“, *Novi list*, objavljeno 13.02.2023, <https://www.novolist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/majka-transrodnog-djeteta-nitko-se-tako-ne-osjeća-zato-je-želi-biti-cool-ponosna-sam-da-je-moje-dijete-imalo-hrabrosti/>

in May 2023 on the topic "Minority stress among LGBTIQ+ people". In conclusion, the Committee supported the institutionalisation of work on this important public health topic and called on the competent authorities and institutions to start implementing mental health protection programmes for LGBTIQ+ people.³¹

Also, Faktograf, a media outlet specialising in verifying the factual accuracy of claims in the public space (fact-checking), has on two occasions published analyses of the accuracy of data on the number of young transgender people that Vukušić presented at the parliamentary session. Referring to the analyses of the Croatian Institute of Public Health (HZJZ), it was established that the presented figures refer to the number of visits to hospitals ("utilisations based on diagnoses of gender identity disorders") and not to the number of persons diagnosed with "gender identity disorder", and that "the number of services/arrivals being several times the number of patients in hospitals speaks in favour of the fact that our hospital institutions address this issue in a highly professional manner".³²

In addition, the Croatian Institute of Public Health states "that the incidence of this diagnosis in the Republic of Croatia is at least 20–40 times lower than that recorded in the world literature" (total for the population of the Republic of Croatia in 2021: 0.005%; literature: 0.1–2%; total for adolescents in the Republic of Croatia in 2021: 0.015%; literature 0.6–1.7%), and concludes that "all available data indicate a stable situation that does not represent a public health priority in terms of the number of persons", which arises "exclusively from the necessity to protect these persons from any form of stigmatisation".³³ The very slight upward trend (total population: 0.003% in 2017 vs. 0.005% in 2021; adolescents: 0.005% vs. 0.015% in 2021) is explained by "the greater awareness among the general population and health professionals, which has increased recognition", and "the greater availability of health care, and only secondarily (if at all) due to the increase in incidence in the population".

31 Duje Kovačević, „Kako točno ide i koliko je težak proces promjene spola? Za srednja.hr pojašnjava Nataša Jokić Begić”, *Srednja.hr*, objavljeno 11.02.2023, <https://www.srednja.hr/novosti/kako-tocno-ide-i-koliko-je-tezak-proces-promjene-spol-a-za-srednja-hr-pojasnjava-natasa-jokic-begic/>

32 „Manjinski stres kod LGBTIQ+ osoba”, *Gradska skupština Grada Zagreba*, objavljeno 25.05.2023, <https://skupstina.zagreb.hr/manjinski-stres-kod-lgbtqi-osoba/4126>

33 Ana Benačić, „Grafikoni Hermana Vukušića odstupaju od službenih podataka”, *Faktograf*, objavljeno 17.02.2023, <https://faktograf.hr/2023/02/17/grafikoni-hermana-vukusica-odstupaju-od-sluzbenih-podataka/>

However, despite the public refutation of the presented data, Vukušić appeared at the meeting of the working group for the improvement of the existing ordinance with regard to the legal gender recognition process, held in May 2023 at the Ministry of Health, which was also attended by representatives of KolekTIRV and persons from the list of experts. After the meeting, KolekTIRV requested from the Ministry to prevent Vukušić from further involvement in the process, but by the conclusion of this text in November 2023, there has been no response from the Ministry.

As a reaction to the overall "strengthening of transphobia, hate speech, discrimination and violence directed against trans people" in the Republic of Croatia and as a direct response to the anti-gender narrative about the exclusion of the letter "T" by the LGBT community, the 22nd International Conference on Transgender Discrimination was held in June 2023. This included a Pride March by the LGBTIQ+ community and rainbow families under the slogan "Together for trans rights!". The March's proclamation, signed by eight organisations – KolekTIRV, Zagreb Pride, Rainbow Families, K-zone, House of Flamingo, Trans Network Balkan, Ponosni Zagreb and Zbeletron – "clearly and loudly" lists the areas of struggle and advocacy: the right to self-determination of gender; safety and security; family life; access to health care; public and safe spaces.³⁴ In addition to local actors, the European non-governmental organisation Transgender Europe (TGEU) also responded to Vukušić's statements with a letter addressed to the relevant Croatian institutions, in which it warned against the misinformation presented that not only trivialised trans and gender variant experiences but also called for restricting access to trans-specific health care for children and young people.³⁵

34 Ana Benačić, „Ni HZJZ-ova nova analiza ne potvrđuje da mladi masovno žele promijeniti spol“, *FaktoGRAF*, objavljeno 15.09.2023, <https://faktoGRAF.hr/2023/09/15/ni-hzjz-ova-nova-analiza-ne-potvrđuje-da-mladi-masovno-zele-promijeniti-spol/>

35 „Proglas 22. Povorke ponosa LGBTIQ osoba, zajednice i obitelji“, *Zagreb Pride*, objavljeno 29.05.2023, <https://zagreb-pride.net/proglas-22-povorke-ponosa-lgbtiq-osoba-zajednice-i-obitelji/>

Actions and connections

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The infamous joint thematic session of the Parliamentary Committees for Health and Social Policy and for Family, Youth and Sports, held in February 2023, is a good example of the features and mechanisms of action of this wave of the anti-gender movement in Croatia. It was convened at the request of Ljiljana Dragić, president of Hrvatska Mati, who proposed Vukušić and Markić as opening speakers, thus bringing together two generations of Croatian anti-gender actors and underlining the strong links between anti-gender associations and extreme right-wing parliamentary political parties. The request for the session was announced back in September 2022 – during the intensive promotion of Zagreb Straight Pride – in the Velebit Podcast show, in which Dragić and Vukušić talked about the topic "More and more children in Croatia decide to change their gender".³⁶

One of the persons responsible for holding the session was the president of the Committee on Family, Youth and Sports, Vesna Vučemilović, a member of the Eurosceptic party Hrvatski Suverenisti (Croatian Sovereignists), which in 2021 united with the party HRAST-Pokret za Uspješnu Hrvatsku (HRAST-Movement for a Successful Croatia), and whose president, since its founding in 2012, has been Ladislav Ilčić, a champion of the anti-gender movement and active as the president of the association Glas roditelja za djecu (GROZD, the Voice of Parents for Children) in debates about school sex education programmes in the period 2006–2009. Stjepo Bartulica, a sitting member of parliament and international secretary of the party Domovinski Pokret who ten years ago organised a series of public appearances by Judith Reisman, a *controversial* author from the USA, who declared the then health education curriculum "a product of the criminal, homosexual and paedophile efforts by Alfred Kinsey",³⁷ also got his five minutes at the session. A decade later, Hrvatski Suverenisti MP Marko Milanović litre addressed MPs of left-wing political parties with the words "Your gender ideology is based on the paedophile Kinsey",³⁸ while KolektIRV, in reaction to

36 „Podcast Velebit – Vukušić/Dragić: U Hrvatskoj se sve više djece odlučuje na promjenu spola”, *Projekt Velebit*, objavljeno 16.09.2023, <https://projektvelebit.com/podcast-velebit-vukusic-dragic-u-hrvatskoj-se-sve-vise-djece-odlucuje-na-promjenu-spola/>

37 Hodžić, A. i N. Bijelić, *Neokonzervativne prijetnje seksualnim i reproduktivnim pravima u Europskoj uniji* (Zagreb: CESI, 2014).

38 „Zajednička sjednica Odbora za zdravstvo i socijalnu politiku i Odbora za obitelj, mlade i sport”, *Saborska TV – odbori*, objavljeno 09.02.2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPojMkCB4WA>

an interview in Glas Istre, stated that "Vukušić deliberately wants to present to the public the alleged connection between transgender identity and paedophilia".³⁹

In addition to the threat of paedophilia, the systematic manipulation of data has for a decade now been a common element of anti-gender activities. As in 2013, opponents of marriage equality have tirelessly cited the findings of Marko Regnerus's study on the harmful effects of same-sex parenting, despite strong international and local criticism of the validity and credibility of the study.⁴⁰ So in 2023, Vukušić and Markić, despite denials from the Ministry of Health and the Croatian Institute of Public Health, continued to present the "collected findings" on the number of trans and gender-variant children and young people as a priority public health problem in Croatia.

In the current period, in addition to the public forms of action of anti-gender actors, there is also **the notable case of an anonymous letter addressed to parents, which contains false information and disturbing messages about their children's gender identity.** The letter was signed by a "well-meaning parent" who in the postscript provides a dozen links and sources on "victims of gender ideology", one of which reads: "Do a Google search on Dr Miriam Grossman, who reveals what's behind gender dysphoria treatment. Our psychiatrist Dr Vukušić also talks about this problem."⁴¹

In contrast to the active and visible involvement of the hierarchical structures of the Catholic Church in the debates a decade ago about school sex education and the definition of marriage, there is now a noticeable lack of public response from them. In November 2022 –

39 „Reagiranje: Psihijatar Herman Vukušić za Glas Istre otvorio tabu teme: Možeš ti gay osobu pretvoriti u žensko ili muško, ALI BIOLOGIJU NE MOŽEŠ POBIJEDITI“, *Glas Istre*, objavljeno 06.09.2022, <https://www.glasistre.hr/istra/reagiranje-psihijatar-herman-vukusic-za-glas-istre-otvorio-tabu-teme-mozes-ti-gay-osobu-pretvoriti-u-zensko-ili-musko-ali-biologiju-ne-mozes-pobjediti-816674>

40 Amir Hodžić and Aleksandar Štulhofer, "Embryo, teddy bear-centaur and constitution: Mobilizations against 'gender ideology' and sexual permissiveness in Croatia," in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*, edited by Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (London: Rowman&Littlefield, 2017), 59-78.

41 „Anonimno pismo“, *KolekTIRV*, objavljeno 31.10.2023, <https://kolektirv.hr/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Anonimno-pismo.pdf>

at the time of the forums and round tables of the Zagreb Straight Pride initiative – in the show "Arguments" of the Croatian Catholic Radio, Vukušić and his interlocutors answered the questions: "Who promotes gender theory, i.e., ideology and why? Is there actually any difference between sex and gender? Is the voice of the Church heard enough, and what kind of voice is it?"⁴² One of the participants, a catechism teacher from Split, called on the Church to be more engaged in these issues:

Modern society demands that the hierarchical Church descend among the people, and that they recognise the problems of us, laypersons and parents, although this could imply the loss of peace, political stability and relations with politics within Croatia. My expectation is that they share the fate with us and that they expose themselves a little more, even if this exposure may result in the loss of some of the privileges of the Catholic Church tomorrow or in a few years. The Church is also my Church and I am ready to lose privileges because I am not interested in the financial aspects or the connection to politics. This is about my children, about our children.

A month later, in December, the issue of cooperation with the Catholic Church deepened the problems in the Zagreb Straight Pride initiative. While Kavur criticised the church's silence ("You didn't even want to receive me when I asked for help to save our children from the imposition of gender ideology. Why is the Church silent???"⁴³), Dragić and Vukušić responded to his statements that they "completely distance themselves from Mr Kavur because it is extremely inappropriate to send a bad message to the Catholic Church with which communication has been achieved", stating their presence at "a meeting at Kapitol where they had a pleasant, cordial and understanding conversation with representatives of the Catholic Church".⁴⁴

42 „Argumenti: U javnosti postoji određeni zavjet šutnje o rodnoj ideologiji“, *Heteropridehr.com*, objavljeno 15.11.2022, <https://heteropridehr.com/argumenti-u-javnosti-postoji-odredeni-zavjet-sutnje-o-rodnoj-ideologiji/>

43 „Inicijativa Heteropride ograđuje se od ne primjerenih izjava Alina Kavura“, *Heteropridehr.com*, objavljeno 31.12.2022, <https://heteropridehr.com/inicijativa-heteropride-ograduje-se-od-ne-primjerenih-izjava-alina-kavura/>

44 „Inicijativa Heteropride ograđuje se od ne primjerenih izjava Alina Kavura“, *Heteropridehr.com*, objavljeno 31.12.2022, <https://heteropridehr.com/inicijativa-heteropride-ograduje-se-od-ne-primjerenih-izjava-alina-kavura/>

Postscript

According to Kavur, there were disagreements in the Zagreb Straight Pride initiative from the beginning. In a public statement released after the thematic parliamentary session, the initiator accuses Dragić and Vukušić of "taking over the initiative for political purposes".⁴⁵ Kavur gave up the leadership of the initiative after a panel in Osijek held two weeks after the cancellation of Hetero Pride in October 2022, at which Darijo Žepina appeared as a panellist without Kavur's consent. Stating that he was "deceived and used", Kavur also emphasised the role of Danijel Horvatinović, the main coordinator and promoter of Zagreb Straight Pride, who joined the initiative after serving as the coordinator of Domovinski Pokret's election campaign, and who assured Kavur that he was "sure that if the Hetero Parade is held, people will be brought in to incite riots". The involvement of Žepina and Horvatinović shows the direction in which this series of attacks on the trans community will continue to move – attacks that aim to achieve the political goals of the far right through the abuse of children and young people.

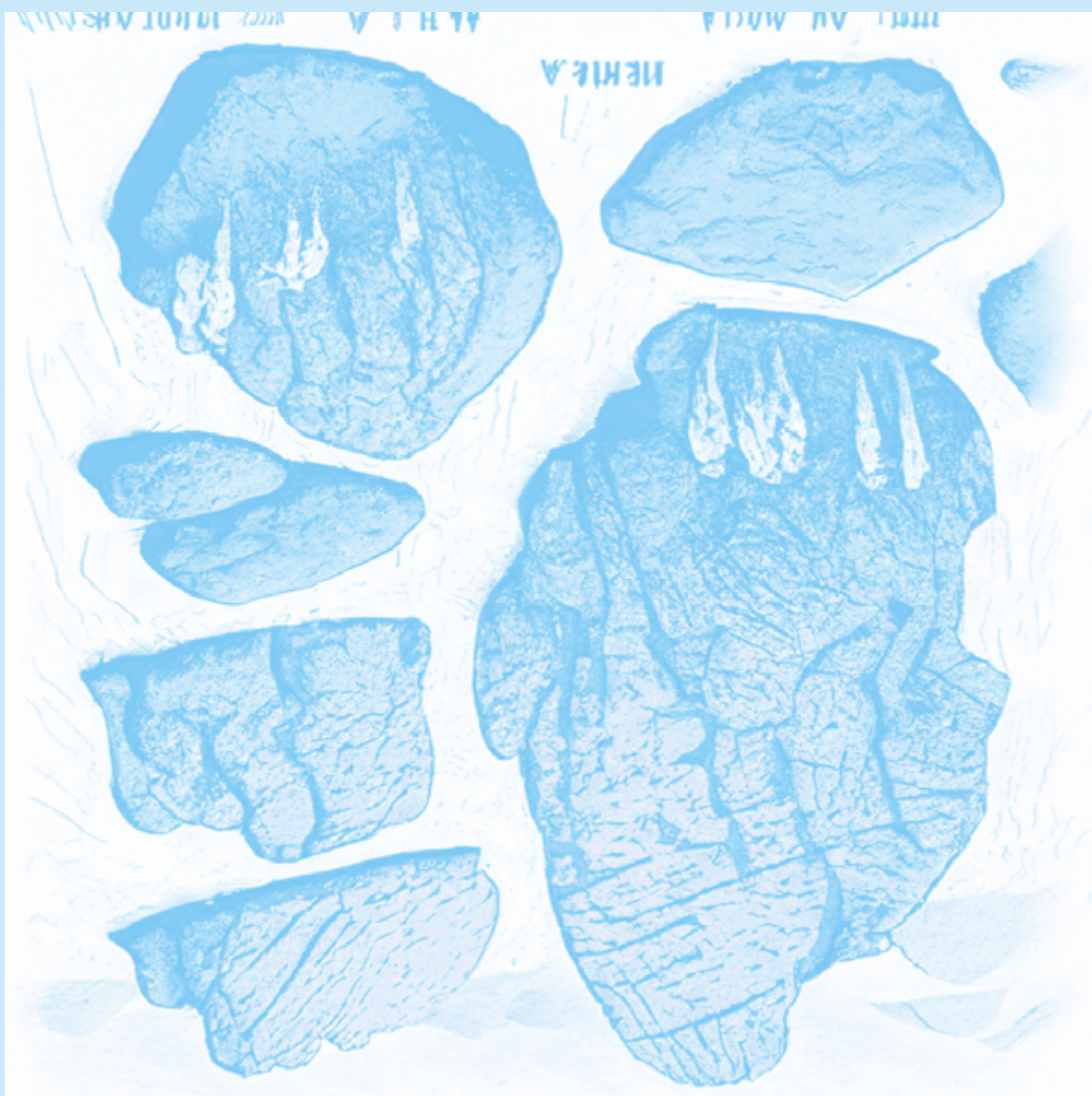
The epilogue of the collapse of the Zagreb Straight Pride initiative took place in March 2023, when Kavur filed a complaint with the Ministry of Finance against Hrvatska Mati, inquiring into what the €7,500 that "should have been donated for humanitarian purposes, primarily for the needs of children" was spent on.⁴⁶

45 Alin Kavur, „Hrvatska – mati ili maćeha?“, *Epoha*, objavljeno 18.02.2023, <https://epoha.com.hr/2023/02/18/hrvatska-mati-ili-maceha/>

46 „Posvajali se organizatori Hetero parade. Dado iz Smogovaca: Gdje su nestali novci?“, *Index.hr*, objavljeno 08.03.2023, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/posvajali-se-organizatori-hetero-parade-dado-iz-smogovaca-gdje-su-nestali-novci/2444556.aspx>

HERIA

11



The case of the "mandatory workbook for parents": a decade of creating fear, panic and hatred

At the beginning of July 2023, the publication "Gender Ideology in Croatian Schools – A Mandatory Workbook for Parents"⁴⁷ by CitizenGO Croatia was published on the portal of the Narod.hr association U ime obitelji, along with which an online petition "Promise to Children: We Will Stop the Spread of Gender Ideology in Schools and Kindergartens"⁴⁸ was launched. These texts are a paradigmatic example of creating and using the narrative of the so-called "gender ideology" in the rhetoric of the anti-gender movement in Croatia and are also a reminder of their ten years of action against gender equality, sexual and reproductive justice and the rights of LGBTIQ+ people. Through an analysis of the "Manual for the Protection of Children from Gender Ideology", this study examines the levels and features of how so-called "gender ideology" discourse has been used in Croatia, the actors involved, their strategies and mechanisms of action, and the reactions to the spread of anti-gender narratives.

47 „Rodna ideologija prodire u hrvatske škole: Što svaki roditelj može napraviti da to spriječi; evo priručnika“, *Narod.hr*, objavljeno 05.07.2023, <https://narod.hr/dom-i-obitelj/rodna-ideologija-prodire-u-hrvatske-skole-sto-svaki-roditelj-moze-napraviti-da-to-sprijeci-evo-prirucnika>

48 „Obećanje djeci: zaustavit ćemo širenje rodne ideologije u školama i vrtićima“, *CitizenGO*, objavljeno 28.06.2023, <https://citizengo.org/hr/fm/211336-obecanje-djeci-zaustavit-cemo-sirenje-rodne-ideologije-u-skolama-i-vrticima>

The field of education, more precisely the inclusion of content on sexuality and gender equality in state school curricula, is high on the agenda of attacks by anti-gender movements, both internationally and in Croatia. Between 2012 and 2013, there was an intensive mobilisation of anti-gender actors against the introduction of a school health education programme, specifically the module entitled "Sex/Gender Equality and Responsible Sexual Behaviour". At that time, the activities were led by the associations Glas roditelja za djecu (GROZD, the Voice of Parents for Children), Vigilare and the Centar za kulturnu obnovu (Centre for Cultural Renewal) and focused on the parents' right to decide how their children are brought up, while claiming that the proposed module represented an attack on traditional Croatian family values. Their activities included street protests and the distribution of emails to the Minister of Education, an open letter to the Prime Minister, and PowerPoint presentations about the "unscientific" nature of sex education to parents and teachers. In addition, they successfully postponed the implementation of the health education programme by filing a complaint with the Constitutional Court, citing procedural formal and legal illegalities (no public hearing was conducted; not all actors were involved in the process; deadlines for the official announcement of the decision on the implementation of the programme were not respected). The Croatian Bishops' Conference also provided support for such activities by distributing an agitator leaflet in churches, shops and kiosks.⁴⁹

In this period, the concept of the so-called "gender ideology" began to be used, appearing in a document by the Croatian Bishops' Conference entitled "As Male and Female He Created Them!".⁵⁰ Here it is described in detail as an "elaborate plan" and a "radical, inhumane revolution". Also, the document emphasises the educational and legal system as instruments for the implementation of the so-called "gender ideology".

About a decade later, at the beginning of October 2023, the CitizenGO Croatia association published posts on its Facebook page in which it shows *the state of war* in the Croatian school system and calls for the mobilisation of parents against the so-called "gender ideology", in this case embodied in the "carefully prescribed and generously financed pattern of globalists and depopulators":

⁴⁹ Amir Hodžić and Aleksandar Štulhofer, "Embryo, teddy bear-centaur and constitution: Mobilizations against 'gender ideology' and sexual permissiveness in Croatia," in *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality*, edited by Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte (London: Rowman&Littlefield, 2017), 59-78.

⁵⁰ „Muško i žensko stvori ih!“, *Informativna katolička agencija*, objavljeno 23.10.2014, <https://ika.hkm.hr/novosti/musko-i-zensko-stvori-ih/>

Education is under siege by gender ideology. Only from May until today, "student associations" have taught about "menstruating people" at the Faculty of Law in Zagreb, and about Kinsey and Money at the Psychology Department in Zadar. Ten days ago, a "masterclass" for parents was held in a high school in Varaždin, and a programme for educators is being implemented in the Prečko kindergarten. None of this happens by chance, but according to a carefully prescribed and generously funded pattern of globalists and depopulators. When it comes to your child's kindergarten/school/college –will you react?⁵¹

We received information that on Friday at the School of Civil Engineering, Natural Sciences and Mining in Varaždin a lecture on "gender identity" was held for students WITHOUT THE KNOWLEDGE OF PARENTS. Can any of the students and/or parents confirm or refute this information first-hand? Feel free to enter your email, with complete confidentiality. Thank you in advance!⁵²

Topics and Arguments

Shortly before, in July 2023, the same actor published a publication that is the focus of this study, the aforementioned workbook (i.e. "vademecum") for "recognising and understanding gender ideology" and "acting in the interest of children and families". In this manual, the concepts of sex and gender are explained by binary and immutable biological categories, and as "interconnected and inseparable (a woman is a woman by sex and gender, a man is a man by sex and gender)". Also, in a similar heteronormative tone, it is stated that "biological and psychological facts are proof that male and female are not stereotypes that need to be removed", and this is so because "the differences between men and women meet in a creative and reproductive potential that cannot be compared to anything."

⁵¹ "Obrazovanje je pod opsadom rodne ideologije", *CitizenGO Hrvatska*, published on 9 Oct. 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/CitizenGOhr/posts/pfbidoYKQZ-JYfQEED2YPyUqybYpZVJMH7gonBnY13dzBwPiDhNw2F8wR4Xcgxjp9A9fNUxl>

⁵² "Dobili smo informaciju", *CitizenGo Hrvatska*, published on 4 Oct. 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/CitizenGOhr/posts/pfbidoddhwxSe5BN4RC6wvBB-ZpRpytxZm4MYCywrUfbN5yVZiUkmj8LidrAwgcszAVZTvjI>

This narrative also denies the principle of self-determination (gender identity) that is presented in this publication as the core of the so-called "gender ideology":

Gender is understood according to subjective criteria and is the basis of gender identity, as opposed to sexual identity.

Gender identity always separates sex from gender and its use implements gender ideology.

The continuation of the argumentation points to the real aim of such anti-gender narratives – to influence the adopted anti-discrimination legislation:

This concept [gender identity] is skilfully promoted and squeezed through non-discriminatory provisions, but non-discriminatory provisions already prohibit discrimination on any possible grounds, and it is reasonable to doubt the benevolence of the use of this term within these provisions.

In the chapter entitled "What does science say?", the approach of the CitizenGO team of authors is radicalised, for instance, the World Health Organization is declared a "political, not a scientific institution", and the 2010 publication "Standards of Sex Education in Europe" (also available in the Croatian version)⁵³ is said to "lack theoretical scientific foundations". As a central reference that supports their claim, they cite an Italian publication from 2015 entitled "Born Free", with the subtitle "Family and School – Sex Education without Gender Theory". It is authored by Tonino Cantelmi, a psychiatrist and psychotherapist who serves as president of the Italian Association of Catholic Psychologists and Psychiatrists.

They also look for legitimacy for their persistent denial of the concept of gender identity in legislative terminology, referring to the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, which "recognises sexual and not gender identity because it explicitly states that gender equality is one of the highest values of the constitutional order of the Republic of Croatia (Article 3)" and thus serves as a basis for interpreting the Constitution. They go on to say that the Constitution mentions gender in two other cases (Article 14 and Article 17), arguing that this means that "it is clear that the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, when referring to human identity, determines it on the basis of gender identity". However, immediately after such loose argumentation, the text provides a list of thirteen Croatian laws and bylaws in which gender identity is mentioned and thus *effectively contradicts itself*.

In the next chapter "How can gender theory be presented in schools?", the concept of so-called "gender ideology" is operationalised as an *omnipresent threat* that lurks for Croatian children at school desks, from kindergarten to university. Thus, as "items that parents should pay attention to and the content of which they should always be informed", the following are listed: required reading list; fairy tales, stories and plays in kindergartens; school curriculum; field work, especially performances or cinema screenings; and integrative projects. Following the instructions given, members of the political party Domovinski Pokret (Homeland Movement) held, in September 2023

53 "Standardi spolnog odgoja u Europi", Agencija za odgoj i obrazovanje, published on 1 Jan. 2013, <https://www.azoo.hr/app/uploads/uvezeno/datoteke/standardi-spolnog-odgoja-1536878938.pdf>

in the Croatian Parliament, a media conference on the topic of "abuse of education for ideological purposes". Stjepo Bartulica, a Member of Parliament and a long-time anti-gender activist, thus warned about the issue of reading list content:

It is clear to everyone that there is an agenda that is imposed from abroad and that wants to indoctrinate our children, it is about gender ideology. Such unnatural and anti-human ideas cannot spread in society without instilling these ideas in young children.

I would say that this is a form of child abuse because if such content is presented to them too early, anxiety and various other disorders can occur.⁵⁴

I believe that parents should have the final say on what happens to their children, as certain things are often organised in both primary and secondary schools without parents' knowledge. Both personally and as part of the Homeland Movement, I will continue to raise awareness about these harmful phenomena.⁵⁵

His party colleague, County Councillor Ivica Kukavica, also reported on the actions already taken:

We have given recommendations to primary and secondary schools in Split-Dalmatia County not to use these materials that are in circulation. We cannot prohibit it, only the Parliament of the Republic of Croatia can do that, but I am proud of the fact that we raised this topic and sent information about our conclusion to the Education and Teacher Training Agency.⁵⁶

54 "Bartulica: Učenici u školama indoktriniraju se rodnom ideologijom", *Tportal*, published on 26 Sept. 2023, <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/bartulica-ucenici-u-skolama-indoktriniraju-se-rodnom-ideologijom-foto-20230926>

55 Marko Vidukić, "Rodna ideologija u školama: Bartulica: Lektira s eksplisnim sadržajima je zlostavljanje djece", *Fenix magazin*, published on 26 Sept. 2023, <https://fenix-magazin.de/rodna-ideologija-u-skolama-bartulica-lektira-s-eksplisnim-sadrzajima-je-zlostavljanje-djece/>

56 Marko Vidukić, "Rodna ideologija u školama: Bartulica: Lektira s eksplisnim sadržajima je zlostavljanje djece", *Fenix magazin*, published on 26 Sept. 2023, <https://fenix-magazin.de/rodna-ideologija-u-skolama-bartulica-lektira-s-eksplisnim-sadrzajima-je-zlostavljanje-djece/>

In the analysed workbook, special attention is drawn to programmes and projects whose content/aim is: deconstruction of gender stereotypes; education on gender equality; education on the acceptance of diversity; health education; the fight against homophobia; fight against addiction; education on the proper use of the internet; as well as the fight against the exploitation and abuse of minors. In addition, through the attached Request for Preventive Information Consent form, parents are encouraged to request detailed information about programmes, activities and projects related to "human sexuality and interpersonal relationships; campaign against violence and discrimination; gender equality; and questions of religious and philosophical beliefs."

At the end of this chapter on "ways of presenting gender theory in schools", a question arises, seemingly out of context, but which points to another of the political directions of the anti-gender agenda – influencing the availability of trans-specific health care for children and young people:

Did you know that since 2014, a bylaw in Croatia has enabled underage children to change their gender identity (without surgery and hormonal therapy)? This is made possible by the Ordinance on the Manner of Collecting Medical Documentation and Determining the Conditions and Prerequisites for Gender Change or Living in a Different Gender Identity (Official Gazette 132/2014).

The last few chapters of this "tool for the protection of children in the education system and other spheres of society" refer to the question "How to act?". The proposed strategies include networking of parents and teaching staff through the "School-Parent Alliance", which is accompanied by an appropriate letter requesting preventive information on "any project in which personal and intimate topics such as sexuality and affectivity are elaborated". Also, it is suggested to establish Regional Parents' Councils, which would operate in each school through the Teachers' Council and the Parents' Council.

The Parents' Council is one

of the frequently used means by which anti-gender actors try to expand their influence within the state educational system.⁵⁷

In addition, an elaborate plan "What to do when a project promoting gender ideology is implemented in school" was offered, which includes the following steps:

- Protocoling of informed consent
- Logging requests for information
- Notifying other parents
- Requesting a meeting with the institution/association that is the project holder and teachers/professors in order to express doubts
- Requesting to suspend the implementation of the project or withdrawing one's own children from participation
- Forwarding protocol requests to the competent offices for education

⁵⁷ "Roditelji odlučuju o odgoju svoje djece", *U ime obitelji*, published on 1 Dec. 2015, <https://uimeobitelji.net/vijece-roditelja/>

Actors and Actions

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The news about the publication of this workbook, produced by Ana Marija Marković and the CitizenGO team, was published on the Narod.hr portal, launched in 2014 by the association U ime obitelji (In the Name of the Family). This association was founded on the activities of the initiative of the same name, which in 2013 organised a referendum through which a provision on marital inequality was included in the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia. Since then, the cooperation between CitizenGO and U ime obitelji has also continued, which was confirmed in 2021 when Wikileaks published about ten thousand documents from the Spanish organisations CitizenGO and HazteOir. The published materials also show their international financial transactions, including a series of payments to the association U ime obitelji, including the amount of USD 17,675 intended for the "campaign" in Croatia in June 2013, six months before the referendum on marital inequality.⁵⁸

CLaunched in 2013 and based in Spain, CitizenGO is a petition platform for advocating for fundamentalist political goals. Today it operates in eleven languages and in about 50 countries around the world. It presents itself as a global community of active citizens who defend and promote *life* (from conception to natural death), *family* (exclusively heterosexual, with a man/father as the main member) and (religious) *freedom* (including the right to conscientious objection) through online petitions and actions. CitizenGO is also a political instrument that brings together many of the main actors of the anti-gender agenda in the EU and centres advocacy actions against LGBTI rights, sexual and reproductive justice, and gender equality. Thus, for example, in the period 2013–14, they organised pressure campaigns against the adoption

58 Ilko Čimić, "WikiLeaks: Španjolski desničari davali novac udruzi Željke Markić i njenim ljudima", *Index.hr*, published on 11 Aug. 2021, <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/wikileaks-spanjolski-desnicari-davali-novac-udruzi-zeljke-markic-i-njenim-ljudima/2296590.aspx>

of three reports in the European Parliament,⁵⁹ mobilising citizens to send tens of thousands of emails to MEPs.⁶⁰

In July 2023, upon marking the tenth anniversary of the organisation, the Facebook page CitizenGO Croatia, led by Ana Marija Marković, a former volunteer of the initiative U ime obitelji, states that, among other things, in Croatia they "pointed out the illegal support of the Constitutional Court in the adoption of children by homosexual partners" and "prepared content to inform and help parents in the fight against gender ideology".⁶¹ In addition, CitizenGO Croatia has launched a series of petitions against the so-called "gender ideology" and "LGBTIQ+ propaganda", so in the last few years their targets have been advertising campaigns by Erste Bank and Cokta; screening of the animated series "Sassy Girls" and the implementation of the programme "Project Two" on Croatian Radio and Television; and an education programme on gender equality and gender stereotypes for preschool and primary school educators implemented by the Status M association. Also, petitions directed at international companies, such as LEGO, Mattel, Disney, DC Comics and Netflix,⁶² were distributed.

The aforementioned petition "Promise to Children" was launched in late June 2023 to announce the workbook's publication and was sent directly to parents. The **text evokes fear and panic** ("Our children are in danger, and our family is under attack! This is not just a nightmare, but a reality that is knocking on Croatia's door as well! Don't wait a minute! Act now!"), called for "the fight for the protection of children and the rights of parents", and presented concrete activities "to make a wave of change and stop the covert spread of gender ideology in the

59 Izvještaj o seksualnom i reproduktivnom zdravlju i pravima (izvještaj Estrela); Izvještaj o EU putokazima za suzbijanju homofobije i diskriminacije na temelju seksualne orijentacije i rodnog identiteta (izvještaj Lunacek); Ravnopravnost muškaraca i žena u EU-2012 (izvještaj Zuber).

60 Hodžić, A. i N. Bijelić, *Neokonzervativne prijetnje seksualnim i reproduktivnim pravima u Europskoj uniji* (Zagreb: CESI, 2014).

61 "CitizenGo slavi 10 godina rada!", *CitizenGO Hrvatska*, published on 29 Jul. 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/CitizenGOhr/posts/pfbidoLykBo2Czx1BQYaYBQy-H8UQKu12cgCj7peFKtKYcFNXqrd9MWDGNZrezykvPB3V6l>

62 "Peticije pod temom Obitelj i školovanje", *CitizenGO*, published on 17 Dec. 2014, <https://citizengo.org/hr/t/fm>

education system, to which we entrust our children", among which included:

Inform parents, schools and kindergartens about the harmful consequences of gender ideology on children and families.

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Support parents in the fight for their right to raise their children in accordance with their own beliefs.

Provide a specific request form by which you can ask kindergartens and schools to immediately suspend the exposure of your children to ideological content without your explicit consent.

Reactions

As the publication of the workbook has gone under the radar of internet portals and civil society organisations, it is necessary to mention the recent reactions of state institutions to media publications by anti-gender actors. In December 2022, the Ombudswoman for Gender Equality sent recommendations to the Narod.hr portal in response to complaints received about published texts that "put the transgender population, as well as professionals who work with them, at a disadvantage" and "further stigmatise them".⁶³ Furthermore, in February 2023, the Ombudswoman and the Centre for Civic Initiatives in Poreč reported the same portal to the Agency for Electronic Media for "expressing homophobic and transphobic attitudes and inciting and spreading hatred and discrimination" during media coverage of Croatian citizens in Zambia.⁶⁴ However, the following month, the Council for Electronic Media, the governing body of the same Agency, awarded €3,450 to the association U ime obitelji for the project "Epidemic of Transsexualism in Croatia and the World" in the category "Encouraging the

63 "UiO: Pravobraniteljica Ljubičić zbog 'transrodnih' osoba vrši pritisak na Narod.hr i izlazi iz svoje nadležnosti", *Narod.hr*, published on 13 Feb. 2023, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/uio-pravobraniteljica-ljubicic-zbog-transrodnih-osoba-vrsi-pritisak-na-narod-hr-i-izlazi-iz-svoje-nadleznosti>

64 Vlatka Polšak Palatinuš, "Pokušaj cenzure: Pravobraniteljica Ljubičić prijavljuje Narod.hr zbog izvještavanja o trans-vijećniku Možemo u Zambiji", *Narod.hr*, published on 25 Feb. 2023, <https://narod.hr/hrvatska/pravobraniteljica-ljubicic-prijavljuje-narod-hr-zbog-izvjestavanja-o-trans-vijecniku-mozemo-u-zambiji>

development of awareness of gender equality and other highest values of the constitutional order".⁶⁵ In addition, the Council rejected the aforementioned charges for transphobia and hate speech and decided that only one text, by publishing the names of the children from the Zambia case, violated the Ordinance on the Protection of Minors in Electronic Media and the Code of Honour of Croatian Journalists. For this violation, the Narod.hr portal was given a warning but was not reprimanded, a measure that would have prevented it from receiving the next two-year funding from the Council.⁶⁶

A decade of anti-gender campaigns: The example of Vigilare

While the Council for Electronic Media did not react to the transphobic content published on the portal of the association U ime obitelji, the Zagreb County Court, also in March 2023, ruled on the basis of a lawsuit filed by the Rainbow Families association that the Vigilare association "discriminated, encouraged discrimination and harassed LGBTIQ+ people and their families" by launching the petition "Let's Protect Children from Homo Adoption" and publishing accompanying texts.⁶⁷ The Vigilare association, founded in 2008 and led by Vic Batarella, has been active since the very beginning of more organised anti-gender activities in Croatia in 2012, when they launched the initiative "I ja sam bio embrij" (I Was an Embryo, Too) aimed at challenging the Law on Medically Assisted Reproduction. Also, in addition to the above-mentioned, court-prosecuted petition, they organised other email protest actions similar to those carried out by CitizenGO, with an additional emphasis on religious freedom and traditional Catholic values. This discursive orientation is related to the fact that at the same address where the Vigilare association is registered, there is also the headquarters of the Vigi-

65 Andrej Dimitrijević, "Ovako se dijeli javni novac: Vijeće za elektroničke medije dalo 10.845 eura udruzi 'U ime obitelji' za poticanje ravnopravnosti spolova", *Telegram*, published on 9 Mar. 2023, <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/ovako-se-dijeli-javni-novac-vijece-za-elektronicke-medije-dalo-10-845-eura-udruzi-u-ime-obitelji-za-poticanje-ravnopravnosti-spolova/>

66 Hrvoje Šimičević, "Kako žica Narod", *Novosti*, published on 16 Apr. 2023, <https://www.portalnovosti.com/kako-zica-narod>

67 "Presuda u slučaju Dugine obitelji protiv Vigilare", *Vigilare*, published on 20 Mar. 2023, <https://vigilare.info/mi/2023/03/presuda-u-slucaju-dugine-obitelji-protiv-vigilare/>

lare Foundation, which is part of the far-right Catholic international movement of political and civic organisations called "Society for the Defence of Tradition, Family and Property (TFP)".

Consistent with previous years, they participated in all the attacks on the goals of the anti-gender movement (health education, Istanbul Convention, availability of abortion), so, during the current period, they are joining initiatives against the current focuses in the corpus of the so-called "gender ideology". In November 2022, they participated in a round table organised by the Zagreb Straight Pride initiative and Hrvatska Mati (Croatian Mother's Association), and published the text entitled "Transgender ideology is taking on terrifying forms in Croatia as well",⁶⁸ in which, citing the statements of a psychiatrist named Herman Vukušić, they stated that "gender madness is obviously coming to Croatia in a big way", and that it was "social engineering, i.e. about gender ideology. The basis of gender ideology is the claim that sex is biologically constructed, and gender is a sociocultural category". This narrative goes on to explain that "the real goal of gender ideology is the dismantling of feminine and masculine specificity", and in particular "the role of women as mother and wife", while the ultimate goal is "the destruction of the family".

Vigilare has also been adhering to guidelines from the CitizenGO workbook. In June 2023, it reported that one primary school is "intensively implementing gender ideology".⁶⁹ The text denounces and condemns the content published on the old, but still publicly available school website under the title "Sexual and Gender Equality" and invites you to contact the principal and the school secretary with the publication of their phone numbers. In addition, "library employees are warned to be vigilant when purchasing reading materials and other resources, and to be vigilant that students do not steal a book or picture book from the library's collection, i.e. of the culture of death".

68 Davor Dijanović, "Transrodna ideologija i u Hrvatskoj poprima zastrašujuće oblike", *Vigilare*, published on 17 Nov. 2022, <https://vigilare.info/istaknuto/2022/11/transrodna-ideologija-kuca-i-na-hrvatska-vrata/>

69 "Škola u Dugoj Resi intenzivno provodi rodnu ideologiju. Pišite ravnateljici!", *Vigilare*, published on 20 Jun. 2023, <https://vigilare.info/oni/2023/06/skola-u-dugoj-resi-intenzivno-provodi-rodnu-ideologiju-pisite-ravnateljici/>

A week later, Vigilare.info also published an article entitled "Genderist Indoctrination of Children: New Perversion in Croatian Kindergartens",⁷⁰ calling out an educational programme by the Status M association, including the animated series "Insolent Girls", ("in which transgender identity, abortion, contraception and sodomy are promoted"), which has also been targeted by CitizenGO petitions. In only a few sentences, the text summarises some of the narrative used by Croatian anti-gender actors, specifically the part about political structures being "indoctrinated with gender ideology":

During the reign of the "Kukuriku" coalition, the contours of the so-called perverse sex education, penned by the followers of the paedophile Alfred Kinsey, were made, and in the last mandate was adopted in the Parliament as the Istanbul Convention.

The new perversion is becoming mainstream in Croatian society, and by accepting and promoting it the servile political elites are raising a monument to their own *progress* before Brussels.

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⁷⁰ Davor Dijanović, "Genderistička indoktrinacija djece: Novo perverzno i u hrvatskim vrtićima", *Vigilare*, objavljeno 26 Jun. 2023, <https://vigilare.info/istaknuto/2023/06/genderisticka-indoktrinacija-djece-novo-perverzno-i-u-hrvatskim-vrticima/>

Identifying mechanisms for understanding the survival and development of anti-gender policies in the Republic of Serbia: the case of introducing gender-sensitive language (2018—2023) and the case of textbook censorship (2021—2022)

Dragana Stojanović
& Aleksa Milanović

Introductory orientations: anti-gender politics at the intersection of continuity and new articulations

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Although it is a term that, judging by its presence in public discourse and the media, didn't come into use until relatively recently in the Republic of Serbia,⁷¹ anti-gender policies have had a long, continuous existence that primarily includes resistance to anti-discriminatory and inclusive practices on the part of patriarchal institutions, individuals and social groups. In patriarchal societies, anti-gender policies are present continuously and exist alongside the development of feminism and gender-sensitive movements,⁷² and the Republic of Serbia is no exception in this regard. In this context, feminist arguments are often referred to as intrusive and violent in relation to issues of history and tradition as well as to the right-wing template of national or gender identity, and the actors of inclusive policies are discredited either by public figures or by entire institutions (political, educational, health, religious). Attempts at such discrediting particularly affect women, as well as persons with minority gender or sexual identities, and to a lesser degree also other actors that patriarchal representatives see as posing a particular political threat – such as non-governmental organisations, regional or transregional media networks, and liberal-oriented political parties and individuals.

In the modern sense of the term, anti-gender policies and movements can be traced back to the beginning of the 2000s. They arose, on the one hand, due to the collapse of decades-long power relations in the wider area of Europe and the rest of the world

⁷¹ In the last two years, it has been present through the terms "gender ideology" or "imposition of violence", especially when it comes to changes related to the introduction of gender-sensitive language or to a non-exclusive, inclusive understanding of the complexity of the concept of gender and sexuality (see, for example, the article entitled "Patriarch Porfirije on the Law on Gender Equality: The Violent Application of Gender Ideology", *Glas Javnosti/Public Voice* dated 27 Jun. 2023, <https://www.glas-javnosti.rs/vesti/drustvo/patrijarh-porfirije-o-zakonu-o-rodnoj-ravnopravnosti-nasilna-primena-dzender-ideologije>, 9 Nov. 2023).

⁷² Elizabeth S. Corredor, "Unpacking 'Gender Ideology' and the Global Right's Antigender Countermovement", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2019.

and to the creation of new political orders in the restructured countries after the Cold War, and on the other hand, due to the emergence of a new generation whose actions are becoming more visible than ever thanks to digital spaces and social networks. Democratisation of the media in the form of the multiplication of different voices in the public space through social networks and various portals will prove to be a double-edged sword – because, while such democratisation may guarantee greater visibility of inclusive policies and of the general diversity of the population, it encourages popularity contests, but also rough manoeuvring by the political right, populism and media violence towards everything seen as self-initiated, new or being in favour of freedom of gender and physical expression.⁷³ In such an arena of intensive distribution and redistribution of social and political power, which often succumbs to the trap of polarisation, there are worrying moves by individuals, organised movements and institutional systems that mobilise a certain number of actors (on both the right and left political spectrums) to promote the ideas of anti-gender movements.

The first aim of this analysis is to identify, name and understand the mechanisms of contemporary anti-gender policies in the Republic of Serbia, and identify key actors that contribute to their survival and development. The second aim is to examine, through specific case studies,⁷⁴ whether there are actors who actively call for the deconstruction of ideas mediated by gender policies, shedding light on possible strategies of action that would reduce the harmful impact of anti-gender policies on the individual and society. Finally, this analysis aims to explain the beneficial impact that a deconstruction of anti-gender policies would have upon society, leading to a more focused, productive, dialogue-oriented civil society in which fear and polarisation would not be the predominant motivation for action.

⁷³ *Impact of Anti-Gender Opposition on TGD and LGBTQI Movements: Global Report*, GATE, New York, 2023.

⁷⁴ Two closely related case studies were examined, one of which refers to the introduction of gender-sensitive language into the legal framework of the Republic of Serbia, while the other case study deals with the withdrawal of a gender-sensitive approach to knowledge in primary school textbooks – primarily in the field of biology.

Mapping the framework of activity: anti-gender policies and their social carriers

Patriarchal resistance to changes in established frameworks and norms can be traced through a gradual or sudden increase in misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, or pressure on physical, sexual or reproductive rights. This pressure is most often directed at women's bodies, or at bodies with minority gender and sexual identities. These demonstrations reveal the structural violence of patriarchy, the deep-rooted objectification of all those individuals whose bodies do not bear cisheterosexual masculine identity characteristics and activities.

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Also, in an attempt to justify repressive actions, which can range from public appearances by individuals and institutions to participation in the adoption or withdrawal of

unwanted legislation, the patriarchal system often invokes the revitalisation of hyper-nationalist agendas and authoritarianism in relation to the body and micro-institutional units such as the family or the community.

It is important to note that this type of patriarchal action does not represent simple, easily measurable or predictable reactions to the implementation of feminist and other inclusive activist initiatives, but rather a complex set of proactive policies that move different social units to action, often using arguments aimed at constructing an atmosphere of civic intimidation, general insecurity and

a sense of general crisis. Of course, this crisis is only partially based on concrete social and broader political dynamics and relies primarily on rhetorical interventions that lead the citizenry to construct and "recognise" the enemy and to create the division between "ours" and "others" (whereby the West is usually labelled as "foreign" in the context of Serbia), but also on the production of consent to the competitive polarisation arena in which there is an illusion that there are only two options – "our" right and "someone else's" wrong. These entire interventions take place predominantly through the media sphere,⁷⁵ and for this reason they provide the basis for the selected case studies in this analysis. All the actions of the actors of anti-gender patriarchal policies mentioned so far are also present in the case studies employed in this analysis, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections. In their study, Edström, Khan, Greig and Skinner (2023) state that this kind of anti-gender discourse is most often coloured by the effects of nostalgia, nihilism and the local/global dichotomy, and that the elements of the body, family and nation are introduced as places of homogenisation, differentiation (we vs. them) and exclusion, which represents a significant abuse of the given concepts that somehow have a material repercussion in the real political and social consequences.⁷⁶ In addition, this discourse shows weaknesses in the form of noticeable contradictions: for instance, gender is seemingly depoliticised, while at the same time it is politicised for the needs of the patriarchal construction of reality. Also, the seemingly anti-global movement is actually being networked and supported by other, similar anti-gender initiatives in the wider region, as well as in Europe and the wider world. These contradictions contain the fundamental weakness of anti-gender movements, as well as the possibility of devising strategies that will point out the inconsistencies of such naturalisation, essentialisation and repressive narratives. Selected case studies in the Republic of Serbia indicate the presence of such tendencies and aim to recognise these mechanisms, as well as to subject them to problematisation and deconstruction.

⁷⁵ At this point, it is useful to compare the conclusions made by Noam Chomsky on the social influence exerted by the dominant media. Noam Chomsky, "Šta čini dominantne medije dominantnim", *Europski glasnik*, Hrvatsko Društvo pisaca, Zagreb, br. 10/2005, 199–207.

⁷⁶ Jerker Edström, Ayesha Khan, Alan Greig, Chloe Skinner, "Grasping Patriarchal Backlash: A brief for smarter countermoves", *Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice*, Issue 1, Jan. 2023, 1–6.

CASE STUDY 1:

Introduction of gender-sensitive language into the legal framework of the Republic of Serbia

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The term *gender-sensitive language* was formally introduced with the adoption of the Law on Gender Equality (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 52/2021). As stated in Article 1 of the Law, "This Law regulates the concept, meaning and policy measures for the achievement and promotion of gender equality, the types of planning acts in the field of gender equality, and the manner of reporting on their implementation, the institutional framework for the achievement of gender equality, the supervision of the implementation of the law and other issues of importance for the achievement and promotion of gender equality." The law therefore deals with a number of issues of importance for achieving and maintaining gender equality, and gender-sensitive language is only one part of it. Specifically, gender-sensitive language appears in Article 6 – *Terms*, in paragraph 17 (out of a total of 25) and is defined as follows: "Gender-sensitive language is a language that promotes equality between women and men and a means of influencing the consciousness of those who use that language in the direction of achieving equality, including changes in opinions, attitudes and behaviour within the language they use in their personal and professional lives." Gender-sensitive language continues to appear consistently throughout the law: in Article 25, which envisages the monitoring, planning, implementation and publication of the results of equal opportunities policies, then in Article 37, which regulates the field of education, upbringing, science and technological development,⁷⁷ and in Article 44, within the definition of gender equality in the field of public information.⁷⁸ The term gender-sensitive language is mentioned in the Law on Gender Equality

77 Article 37, para. 3 of the Law on Gender Equality: "the use of gender-sensitive language, i.e., language that is in accordance with grammatical gender, in textbooks and teaching materials, as well as in certificates, diplomas, classifications, titles, professions and licenses, as well as in other forms of educational work."

78 Article 33 of the Law on Gender Equality: "The media is obliged to use gender-sensitive language in reporting and contribute to the suppression of gender stereotypes, social and cultural patterns, customs and practices based on gender stereotypes, discrimination on the basis of sex, i.e. gender and other personal characteristics, as well as gender-based violence, domestic violence and violence against women by developing awareness of the importance of gender equality."

a total of five times, concluding with Article 73 – Harmonisation and Adoption of Acts, stating: "Application of gender-sensitive language referred to in Article 37, paragraph 1, item 4), subitem (3) and in Article 44, paragraph 3 of this Law shall enter into force three years after the adoption of this Law". Gender-sensitive language is therefore defined by law as an important tool for promoting gender equality, whereby the link between the language of use and cultural, social and individual beliefs is underscored, fully congruent with the findings of numerous theoretical and empirical research studies in the field of social sciences and humanities since the mid-twentieth century (especially poststructuralist linguistic studies based on interdisciplinary studies intertwined with cultural studies). The law delineates education, upbringing, science and technological development, as well as the media, as institutions of key importance for monitoring the development of personality and the formation of beliefs and values applicable in institutional and social life. The law provides for a three-years transition period, which gives the relevant institutions enough time to adapt and implement its provisions.

It is interesting, however, that of the numerous regulations defined by the Law on Gender Equality, the introduction and implementation of gender-sensitive language caused the most reaction in the public, and that element of it which is not explicitly mentioned in the law itself – and refers to the introduction of feminatives, i.e. the use of feminine gender nouns in circumstances where necessary (in the names of professions, in the naming of identities carried by women and the like). Although the law treats masculinities and feminatives in the same way, it seems that feminatives, as a so far neglected form of language, have attracted the most attention, and that the visibility of the female gender in the language (and perhaps consequently in society) was the reason for the strong reactions, first by certain institutions and then by individuals in the Republic of Serbia. Given that media sources are primarily interested in strong reactions as a potential magnet for readership/viewership, the unrelenting appearance of newspaper articles, television shows, publications on social networks and the mass advertising among the professional and general public is not surprising. Unfortunately, there was a lack of open, high-quality dialogue, and preference

was given to polarising and differentiating narratives (ours vs. someone else's, tradition vs. novelty), and one of the loudest narratives is certainly that of anti-gender politics. Despite the increasing presence of the use of feminatives in language, especially among the younger generation, primarily for professions in the feminine gender and for nouns that have so far not been used that often in the feminine gender,⁷⁹ institutional voices have strongly criticised the decision to adopt the Law on Gender Equality, concentrating on explaining the alleged errors of the law in insisting upon gender equality in language. It is particularly interesting and, in this study, crucial to consider the institutional actors of such anti-gender policies (in which, as expected, gender is perceived exclusively as the feminine gender, as *the new, that what bothers us*, what must not be seen – while the masculine gender is unhindered and in this context is not recognised as a gender, but rather as *a basis*).⁸⁰ It is also important to analyse the specific arguments that these actors have used to justify the desired return to the status quo position. These arguments reveal deep contradictions, work on the mechanism of enemy production (often identified in one's own ranks, in one's own space – most often it is women), and encourage an atmosphere of populism, polarisation, blame, condemnation and fear. In the end, these actors, through their argumentation, appropriate the concepts and material realities of the body, family and nation, thereby mobilising this narrative to support traditional, right-wing, radical and authoritarian political and social discourses.

79 The character and symbolic position of such nouns are not negligible; namely, they usually denote a term closely related to strength or power – whether mythological (dragon, femininative dragonica), interventionist (fighter, femininative fighterica) or political (minister, femininative ministrica). "Euronews Centre on Gender-Sensitive Language: A dragon is much more powerful than a female dragonica", *Euronews* from 17 May 2023, <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/drustvo/87724/euronews-centar-o-rodno-osetljivom-jeziku-zmajica-je-mnogo-vise-od-zenskog-zmaja/vest>, 9 Nov. 2023, Katarina Đorđević, "How to talk about women in gender-sensitive language – fighters or fighters", *Politika* from 10 Jun. 2021, <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/480957/Kako-se-kaze-za-zene-u-rodno-senzitivnom-jeziku-borci-ili-borkinje%2010.06.2021,09.11.2023>, Sonja Gočanin, "Serbian Patriarch 'cleanses' language of gender sensitivity", *Radio Free Europe* from 16 Apr. 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/spc-zene-rodno-osetljiv-jezik/32370740.html>, 9 Nov. 2023, Sarita Bradaš, "Our language discriminatory", *Peščanik* from 3 Feb. 2023, <https://pescanik.net/jezik-nas-diskriminatorski/>, accessed on 9 Nov. 2023.

80 The critique of this principle has been one of the basic postulates of feminisms throughout the twentieth century, especially from the mid-twentieth century and second-wave feminisms onwards (see here the conclusions of Simone de Beauvoir or Luce Irigaray, but also many other authors of feminist theory of that time). It is therefore not a new, but a very expected phenomenon of resistance that patriarchy provides in relation to women's visibility and inclusiveness of differences.

By analysing media content, including the Law on Gender Equality, Matica Srpska's statement on the issue of gender equality of 27 May 2021, the decision of the Committee for Standardisation of the Serbian Language from 2018, and slightly more than fifty different newspaper articles from the period from May 2018 to August 2023, we have **examined the continuous work being done to shape and promote anti-gender policies. On the surface, such policies affect the use and application of gender-sensitive language, but in fact they express the deeply misogynistic nature of such a movement in an attempt to present equality as pre-existing without the actual existence of it.** This is in fact one of the contradictions mentioned: a frequent argument of an institution such as Matica Srpska, as well as normatively oriented linguists, is that the masculine grammatical gender is "neutral", and that it already implies the feminine gender in itself – therefore, it already implies the equality of the existence of both genders without the occurrence of both genders, that is, with the appearance of only the masculine gender.⁸¹

One of the key institutional actors in this public debate is certainly Matica Srpska, whose role is all the more noticeable if we understand that this institution was founded in 1826 as "the oldest Serbian literary, cultural and scientific institution", as stated on its website.⁸² In the debate on the use of gender-sensitive language, Matica Srpska draws attention to itself with a statement issued on 27 May 2011, after the adoption of the Law on Gender Equality. Interpreting the adoption of the law as a premature move in which the Government of the Republic of Serbia failed to first consult with Matica Srpska and the Board for Standardisation of the Serbian Language, and considering it "a serious procedural error that shouldn't happen in the future",⁸³ Matica Srpska goes on to openly criticise the provisions on gender-sensitive language, calling them:

81 "The Language of Gender Equality: Gender-Differentiated Language and the Grammatical Category of Gender in the Serbian Language", Institute of the Serbian Language of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Committee Decisions, Standardisation, Broad Activities 14 May 2018, Explanation, paragraph 3,

82 <https://www.maticasrpska.org.rs/matica-srpska/>, accessed on 5 Nov. 2023.

83 *Press release of Matica Srpska regarding the issue of gender equality of 27 May 2021*, <https://www.maticasrpska.org.rs/saopshtee-matitse-srpske-povodom-pitaa-o-rodno-ravnopravnosti/>, accessed on 9 Nov. 2023.

1. Exclusive, intolerant, coercive, discriminatory (towards the population that will not adopt gender-sensitive language due to a lack of habituation to it), undemocratic, negatively connotated and undesirable (paragraph 1)
2. Potentially threatening, restrictive and punishing (paragraph 2)
3. Radically interventionist, inadmissible linguistic engineering that "entails deep cuts in the norm of the standard Serbian language" (paragraph 3)
4. Burdensome, aggravating (on the example of potential application in textbooks) (paragraph 4)
5. Unequitable, discriminatory (again, towards those who potentially do not want to use it)

There is an evident attempt to turn the thesis on its head – namely to present the initiative for gender equality and gender-sensitive language as the one that discriminates and the one that excludes, while the situation is actually quite the opposite. The communiqué appears to pretend to protect language from change, but essentially protects those who refuse to accept changes in the form of gender equality, thus championing their rights to exclusion (para. 1, 2 and 5). Paragraph 2 specifically creates an atmosphere of fear (of punishment), while the law quite clearly provides for three years of transition before any provisions of the new law are implemented. The use of words such as "intervention", "deep cuts", and, finally, "linguistic engineering" is aimed at dehumanising and discrediting the legislators, as well as all those who stand by its respect, i.e., gender equality in language, everyday life and society in general. This unusual situation, in which a state institution submits such a critical statement to another state institution, didn't go unnoticed in the media. For instance, in the article "Will there be a female soldier in school textbooks: The law says gender-sensitive language should be included in textbooks, but NPS and linguists say otherwise," Prof. Emeritus Svenka Savić, notes: "Matica Srpska published a collection of statements against gender-sensitive language, financed by the Ministry of Education, though the government passed the law. Why does the Ministry of Education finance anti-activities? I think everyone is confused."⁸⁴

84 Slavica Tuvić, "Will there be a female soldier in school textbooks: The law says that gender-sensitive language should be included in textbooks, but NPS and linguists say otherwise", *Euronews* from 16 Oct. 2022, <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/drustvo/64388/hoce-li-biti-vojnkinja-u-udzbenicima-zakon-kaze-da-rodno-senzitivni-jezik-ulazi-u-udzbenike-ali-ne-i-nps-i-lingvisti/vest>, accessed on 9 Nov. 2023. NPS stands for "Nacionalnog prosvetnog saveta" (National Education Council).

Newspaper articles that cover such reactions as Matica Srpska's statement rarely problematise the complex spectrum of attitudes when it comes to language changes, and mostly stick to polarising "for" and "against" discussions.

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In this case, they are even more confusing, because in addition to the established categories of women/feminists/democracy ("foreign") and man/tradition/petrification/right ("ours"), the category of legislators is added, which pits Matica Srpska, a state institution versus another state institution, the National Assembly. The headlines that dominate newspaper articles on this topic are full of words such as

violence ("Serbian science protected language from Western pressure and violence"),⁸⁵ ideology (for gender equality) and the like. An interesting dichotomy is formed around the idea of gender equality as an ideology, as opposed to gender exclusivity as nature, which is a direct demonstration of the naturalising practice of anti-gender policies. In fact, any political initiative related to language can be called an ideology, which, of course, does not automatically give it a pejorative tone. It is also worrying that such a contradiction (an accusation of ideology by an ideology posing as nature/self-evident and logic/permanence) shows an astonishing level of underestimation of the readership. A similar effect is the almost exaggerated desire of Matica Srpska to "protect" the population that would not (immediately) start using gender-sensitive language and, according to Matica Srpska, would be seen as "illiterate". Here, it is as if it were simply incredulous that the population could successfully adopt inclusive action policies, led by language, which do not intend to discriminate, but quite the contrary – to open up spaces of expression in a way that takes account of gender differences and specificities.

The discourses gathered around Matica Srpska's statement on the issue of gender equality are dominated by the idea that changes in language pose a threat to the nation; namely, as a national institution that preserves the official language of the Republic of Serbia – the Serbian language. With the history of its establishment closely related to the preservation of the national and linguistic identity of the Serbian people, Matica Srpska indirectly directs its criticism of gender-sensitive language towards the idea of disrupting the traditions and habits of the nation, which is especially evident through the reception of the statement in newspaper articles and through the coming together of right-wing political forces to approve and promote the statement. With such a move, **anti-gender politics in the field of language directly construct the idea of a Serbian nation that resists the "imposition" of new, different, more modern frameworks, while placing gender equality**

85 The Sheriff's Office, "The First Battle Won: Serbian Science Protects Language from Western Pressure and Violence", *Sputnik* of 16.08.2022, <https://sputnikportal.rs/20220816/prva-bitka-dobijena-srpska-nauka-odbranila-jezik-od-zapadnih-pritisaka-i-nasilja-1141166048.html>, accessed on 9 Nov. 2023.

in the category of a hostile, foreign initiative. This understanding of the communiqué comes with multiple dangers, first of all by creating a social atmosphere of fear of the unknown (which is actually not the case) and fear of sanctions being imposed for "disobedience", thereby producing a deep polarising rift in the state, all because of the (female) gender, because of (female) bodies – and because of women (and men and all other individuals) who want to use gender-sensitive language for themselves and/or for others.

Another major institution that could not resist reacting to gender-sensitive language, two years after the adoption of the Law on Gender Equality, was the Serbian Orthodox Church. It not only once again made gender-sensitive language a public matter of national concern, but this time framed it as a family issue as well. In his Easter message in 2023, Patriarch Porfirije touched upon the use of language: "We appeal to standardise the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in the public space, as well as to stop the violence against the Serbian language and to abolish the provisions of the laws which impose that violence, especially the unconstitutional law that imposes so-called gender-sensitive language, behind which is hidden the fight against marriage and the family as established by God's sacred and natural forms of human personal and common life."⁸⁶ As part of the Easter Epistle, this sentence was carried by numerous media outlets;⁸⁷ thus the gender-sensitive language once again found itself in the public spotlight, this time in the dichotomy of Cyrillic: gender-sensitive language, which performed another manoeuvre to alienate gender-sensitive language from social and cultural heritage. Unlike the seemingly undisputed authority of science in the case of Matica Srpska's statement, which was not overly contradicted, after the Patriarch's message,⁸⁸ the Com-

⁸⁶ "Porphyry: Behind the gender-sensitive language is the fight against marriage and family. We appeal to stop violence against the Serbian language", *Novi dani* from 13 Apr. 2023, <https://novidani.com/porfirije-iza-rodno-osetljivog-jezika-se-krije-borba-protiv-braka-i-porodice-apelujemo-da-se-obustavi-nasilje-nad-srpskim-jezikom/>, and many other sources that covered Patriarch Porfirije's Easter Epistle in 2023.

⁸⁷ Radio Television of Serbia, N1, o21, Novi Dani, Mašina, Peščanik, BBC.

⁸⁸ Of course, it must be taken into account that in this public debate, individual voices of experts in the field of gender studies, language studies, cultural studies, as well as political life were heard. Among these voices were those of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality and a number of scientists and professors who individually advocated for the application of gender-sensitive language in accordance with the Law on Gender Equality.

missioner for the Protection of Equality very quickly spoke out, pointing out that the issue of gender-sensitive language does not fall within the decision-making competence of the Serbian Orthodox Church, although, of course, the Church has the right to express itself on all social issues that it considers important.⁸⁹ The Commissioner recalled the Republic of Serbia's secular state system and emphasised her disagreement with the resistance to gender-sensitive language, in which there are already generally accepted elements that were once novelties, but are not seen as a problem (borrowings from foreign languages, for example). With this, the Commissioner underscored the misogynistic nature of the objection to gender-sensitive language, which will be clearly apparent in the subsequent statements of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Also, it **was not entirely clear in what way gender-sensitive language is "against marriage and family"**, and some citizens responded publicly to such a crudely presented argument of traditionalism that indirectly – and perhaps even directly – puts forth the idea that the invisibility of women guarantees the preservation of traditional patriarchal cultural patterns, and that this is the Patriarch's recommendation. One citizen even makes a comment: "If my four-year-old child says poetess (instead of poet), how is that against marriage and family?"⁹⁰ Furthermore, the Patriarch did not specify how the Law on Gender Equality is contrary to the Constitution, since the Constitutional Court in Serbia has not ruled upon it.⁹¹ Despite the obvious illogicalities, the Patriarch's message should not be ignored, since in the 2011 census, 85% of the population of the Republic of Serbia declared themselves to be Orthodox, and in the 2022 census this percentage still stood at 81.1%,⁹² so it is understandable that one part of the Serbian political community remains silent.

89 "Janković: Gender-sensitive language is not an issue for the Serbian Orthodox Church", *N1 Beograd* from 18 Apr. 2023, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/jankovic-rodno-senzitivni-jezik-nije-pitanje-za-crkvu/>

90 Sonja Gočanin, "Serbian Patriarch 'cleanses' the language of gender sensitivity", *Radio Free Europe* from 16 Apr. 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/spc-ze-ne-rodno-osetljiv-jezik/32370740.html>

91 Sonja Gočanin, "Serbian Patriarch 'cleanses' the language of gender sensitivity", *Radio Free Europe* from 16 Apr. 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/spc-ze-ne-rodno-osetljiv-jezik/32370740.html>

92 Republic of Serbia, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Population by religion, <https://data.stat.gov.rs//Home/Result/3104020301?languageCode=sr-Cyrl>, "Results of the census on mother tongue and religion in Serbia published", *Radio Free Europe* from 16 Jun. 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/popis-srbija-veroisповest-mater-nji-jezik/32462211.html>

Shortly after the Patriarch's letter and a somewhat more audible negative reaction of the public than was the case for Matica Srpska's statement, the Bishop of Bačka and the spokesperson of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Irinej, also spoke out, rejecting the claims of the media and non-governmental organisations that the issue of gender-sensitive language was not an issue for the Serbian Orthodox Church. He did so with these words: "We, the members of the Church, are not excommunicated from society because we constitute the absolute majority of it. Therefore, the proponents of this purely Marxist view, disguised as supporters of 'Western liberalism', cannot, at least for the time being, deprive us of our civil rights, as well as, of course, our responsibility before the law and society."⁹³ In these sentences, there is a tendentious reference to a statistical majority of citizens who declare themselves as religious, without research on or attention given to what their individual attitudes are, which once again points to a strategy of underestimating the population, as in the previous example. Also, in the aforementioned sentences of the Bishop of Bačka Irinej, "representatives of the Marxist understanding" and "supporters of Western liberalism" are mentioned, marking the new-old categories of "enemies" of the Church, i.e. believers, i.e. citizens, i.e. the nation and the state – the Republic of Serbia. **Such naming of so-called enemies is an extremely problematic and dangerous move that represents another instance of turning the thesis on its head – instead of recognising his speech about gender-sensitive language as exclusive, the bishop places exclusion as a criticised strategy in a locus outside the Church, labelling left-wing political options and Western political legacies the citizens' enemies.** The bishop does not stop there, but goes on to describe the media as a "CNN-affiliated group",⁹⁴ which carries on the practice of producing an enemy in the form of a foreigner from the West.

93 Beta, "Bishop of Bačka Irinej rejects claims that the issue of gender-sensitive language is not an issue for the Serbian Orthodox Church", *Today* from 21 Apr. 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/episkog-backi-irinej-odbacio-tvrđenje-da-pitanje-rodno-senzitivnog-jezika-nije-pitanje-za-spc/>

94 "Patriarch Porfirije on the Law on Gender Equality: Violent Application of Gender Ideology", *Voice of the Public* from 27 Jun. 2023, <https://www.glas-javnosti.rs/vesti/drustvo/patrijarh-porfirije-o-zakonu-o-rodnoj-ravnopravnosti-nasilna-prime-na-dzender-ideologije>

The Serbian Orthodox Church has continued to react to gender-sensitive language, for instance, in May 2023 in a video that appeared on social networks in which Patriarch Porfirije talks about gender-sensitive language, addressing an unknown person with the following words:

"When we told you about the so-called gender-sensitive language, you were unfortunate enough to confound the thesis. So you say that the Church and the Patriarch do not take care of women. What does it matter to you, what does it have to do with the fact that you have passed a law on women? It has to do with the essence of our existence. It has to do with the essence of our being that you destroy, and you are here to take care of our being... I'm not going to name names, because I'd cry, I'd scream in anguish when I see a poor woman changing her thesis to say: 'And why haven't they taken care of women, women are endangered?'. Well, they are endangered, we are all endangered by you, you bastard. Because you've come to the manger and you're selling the manure, as if the world exists thanks to you."⁹⁵

This time, the reactions of the public were stronger, so the Commissioner for Equality as well as a number of politicians issued statements. However, there was no direct response by politicians from the right-wing spectrum, although there were a number of attempts to justify the Patriarch's statement with the assumptions that "he did not know that he was being recorded", that "he does not address all women", that "we do not know the context in which that sentence was spoken" and the like.⁹⁶ Such attempts to justify violence in communication and public speech, and especially in the statements of a man at the helm of an institution such as the Serbian Orthodox Church, are inadmissible without first condemning the unequivocally violent use

⁹⁵ "The Patriarch's statement on 'sensitive language' caused numerous negative reactions", Moj Novi Sad, transmitted from *N1*, 13 May 2023, <https://www.moj-novisad.com/vesti/patrijarhova-izjava-o-senzitivnom-jeziku-izazvala-brojne-negativne-reakcije-video-id54281.html>

⁹⁶ "The 'wretched, poor thing' affair: Who was the patriarch referring to, what is the substitution of theses and what is the fault of gender-sensitive language?", *K1 info* from 15 May 2023,

of language and misogyny. Particularly interesting were the observations made by the media that the Patriarch seems to have a problem with gender-sensitive language and feminatives, but this does not apply to feminatives such as "poor thing", which in turn reflects the direct misogynistic basis of such mediated resistance to gender-sensitive language.

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In an article dated 27 June 2023, the Information Service of the Serbian Orthodox Church announced that when it comes to gender-sensitive language, the problem is only partly of a linguistic character and that it is essentially a "process of transforming the consciousness of the individual and society as a whole, imposed by law, through language." The Information Service is actually right – except that the transformation of society in the case of gender-sensitive language is, in fact, the transformation of society towards openness, diversity, inclusion and dialogue, and in no way, as the Church implies, promotes the exclusion of the hitherto predominantly masculine gender and identity from the language and culture. The use of the feminine gender in the language does not take away the space of the masculine gender – the space only expands and includes the diversity that is already present in the field, as well as in the spoken language.

The final part of the article from 27 June 2023 contains a direct definition of the Serbian Orthodox Church in relation to the anti-gender policies it represents. The article states: "Patriarch Porfirije emphasised that the question of language defines the identity of the people. He says, 'any violent and thoughtless change can have great consequences for the self-consciousness of a nation such as Serbia', adding that the Church constantly draws attention to this issue. At the meeting, it was noted that 'competent authorities do not prevent and are even tolerant of a group of non-governmental organisations, which persistently and systematically promote gender ideology, politics and practice through their direct presence in preschools and schools.' The statement also states that these non-governmental organisations are thus propagating the idea that 'even the youngest children can choose their own sex and gender.'"⁹⁷

97 "Patriarch Porfirije on the Law on Gender Equality: Violent Application of Gender Ideology", *Voice of the Public* from 27 Jun. 2023, <https://www.glas-javnosti.rs/vesti/drustvo/patrijarh-porfirije-o-zakonu-o-rodnoj-ravnopravnosti-nasilna-prime-na-dzender-ideologije>

Despite mass representation of institutional anti-gender policies, it is encouraging to note that the voices of those actors who warned of the consequences of such occurrences could be heard through media advertisements. Unfortunately, these are only the individual voices of experts from the academic sector, the isolated voices of interviewed citizens, as well as a few voices – mostly from women – from political life in the Republic of Serbia. Given that the discourse of media reporting largely shapes the perception of public opinion on notable social issues, it remains unclear whether the voices against anti-gender policies in the Republic of Serbia are more numerous than can currently be determined. Therefore, it is necessary to invest in further research to identify actors who have the will, capacity and resources to counter anti-gender narratives. This could significantly reduce the level of politically induced fear and reduce binary mind-sets, while fostering intersectional alliances and strengthening an open and inclusive civil society.

CASE STUDY 2: School Textbook Censorship

Within this case study, we will describe and analyse the entire process – from how the topic itself was brought into the public domain by the media through to the reactions of individuals and academic institutions – while also providing an overview of the institutions and decisions that ultimately ushered in the withdrawal of the gender-sensitive approach to the knowledge presented in school textbooks, i.e. leading to censored biology textbooks for 8th graders (14–15 year olds). This case study will serve as an illustration of the arguments made in the preceding section, which assert that inclusive policies related to gender and sexuality, as well as the actors who implement them in Serbia, are almost always discredited through state ideological apparatuses. In this case, these are informational, educational, political and religious institutions that have resisted the introduction of new content in textbooks and have inevitably contributed to the spread of transphobia and homophobia through their actions and reactions.

A school textbook lesson becomes news in the mainstream media

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In early 2021, the media reported how a school textbook for the 8th grade module "The Biological Meaning of Adolescence" contained explanations and definitions of transgender identity, intersexuality and homosexuality. In accordance with the official procedure, the textbook had been approved by all relevant institutions and was to be used starting in the 2021/22 school year. The media reported that the textbook was published by the Klett publishing house and published photos of pages from the textbook containing the aforementioned definitions. The lesson on gender and gender identity first explains the difference between sex and gender, then explains what gender identity is and what gender roles are. In a section titled, in capital letters, "KNOWLEDGE", there is a photo of Clara Zetkin and basic information about the celebration of International Women's Day on 8th March, as well as an explanation of what gender inequality is. Under the subheading "Transgender" is the following text:

There are people who have the feeling that they were born "in the wrong body", i.e. although they have characteristics of a certain sex, they feel that they belong to the opposite gender. We call such people transgender people. They often need to dress and resemble people of the opposite sex, and sometimes undergo certain types of therapy (hormone or surgical therapy) to change their sex. Depending on the society or community to which they belong, these people may experience some form of discrimination. The society we live in imposes on us norms that are sometimes not in line with our feelings. This is also the case with gender identity, where in many cases, society imposes a role that they must align with."

Below this paragraph, there is a section titled, in capital letters, "TIPS", and it contains the following text:

It is not unusual for transgender people to be rejected by their environments, including those closest to them. As a society, we need to develop a sense and understanding

of all differences, to accept that it's okay to be different, as long as one's behaviour doesn't endanger others."

On the side of the page, the concept of discrimination is explained as follows

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Discrimination – unfair and unequal treatment of certain groups of people on the basis of certain differences, such as skin colour, sex, or gender.

On the next page there is an explanation of intersex. That passage is titled "Intersex", and part of the text reads:

Another example of sex and gender mismatch is biological in nature. Sometimes it happens that, due to several different factors, the structure of the reproductive organs does not fit the definition of exclusively male or female sex. Sometimes a baby has a pair of sex chromosomes of one sex, but during embryonic development there is (at least partially) development of the reproductive organs of the other sex. These people have characteristics of both male and female sex, and we call them intersex people.

Below the explanation of intersex, there is a section that is titled, in capital letters, "TIPS", and it contains the following text:

In all these cases, these are people who, like everyone else, do not deserve the suspicion and misunderstanding of the public. Everyone is different in their own way and because of that they are just as much a member of society as anyone else.

In addition to these definitions, the textbooks also include a short introduction to sexual orientation and briefly explain what homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality are and why people of homosexual and bisexual orientation should not be subject to discrimination.

Introducing these basic definitions and explanations into textbooks, as well as drawing attention to the discrimination faced by sexual minorities, transgender and intersex people, and women, is one small step towards building a society without violence, discrimination and gender inequality. **Education and sensitisation**

of adolescents is necessary when it comes to these topics, since research shows that homophobia and transphobia are extremely widespread among secondary school students in Serbia. The results of a survey published in 2020 by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights⁹⁸ show that "only 24% of secondary school students support LGBT rights, 31% are moderately homophobic, while 44% are homophobic".⁹⁹ When it comes to the results related to transphobia, the research points out that: "Statements on trans persons are more negative than those on gays and lesbians. Out of all answers, 21% of students support trans person's right to gender change, while 60% are against; the latter indicates that they are rather unaware about trans experience".¹⁰⁰

To understand and empathise with discriminated groups, it is necessary for adolescents to first receive basic information about these groups and the problems they face, and this textbook has offered a starting point for this work. However, the media presented the textbook and the intentions behind the lesson on sex and gender identity in a completely different, and above all, negative light. In March, April and May 2021, 21 articles on this topic were published in ten online¹⁰¹ and six print media, of which only 4 texts presented the topic adequately without too much negative spin. In other texts, this topic was reported in an extremely sensationalist way, with the intention of spreading panic, since the headlines contained incorrect information highlighted in capital letters. Some of the mentioned headlines read:

"EIGHTH GRADERS LEARN ABOUT INTERSEX PERSONS: The new biology textbook shocked many parents, teachers and the professional public" (Novosti, published on 15 March, 2021)¹⁰²

98 Marija Radoman, *Value Orientations of High School Students in Serbia*, 2019 (Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia and Institute for Sociological Research, Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade, 2020).

99 Ibid, 70.

100 Ibid, 74.

101 With over a million users, it is one of the most popular online portals.

102 Link: <https://www.novosti.rs/drustvo/vesti/975075/osmake-uce-me-djupolnim-osobama-novi-udzbenik-biologije-sokirao-brojne-roditelje-nastavnike-strucnu-javnost>

"CHILDREN IN SERBIA ARE TAUGHT THAT THEY CAN CHOOSE THEIR OWN GENDER: A new textbook for eighth graders SHOCKED the public! Many parents are furious!" (Espresso, published on 13 April 2021)¹⁰³

"CHILDREN IN SERBIA WILL LEARN THAT THEY CAN CHOOSE THEIR GENDER: New biology textbooks infuriate parents, teachers taken aback" (Mondo, published on 13 April 2021)¹⁰⁴

"What's going on in schools? They IMPOSE A THIRD SEX UPON OUR CHILDREN" (*Lens*, front page, print edition, 16 March 2021)

According to the media articles, introducing this topic in textbooks "imposes upon children teaching that is grossly contrary to our tradition and religion".¹⁰⁵ The articles also claim that using such textbooks "imposes someone else's world view on our children" and represents "a violent imposition of gender ideology and the manipulation of children".¹⁰⁶ In other words, the media as well as the interviewed parents, teachers and people presented as experts, deemed the textbook lesson on sex and gender identity to be scandalous and claimed that the new content in the school textbooks was an attempt to introduce sex education into the education system through the back door.

The media have practically used the textbooks to spread transphobia and create an atmosphere of panic and fear, because they have evaluated and presented a part of the educational process in compulsory schooling as one im-

103 Link: <https://www.espreso.co.rs/vesti/drustvo/769701/decu-u-srbiji-uce-da-mogu-sami-da-biraju-pol-novi-udzbenik-za-osmake-sokirao-javnost-mnogi-roditelji-besni>

104 Link: <https://www.espreso.co.rs/vesti/drustvo/769701/decu-u-srbiji-uce-da-mogu-sami-da-biraju-pol-novi-udzbenik-za-osmake-sokirao-javnost-mnogi-roditelji-besni>

105 Lj. Begenišić, OSMAKE UČE O MEĐUPOLNIM OSOBAMA: The new biology textbook shocked many parents, teachers and the professional public", *Novosti*, published on 15 Mar. 2021. Link: <https://www.novosti.rs/drustvo/vesti/975075/osmake-uce-medjupolnim-osobama-novi-udzbenik-biologije-sokirao-brojne-roditelje-nastavnike-strucnu-javnost>

106 An article published on the *Espresso portal* on 13 Apr. 2021: "CHILDREN IN SERBIA ARE TAUGHT THAT THEY CAN CHOOSE THEIR OWN GENDER: A new textbook for eighth graders SHOCKED the public! Many parents are furious!" Link: <https://www.espreso.co.rs/vesti/drustvo/769701/decu-u-srbiji-uce-da-mogu-sami-da-biraju-pol-novi-udzbenik-za-osmake-sokirao-javnost-mnogi-roditelji-besni>

posing content that is harmful and dangerous to children.

Additionally, in 2021, domestic media reported on dolls with a gender-neutral appearance and used this news to spread accusations of imposing transgender content upon children.

For the majority of the population, the mainstream media is the first, and often the only, source of information about transgender topics, identities and community. Most people encounter this topic for the first time through online media, daily newspapers and television, and they form attitudes about transgender people based on this information. Our research, which included an analysis of media content published in Serbia in 2021, showed that the media report on transgender topics in an extremely sensationalist and unethical way, that they dehumanise trans people and that they have a great influence on the spread and promotion of transphobia in society.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, the role of the media in spreading anti-gender propaganda, myths and disinformation must not be neglected, as media publications often represent the first in a series of actions that lead to the degradation of human rights or additional marginalisation of certain social groups. On such topics, the media usually address the same interlocutors who hold conservative and anti-gender views and respond to issues in the same way.

In addition to the media, public criticism and an appeal for the removal of the lesson on sex and gender identity from biology textbooks were also publicly made by members of the Women's Solidarity collective,¹⁰⁸ who call themselves feminists, although they do not respect basic feminist principles, but very loudly propagate transphobic attitudes, clearly siding with the right-wingers, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and other already established actors of the anti-gender movement.

¹⁰⁷ Aleksa Milanović, "The Impact of Print and Online Media on the Spread of Transphobia in Serbia", *Sociology* Vol. LXIV, No 3, (2022): 473–492.

¹⁰⁸ Marija Radoman, "Chromosome Counting: Right, Science and Transphobia", *Bulletin*, 17 Apr. 2023. <https://www.bilten.org/?p=44482>

Reviving the textbook issue on the eve of the EuroPride

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Though almost a year had passed since the last media articles were published on this topic, it became relevant again on the eve of the EuroPride and Pride Week, which took place from 12 to 18 September 2022. This controversy also centred on textbooks and was started and led by MP Boško Obradović, leader of the political party Srpski pokret devri (Serbian Movement Dveri), who in a statement issued on 31 August 2022 cites three biology textbooks, published by Novi logos, Nacional geografija i Klet, Data status and Vulkan, accused the publishers of "spreading homosexual and transgender propaganda to minors."¹⁰⁹ Addressing the media, Dveri points out that this accusation also refers to a history textbook of the Klet publishing house intended for 8th grade pupils.¹¹⁰ Shortly after the publication of this statement, the parliamentary group of the Serbian Movement Dveri submitted to the Speaker of the National Assembly on 5 September the "Draft Declaration on the Prohibition of Homosexual and Transgender Propaganda to Minors".

In addition to the statements and tweets of Boško Obradović and his party, the textbook issue was also included in the speech that Serbian Patriarch Porfirije gave on 11 September 2022 in front of the Cathedral of St. Sava in Belgrade. This gathering was announced as "a nationwide prayer for the sanctity of marriage and family, harmony and peace in our people", and the reason for scheduling the gathering was the upcoming EuroPride event. The Patriarch called the introduction of textbooks "the fruits of the silent engineering of LGBT ideology" and asked the relevant authorities to immediately withdraw the disputed textbooks from use:

We cannot accept that the media, education, culture, and political institutions are turned into instruments of constant and

¹⁰⁹ Link: <https://dveri.rs/saopstenja/bosko-obradovic-gej-paradu-zabrani-ti-na-100-godina-i-okrenuti-se-socijalno-ekonomskim-problemima-gradjana>

¹¹⁰ Text on the *Nova portal* entitled "Boško Obradović declares war on biology and history textbooks", published on 6 Sept. 2022. <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/dveri-objavile-rat-biologiji-traze-da-se-menjaju-udzbenici/>

permanent psychological and moral pressure in the service of violent social engineering. We cannot allow this ideology to change the model of society that our people have lived with for as long as they can remember.

We are already faced with the fruits of the silent engineering of this LGBT ideology. Lest anyone says that we are exaggerating, that we are suspicious, that I am exaggerating: these days we have found out that far from the public eye in our country, lessons that propagate gender ideology have been incorporated in textbooks for primary and secondary schools. Who did this? Has anyone with school-age children asked you about this? Do you agree with this? If they didn't ask you, and I know they didn't, we ask the competent authorities to immediately withdraw from use all textbooks, manuals and teaching aids in secondary, primary and preschool institutions that contain such lessons.¹¹¹

The day after this gathering and the Patriarch's address, on 12 September 2022, the First Session of the Committee on Education, Science, Technological Development and Information Society was held. At the session, the leader of Dveri raised the issue of controversial lessons in biology and history textbooks for the 8th grade of primary school and in sociology textbooks for the fourth year of secondary school, and called on the committee chairperson to declare whether he was prepared to launch an initiative to withdraw the textbooks, as called for by Patriarch Porfirije the day before:

Gender ideology tries to explain to our children that they are not born male or female, but that in the course of their social and psycho-physical development they can choose their own identities. It recommends 80 different identities and variations that represent social constructions that are incorporated in this way into our textbooks. The chair of this committee should declare whether he is prepared to launch an initiative through the competent ministry, as requested by His Holiness Serbian Patriarch Porfirije last night, one that will ensure

¹¹¹ Sajt Srpske pravoslavne crkve, "Desetine hiljada vernika na svenarodnom molebanu za svetinju braka i porodice, slogu i mir u našem narodu", published on 11 Sept. 2022, <https://spc.rs/tv-hram-uzivo-svenarodni-moleban-za-svetinju-braka-i-porodice-slogu-i-mir-u-nasem-narodu/>

that this content is removed from our textbooks and that the person who approved it is identified.¹¹²

On that same day, 12 September 2022, Branko Ruzic, First Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia and Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development, asked the Nacionalnog prosvetnog saveta (NPS, National Education Council) to re-examine and give an expert opinion on the Biology Teaching and Learning Programme for 8th grade pupils.¹¹³ The minister explained why he decided to take this step:

Due to the controversy in the public sphere over the past few days, which surrounds the content in biology textbooks for 8th graders, I demanded that the National Education Council issue another statement and give its expert opinion on whether such a programme is in line with scientific theories which the biology faculties accept and on which their work is based, on whether it also reflects the national interest, and above all, on whether it is in the best interest of our children's education.¹¹⁴

This decision by the Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development is problematic for at least two reasons. The first reason certainly has to do with the fact that the decision was motivated solely by the pressure exerted in public by representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Movement Dveri on the eve of the EuroPride. The second reason concerns the fact that the Minister decided to initiate a procedure that conflicts with applicable legal requirements. According to the Law on Textbooks, the Minister of Education, based on a positive opinion of the expert commission of the Zavod za unapređivanje obrazovanja i vaspitanja (ZUOV, Institute for the Advancement of Education of the Repub-

112 Sajt Srpskog pokreta Dveri, "Obradović: rodna ideologija pokušava našoj deci da objasni da nisu rođeni kao muškarci ili žene", published on 12 Sept, 2022, <https://dveri.rs/saopstenja/obradovic-rodna-ideologija-pokusava-nasoj-deci-da-objasni-da-nisu-rodjeni-kao-muskarci-ili-zene>

113 Sajt Vlade Republike Srbije, "Program za biologiju vraćen NP na ponovno razmatranje", published on 12 Sept. 2022, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/650257/program-za-biologiju-vracen-nps-na-ponovno-razmatranje.php>

114 Sajt Ministarstva prosvete Republike Srbije, "Ružić: program za biologiju vraćen Nacionalnom prosvetnom savetu na ponovno razmatranje", published on 12 Sept. 2022, <https://prosveta.gov.rs/vesti/ruzic-program-za-biologiju-vracen-nacionalnom-prosvetnom-savetu-na-ponovno-razmatranje/>

lic of Serbia), shall make a decision on approving the manuscript of textbooks. Accordingly, the Minister is supposed to contact ZUOV if he has any objections to the content in the textbook, as it is this institution that deals with biology curriculum issues and not the National Education Council.

The way in which the right-wing Serbian Movement Dveri and the Serbian Orthodox Church have addressed the topic of textbooks in their letters and statements to the public fits into the standard pattern practiced by anti-gender movements around the world. They first point out that their reactions are motivated by a purported concern for family, children and nation, and they place this concern at the forefront of their priorities, putting it over and above respect for human rights and the call for tolerance and understanding. Articulating their views on this issue implies creating and emphasising the "us" – "them" division, where all those who do not share their views are labelled as foreign elements and enemies of the people, as ones who forcibly impose their values and way of life on everyone else. In other words, **Dveri and the Serbian Orthodox Church portray the LGBTIQ+ population, especially those who fight for the human rights of gender and sexual minorities, as enemies of the people who, with the help of LGBT ideology, forcibly introduce social changes through the integration of these textbooks into the education system.** Of course, this is about spreading misinformation, distorting facts, and spreading panic among the people. In his speech, the Patriarch points out that "lessons that propagate gender ideology" are being introduced into school textbooks "away from the public eye" and "under the counter". It is obvious that he's painting a completely transparent process, one that has been ongoing for several years and has involved many local experts, as "under-the-counter work". This can be characterised not only as the spread of disinformation, but also as a form of degradation of the institutions and experts who participated in this process. The additional steps taken by the Ministry of Education after Dveri and the Serbian Orthodox Church concluded their campaign to remove these textbooks can rightfully be called "under-the-counter work" carried out "far from the public eye".

Withdrawal of textbooks: censorship of professional and scientific thought

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On the basis of the letter sent by the Minister, the National Education Council (NPS) responded by requesting the expert opinion of the Srpsko Biološko Društvo (SBD, Serbian Biological Society) and all departments of biological faculties, including that of the Institute for Biological Research "Siniša Stanković" (IBISS). At the session held on 16 September 2022, the NPS came to the conclusion that the biology programme for 8th grade primary school pupils is based on scientific facts, but the second part of that conclusion included the statement that "no interpretation of the programme can contain elements of ideology and that the psychological and sociological knowledge of students must be taken into account when it comes to interpreting the programme, since students learn psychology from the second year of secondary school, and sociology from the third year." On 19 October 2022, the Serbian Biological Society distanced itself from this statement by publishing a press release that stated that its opinion "related clearly and unambiguously only to the scientific basis of the biology curriculum for 8th grade primary school pupils and did not deal with the issue of textbook content, much less the possible need to change it. Moreover, the representative of the SBD in the NPS was the only one to vote against the conclusion, explaining that the second part of the conclusion did not reflect the position of the SBD."¹¹⁵

Based on the conclusion and position of the National Education Council, on 20 September 2022, the Minister of Education sent a request to the Institute for the Advancement of Education to review the content of biology textbooks, i.e. to form a working group dedicated to this task. Although this whole process, according to the Minister, was initiated due to the public controversy, the same public was left in the dark as to who sat on the Working Group. ZUOV and the Ministry of Education were initially unwilling to disclose this information to the daily newspaper *Danas*, and only did so later after the newspaper's editorial board requested the information under the Law on

¹¹⁵ Saopštenje za javnost Srpskog biološkog društva: <https://www.serbiosoc.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Saop%C5%A1tenje-SBD.pdf>

Free Access to Information of Public Importance.¹¹⁶ The public thus learned that none of the working group members was an expert in the field of biology or pedagogy, and that the members were known locally for their homophobic and transphobic attitudes. In fact, this seems to have been the sole criterion for their selection to this working group, which was created with the intention of removing from the textbooks all the content that the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Movement Dveri considered undesirable.

The working group quickly determined that deficiencies in seven of the eight approved biology textbooks for 8th grade primary school pupils, which had to do with the "biological meaning of adolescence", should be corrected. And then, as early as 3 October 2022, i.e. only three weeks after the Patriarch's public criticism of the textbooks, ZUOV sent an explanation to the publishers of seven of the eight textbooks,¹¹⁷ stating that they were obliged to submit the corrected manuscript of the textbook within ten working days. **In this way, the Ministry of Education has shown that it is extremely susceptible to the influence of the right-wing Dveri party and the Serbian Orthodox Church, which led a campaign directed against these textbooks.** With its actions and decisions, the Ministry has shown that it believes that entire teams of authors of the aforementioned textbooks, as well as experts who were part of the quality assessment procedure, are less valuable than the opinion of a working group that does not even include experts in the field of science that is being discussed.

The Serbian Biological Society, as one of the institutions that was consulted during this process in order to provide an expert opinion, publicly distanced itself from any responsibility for the formation and work of the body formed by ZUOV. Their response to the decision to change the textbooks was contained in the aforementioned statement, which states, among other things, the following:

¹¹⁶ An article in the daily newspaper *Danas*, "Danas saznaje: Ko su članovi radne grupe koja je utvrdila nedostatke u udžbenicima biologije za osmi razred", published on 24 Oct. 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/danas-saznaje-ko-su-clanovi-radne-grupe-ko-ja-je-utvrdila-nedostatke-u-udjzbenicima-biologije-za-osmi-razred/>

¹¹⁷ The publishers are Klet, Institute for Textbooks, Eduka, Data Status, Gerundium, Vulkan Publishing and Novi Logos.

Moreover, we consider the well-established practice of partial modification of already approved textbooks without clearly defined criteria to be poor. We are concerned about the fact that as many as seven out of the eight textbooks have been changed. Perhaps it could be accepted that the authors of one or two textbooks did not interpret the programme precisely enough, but that the vast majority did so is unlikely.

Particularly worrying is how the textbooks have been edited. From interviews with the authors, we learned that the working group has denied the authors any autonomy in editing the text within the framework of possible suggestions, guidelines or requests, and instead has made direct interventions in the text, deleting or changing individual parts. This procedure is very reminiscent of censorship, to which the SBD is firmly opposed out of principle.¹¹⁸

Criticism of the Ministry's decision, as well as an analysis of the entire process that led to the withdrawal of the textbooks, was also published by a group of experts who came together at the initiative of the Gender Research Laboratory, which operates within the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (IFDT) of the University of Belgrade. This interdisciplinary group, made up of numerous experts from all relevant disciplines (biology, pedagogy, psychology, law, medicine and sociology), conducted a detailed analysis of all procedures, evaluating both the procedures themselves and the content issues related to this case.¹¹⁹ Altogether, 32 people took part in the analysis. On 24 November 2022, the Gender Research Laboratory organised a press conference at the Media Centre to present the results of the group's analysis.¹²⁰ One of the signatories of this document, Biljana Stojković, a professor at the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Biology and a member of the commission that proposed the 8th grade biology programme, sharply criticised the Ministry's decision in the media, stating that "politics has once again prevailed over profession" and that this is the "capitulation of the state to the church".¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Press release of the Serbian Biological Society: <https://www.serbiosoc.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Saop%C5%A1tenje-SBD.pdf>

¹¹⁹ Expert opinion of the interdisciplinary commission established on the initiative of the IFDT: <https://ifdt.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Strucno-misljenje-interdisciplinarne-komisije.pdf>

¹²⁰ IFDT – Conference for Metalworkers: <https://ifdt.bg.ac.rs/2022/11/protiv-cenzure-nauke-u-udzbenicima-biologije/>

¹²¹ "Crkva pobedila nauku": Profesorka Biljana Stojković o odluci da se menjaju udžbenici biologije", *Today*, 4 Oct. 2022, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/profesorka-biljana-stojkovic-o-odluci-da-se-menjaju-udzbenici-biologije-crkva-pobedi-la-nauku/>

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Anti-gender narratives in

Nađa Bobičić

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Jovan Džoli Ulićević

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Montenegro — the use of democratic methods against gender and democracy

This report represents the most recent research on anti-gender narratives in Montenegro. It comes at a politically important moment, as the regional influence of conservative actors has been growing stronger in recent years. The attack on gender equality is one of the main areas of mobilisation for such actors, as evidenced by other texts in this publication that analyse the situation in Croatia and Serbia. In parallel with these processes, Montenegro experienced a change of government in August 2020, after thirty years of neo-liberal rule that was responsible for the "democratic transition", for the creation of an unprecedented class gap, for the rise in corruption, and for the strengthening of right-wing forces and the Serbian Orthodox Church, the latter of which serving as a proxy for the imperialist policy of Serbia and Russia.¹²² This is a moment in which parties of different political orientations have taken power, but who all share one thing in common, namely that they flirt with or openly support anti-gender actors, a fact that we illustrate with the following analysis.

¹²² More in: Digital Forensic Center (DFC), *Threats to Democratic Processes in Montenegro: Mapping the Impact*, 2023, <https://dfc.me/dfc-studija-prijetnje-demokratiskim-procesima-u-crnoj-gori-mapiranje-uticaja/>

After over a decade of negotiations by Montenegro within the EU accession process, but also eleven years since the organisation of the country's first Pride March, Montenegro still doesn't have gender equality policies in place. During that time, Montenegro prided itself on its position as a "leader in the region" in terms of respecting the human rights of LGBTIQ+ people, which enabled pinkwashing. A striking example of this practice occurred when RTCG, the Montenegrin public broadcasting service, attempted to instrumentalise the Pride March to justify broadcasting Bishop Joanikije's enthronement as the new Metropolitan of Montenegro on the Parliamentary Channel. Despite its claimed leadership, Montenegro quickly became a country where at least five women were killed within nine months¹²³ and where a debate on the right to abortion was organised by the public broadcaster – one which not only accorded respect to the opinions of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Islamic Community representatives, but also saw the priest Gojko Perović be one of the most vocal speakers. In addition, Jakov Milatović, the former Minister of Economy and the president of Montenegro since 2023, asked for consultations with the Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church regarding the creation of birth rate policies.¹²⁴ Furthermore, hate speech has increased across the board, especially targeting women, LGBTIQ+ people, and people with disabilities, even reaching the Parliament of Montenegro.¹²⁵ A high degree of tolerance and a reluctance to condemn such attitudes have strengthened the hostile environment, one in which MPs refuse to apologise for their statements and take any responsibility.¹²⁶ These are just some of the events of the past few years that illustrate the growing strength of anti-gender narratives, while at the same time highlighting a broader (re)action by the feminist movement, which consists of only a few active, tireless and vocal organisations, has very often been lacking.

123 Nikolić, Predrag, "Nižu se žrtve porodičnog nasilja: The System as an Accomplice in Crime", *Monitor online*, 1 Jul. 2022: <https://www.monitor.co.me/nizu-se-zrtve-porodicnog-nasilja-sistem-kao-saucesnik-u-zlocinu/>

124 "Milatović upoznao mitropolita Joanikija sa mjerama Vlade donijetim u cilju unapređenja nataliteta", *Vijesti online*, 25 Mar. 2022. Available at: <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/ekonomija/596810/milatovic-upoznao-mitropolita-joanikija-sa-mjerama-vlade-donijetim-u-cilju-unapredjenja-nataliteta>

125 Tomović, Predrag, "Osude novih napada Demokratskog fronta na LGBTIQ u Crnoj Gori", *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 23 Dec. 2021. Available at: <https://www.slobodna-evropa.org/a/crna-gora-demokratski-front-lgbtqi/31623211.html>

126 "Vučurović: Neka me smijene sa mjesta predsjednika Odbora, važnija su mi uvjerenja od funkcije", *Standard*, 25 Dec. 2021. Available at: <https://www.slobodna-evropa.org/a/crna-gora-demokratski-front-lgbtqi/31623211.html>

To comprehend anti-gender politics in Montenegro, we must first understand both the context in which Montenegro finds itself now and the context in which different actors and policies developed after the fall of self-managed socialism in Yugoslavia. These policies were not created today, but were very topical both before the opening of the process of accession to the European Union, and afterwards when Montenegro used the human rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people to score political points in the process of European integration.¹²⁷ In the following analysis, we examine anti-gender movements and anti-gender narratives by contextualising them into the broader narratives promoted by the actors dominant on the Montenegrin political scene, in order to better understand their methods, goals and motivations.

Although the anti-gender movement in Montenegro is still not very large, at least not yet, it is certainly not lacking in strategies. These are much the same strategies that they have yielded substantial results in other countries around the world, undermining democracy and bringing right-wing clerical forces to power. And it is these very forces that instrumentalise the violation of human rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people for political and material gain. In this context, this analysis will use two representative case studies – one on the abortion debate hosted by Montenegro's public broadcaster and the other on the Serbian Orthodox Church's organisation of a "moleban" or religious rally against the Montenegro Pride march – to identify anti-gender actors in Montenegro as well as outline their narratives and strategies. We will also examine the arguments of progressive actors, and discuss the lessons that can be learned from them. The aim here is that the movements that fight against anti-gender politics can be more effective and more organised, while taking a more strategic approach that provides alternatives and not just resistance. The sensitive nature of the moment was one of the motivations for conducting this research so that, while there is still time, we can react as quickly as possible and make it more difficult for anti-gender tendencies to expand unchecked and build additional infrastructures. International experience so far has taught us that conservative

127 Feminist and queer organisations have often spoken about this instrumentalisation of human rights. For more information, see the Center for Women's Rights, the LGBTIQ Association Queer Montenegro, the Spektra Association, the LGBTQ Women's Association STANA, the NGO Juventas, and members of the coalition "Equal", which brings together over 40 NGOs that are active in advocating for gender equality.

processes can move forward quickly because, among other things, in the initial stages they tend to fall under the radar and can easily be written off as obscure right-wing ideas without widespread support.

In order to look at the Montenegrin situation in a broader context, the framework we use in this research relies on the conclusions from the cross-country comparative action research project *Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice*, which runs from October 2019 to September 2025. Over the course of six years, the project, hosted by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex in Brighton, UK, has been developing collaborations between research centres and organisations from six partner countries, Brazil, Bangladesh, India, Kenya, Lebanon and Uganda, including four short-term partnerships with organisations in India, Pakistan, Serbia and Turkey. We have chosen this framework as it takes into account different global contexts, thus decentralising the approaches taken to anti-gender tendencies, which means we also look at our region in the context of these wider networks.

The global anti-gender movement has grown so much that, despite all the regional differences, it is now clear that the right-wing counter-revolution is reaching all corners of the world. Hence the phrase *countering backlash*, which refers to the conservative assault on gender equality in the first phase of anti-gender mobilisation, spearheaded by the Vatican in response to the UN World Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 and the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Since then, right-wing actors, led by religious leaders, political populists, conservative media, and intellectuals, have worked hard to slow or reverse any progress towards greater gender equality. Their targets were reproductive rights, women's bodily freedom and the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community. Of course, the regional context should be considered too. Thus, for our post-Yugoslav region,¹²⁸ one could argue that the conservative counter-coup was ushered in by the devastation of war, only to be later transformed during the period of the so-called neoliberal transition.

¹²⁸ We use this term rather than the term Western Balkans, which we consider more bureaucratic and, in a way, even colonising. On the other hand, post-Yugoslav contains a reference to the period after Yugoslavia, i.e. a period during which there was a conservative counter-coup, or counter-revolution, carried out in the most brutal way through the wars of the 1990s.

When it comes to the forms of action used by conservative actors, we can single out a few that make them so successful, effective, and consequently very dangerous for gender equality. Firstly, for conservative actors, no battle is ever too small or too unimportant. For them, it is equally important to respond to seemingly incidental things such as minimal changes to textbooks or detailed matters such as government budget procedures, while also conducting broad social campaigns to eliminate the right to abortion, gender transition and same-sex partnerships or to halt the creation of avenues for legal gender recognition. Secondly, they are patient with their efforts and do not get discouraged when they attract only small numbers of people at first. Thirdly, through their lobbying, they connect various actors such as large capitalists, clergy, political parties, public figures and intellectuals, and in some countries women's organisations that espouse an essentialist view of gender. In this way, they are constantly expanding their influence and addressing different social groups. Their lobbying activities also facilitate a continuous flow of support, often via non-transparent channels, which are very rarely monitored or detected by organisations dealing with corruption prevention, let alone by feminist organisations. Fourthly, they work together despite their differences. Even when they disagree on all other issues – for example, the feuding Christian and Islamic religious communities – when it comes to attacking gender equality, they set aside their differences and cooperate. And fifthly, after infiltrating the state apparatus, they redirect and pump additional money into new "branches" not only within the framework of nation states, but also more broadly, ironically building a *global counter-movement*.

Methodology

In the analysis of the two case studies, we were guided by the methodological framework proposed in the publication "Grasping Patriarchal Backlash: A brief for smarter countermoves",¹²⁹ adapting it somewhat to the local context.

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The first pattern that we have adopted concerns the main protagonists, who the authors of this publication compare to different chess pieces. According to this symbolic division, the "pawns" are men's rights actors and so-called manosphere communities; the "kings and queens" are patriarchal populist authoritarian leaders and aspiring dictators; the "bishops/mullahs" are religious fundamentalists and aspiring theocrats; the "knights" are ethno-nationalist, mythopoetic neo-fascists and racist movements; and the "towers/rooks" are private wealth, hyper-capitalists, aristocrats and economic elites. This is in contrast to the actors working to counter the anti-gender backlash, which according to Edström, Khan, Greig and Skinner, include researchers, activists, policymakers, donors and other stakeholders and decision-makers.

Conditionally speaking, we have adapted this scheme of opposing conservative and progressive actors to the Montenegrin context. We have omitted the chess metaphor in the analysis, grouping the actors instead into categories conservative/right-wing, progressive and governmental. The latter are not as neutral as it may seem at first glance, but state institutions are considered a separate category because it is here where the struggle for influence is waged, as evidenced by their increasing infiltration by right-wing actors. In the first case study, we classified state institutions as anti-gender actors, because this analysis did not include neutral state actors, and we wanted to avoid including state actors who simply did not react, while also believing that a non-reaction by institutions also contributes to the relativisation and empowerment of anti-gender actors. We have expanded the analysis by introducing a regional and international perspective, because the collected material has shown that Montenegrin actors themselves often refer to this broader context and note the importance of globally influential "players" in issues related to the anti-gender backlash on gender equality.

129 Jerker Edström, Ayesha Khan, Alan Greig, Chloe Skinner, "Grasping Patriarchal Backlash: A brief for smarter countermoves," *Countering Backlash: Reclaiming Gender Justice*, Issue 1, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (January 2023): 1–6.

In addition to describing the key actors on both sides of the anti-gender movement in Montenegro, we analyse what their attitudes are in relation to three key topics or levels: body, family and nation. Without understanding this axis – from the personal to the most broadly social – we would fail to gain insights into the structural relationships that form anti-gender policies.

CASE 1:

Moleban of the Serbian Orthodox Church for the "Sanctity of Marriage and Family"

Anti-Gender Rhetoric of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro

This case study deals with one of the rarely organised gatherings for the preservation and promotion of the heterosexual family in Montenegro, and in opposition to the Montenegro Pride March. When Montenegro Pride was first held in 2013, numerous counter-events were organised, mostly by the Serbian Orthodox Church or with its support, which included raising awareness on the ground. In order to adequately address the narrative during the moleban itself, we must approach the analysis of the narrative of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro in relation to LGBTIQ+ issues. This also concerns topics that are contrary to the values for which the queer movement stands, while situating them within the broader narrative of this actor, because as we show later in the analysis, the discourse on LGBTIQ+ issues never exists in isolation, but in parallel and in correlation with other topics, especially discourse on the nation and the status of the Church. Fully aware of the volume of discourse data that can be analysed when it comes to this topic, we focused on key statements that typically resonated widely in the public and that were the most relevant in relation to the three levels – body, family and nation – that we analysed.

On the eve of the 10th Montenegro Pride event, which was held on 8 October 2022 under the slogan "No more butts", a moleban "for the sanctity of marriage and the preservation of the family" was organised by the Serbian Orthodox Church in Podgorica, in front of the Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ. The religious rally was also attended by the well-known fascist pro-Serbian and pro-Russian group **Night Wolves**, as well as numerous state actors, i.e. representatives of political parties and government institutions. The Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral (MCP) announced that the moleban was organised because events were being held in Montenegro that directly destroyed the God-ordained sanctity of marriage and family and undermined traditional values. They invited all those who cherish traditional values, morality and faith to come to the supplicatory prayer with Slava icons, but without political insignia, slogans and banners.

WHO ARE THE KEY ANTI-GENDER ACTORS?

Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro: From Amfilohije through Jovan Plamenac and Velibor Džomić to Gojko Perović and Joanikije Mićović

During all these years, the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro has played a significant role in spreading various fascist views, including anti-LGBT attitudes. These attitudes have come in many shapes and forms, from the proliferation of hate speech to portraying love between gay people as **"violence against the general population"**. By twisting the narrative that those who experience violence commit violence, such arguments aim to persuade the general population, whom anti-gender actors want to mobilise, to view themselves as the victim, and thus implicitly call on them to **defend** themselves and **defend endangered "traditional" values**.

"I belong to that group of citizens who build and nurture a Christian family. The tenets of the Christian family are, first of all, heterosexual marriage, which involves preparing for that marriage in a normal moral and chaste way and not in a lewd way. I personally felt threatened after watching that video. It was an aggression against me, against the environment in which I raise my children. So when I expect a football commercial, don't impose upon me some LGBT advertisement," said priest Gojko Perović. (*Vijesti*, 2011, Gojko Perović: LGBT video promotes fornication, debauchery and violence)

One example of **hate speech** is the statement below by **priest Jovan Plamenac** in 2016, which is the first reported case of a Montenegrin priest engaging in hate speech against LGBT persons, and the first case in which the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms of Montenegro determined that language used by a priest constituted hate speech.¹³⁰

"Let the killing of children in their mother's wombs stop. Let them restore both dignity and fairness to us and to education and culture. Let the Montenegrin moustache return to where it belongs – no longer on the buttocks of homosexuals, but on our glorious ancestors," said priest Jovan Plamenac. (*Radio Free Europe*, 2016, LGBT community expects an apology from the priest of the Serbian Orthodox Church)

However, as the years passed, events happened with less and less reaction from the Church. The news resounded through the region when **Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović** granted the blessing of baptism to a transgender man before sex reassignment surgery. The story was predominantly portrayed in a positive light, but with very little critical scrutiny of the statements made by the Serbian Orthodox Church. In this case, the Church clearly explained its position on bodily changes by focusing on the medical rationale, emphasising that there had been no change in its stance on same-sex partnerships, which it still considered a sin. The Church went on to condemn "gender ideology", thus confirming that it was still opposed to gender equality.

¹³⁰ Protector of human rights and freedoms of Montenegro. (2016). Opinion. https://www.ombudsman.co.me/docs/1463660404_13052016-preporuka-km.pdf

"They further emphasise that cases of gender reassignment for justified and very specific medical reasons represent a completely different reality from the propaganda and justification of same-sex relations, mindless gender ideology and the like, which, as they add, have been witnessed in recent decades, and which, without any doubt, constitute a sin." (*Portal Analitika*, 2019, Metropolitanate of the Serbian Orthodox Church: The baptism of a transgender person is nothing new)

In this context, the Church is portrayed as more progressive than the state ("The Church, in relation to the state, has made a huge step forward" – Bojana Jokić, BBC Serbia, 2019, Montenegro: The first baptism of a transgender person in Podgorica). This marked the beginning of the Serbian Orthodox Church's "pinkwashing" in relation to the Law on Freedom of Religion and the Liturgy, which would later be interpreted by some in Montenegrin society as an emancipatory movement for civil liberties, positioning the Church as a progressive force and a catalyst for democratic change. In future analyses, it would be beneficial to pay attention to how public actors who offered this interpretation are connected to the Serbian Orthodox Church and to what their actual or potential role in the structure of the Montenegrin anti-gender movement has been. Authors such as Boban Batrićević, a historian, call this process a counter-revolution, and their analysis draws parallels with the one that took place in 1989, when real socialism was overthrown, the clericalisation of society was greatly enhanced, and nationalism and fascism grew stronger, which resulted in the Yugoslav wars.¹³¹

On that note, the Church was also surprisingly quiet when the Law on Same-Sex Life Partnerships was passed in 2020. By analysing such processes in a broader context, one can see how anti-gender actors politically instrumentalise certain gender-related issues. As a speaker and representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the **priest Gojko Perović** played a prominent role at the moleban. He very often presents himself to the public as part of the "moderate wing" of the Church and is known for his "pro-democratic" narrative. As this analysis shows, however, Perović frequently uses this same narrative

¹³¹ Boban Batrićević, *Diary of a Counter-Revolution* (Cetinje: Montenegrin PEN Center, FCJK – Faculty of Montenegrin Language and Literature, 2022).

to promote anti-gender attitudes, while at the same advocating in a receptive, populist way for greater involvement of the Church in social issues.

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In the religious rally of the Serbian Orthodox Church in 2022 on the occasion of Montenegro Pride, the statement of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral uses a narrative that places an emphasis on **love** ("Unfortunately, we are witnessing that nothing has devalued in our time as much as the word love") in opposition **to instinctive totalitarianism** ("We live in a time of instinctive totalitarianism, where sin, self-centeredness, self-love and personal preferences of individuals are set as a measure of love, truth and freedom, while in fact they are a degradation, perversion and meaningless expression in terms of love, truth and freedom"), and the family is emphasised **as the basis of productivity in society** ("It is in the family, as a domestic church, that persons first learn the blessed order, receiving an education in which they later advances their knowledge and multiply their talents, thus becoming a useful member of society and the community"), thus placing themselves in contrast **to the unproductive parts of society**. This clearly points to the capitalist logic of anti-gender actors, which is often declaratively anti-capitalist, which is typical of fascist actors, both throughout history and in contemporary social relations. Although the rhetoric in this statement performatively emphasised those values that should represent the benevolence of this gathering, this example shows the evolution towards a pro-democratic narrative, from an openly fascist one, which was characteristic of Metropolitan Amfilohije's statements in 2013 regarding the Pride March: "A tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire", while retaining the same key messages and analogies. This "evolution" shows the retention of the same attitudes, through the adoption of a slightly different narrative, so as not to antagonise the general public and distance itself from a Church that has long been accused of spreading fascist attitudes and hatred.

Analysing this text and comparing it with the text by Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović from 2013, clear parallels can be drawn, and it is clear that the same message has been reformulated in order to change the perception of the Church but achieve the same effect:

"This revolution of the new (ancient) pagan totalitarianism renders the sanctity of marriage meaningless, destroys the family, abolishes monogamy, transforms the mother's womb from the workshop of life into the workshop of death in the name of individual sexual satisfaction, legalises all sexual perversions, from sodomy to pederasty. Increasingly, even in education, premature seduction and sexuality are being forced, regardless of the general human experience and consensus that the premature application of anything immature and unadulterated can be detrimental to someone's health. Everyone knows how much the awakening of early sexuality harms children and young people, leading to early pregnancies and abortions, contributing to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, leaving deep emotional scars, incapacitating the young creature for true love and attachment, for respect for the individuality and uniqueness of the personality of the other."

(Portal Analitika, 2013, Metropolitan Amfilohije: The Church opposes the futile inflaming of male-to-male and female-to-female relationships.)

It is this "watered-down" version that can be seen in the text by the already mentioned priest Gojko Perović, entitled "Church Attitudes", published after the Pride March. In this text, he emphasises how the Church has softened its attitudes, adapted to the democratic rules of pluralism, and reduces the defence of the family to democracy, making naturalistic parallels. In this article, he purportedly debunks all "myths" about Church views, including that the Church is against LGBT rights. In his well-known manner, Perović presents his "ecclesiastical views" as a legitimate struggle for "the preservation of the traditional form of the family, **while the generation of people who do not remember their grandmother (but have two grandfathers from the same parent) and in which men carry an offspring for nine months in their wombs,**" emphasising that he supports everyone's rights to feel and belong, as long as it doesn't jeopardise one's family. In addition, he believes that there is nothing more "**democratic and civic**" than simply expressing his position against what threatens the family. With this argument, he presents himself as a worthy

opponent in defence of "family values", within the framework of democracy and the civic concept of human rights, thus propagating the classic right-wing narrative on **freedom of speech and participatory democracy**. Furthermore, he portrays the moleban as part of an emancipatory movement (which is his well-known thesis), but also the autochthonous movement of the "people", and Pride as a foreign and imported movement, which brings novelty to Montenegrin society in order to irreversibly change it and destroy its "traditions". This is how he added legitimacy to the religious rally while attempting to take away the legitimacy of the Pride March.

"A church protest that has risen against the anti-legal intention to confiscate someone's property outside the court, and to resolve the unique issue of property within the same state in two different ways according to two different legal approaches, can by no means have principled (not to mention substantive) similarities with the long line of citizens who demand that some future, yet-unborn people, without their consent, be left without a mother. Mothers, of course, of the female gender. **If it is a sin to cut down a tree, contrary to some wider social convention, what about cutting off a female parental figure from someone's childhood? And it's all because Mr. Dad has some selfish rights of his own.** The moleban defended the rights acquired over the centuries, while the **Pride Marches propose something that we have never had to deal with here.** And as much as all of this is, on the one hand, legitimate, it is at the same time, and precisely because it is legitimate, subject to criticism."

(Website of the Metropolitanate, 2022, Priest Gojko Perović: Church Attitudes)

This seemingly **democratic attitude**, as well as further pinkwashing, is also demonstrated in the alleged openness to cooperation with the LGBTIQ+ community, which is visible through the meeting held on 27 April 2023, which was attended by Perović as the only representative of religious communities. The meeting concluded that there is a common understanding on the unacceptability of discrimination and human rights violations, and views were exchanged on the status of the LGBTIQ+ community and their relationship with religious communities.

"The important conclusion is that **there are still certain bases on which the two sides can understand each other, and therefore represents a small but important step forward** towards building a better relationship between religious communities and the LGBTIQ+ community."

From this conclusion, it is not possible to determine which specific bases of mutual understanding have been established.

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Perović encouraged the democratic narrative nine years ago when he instrumentalised "LGBT ideology" to promote the official agenda of the Serbian Orthodox Church and to advocate the "softened" nationalist Greater Serbian agenda, which negates the Montenegrin nation and appropriates it into Serbian culture, linking LGBT human rights with the affirmation of the Montenegrin nation, while at the same time linking national symbols and tradition. Through this comparison, we can see the connection that the Church makes between the LGBT community and the nation because the Montenegrin nation and LGBT "ideology" are placed on the same plane as a product of modernity and decadence, while the symbols of (greater) Serbian nationalism are used as "traditional" values, which are characterised by the appropriation of Njegoš and the glorification of St. Sava and Vuk Karadžić.

"It is obvious that today the **LGBT ideology – which has no tradition in Montenegro** – is being forced into Montenegrin schools, streets and media, and that, for example, traditional values such as Njegoša, St. Sava and Vuk Karadžić are being forced out of the same schools, streets and media."

When all of the above is taken into account, it is not surprising that on the one hand the priest Perović advocates the separation of church and state, while on the other hand, he calls for the inclusion of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the working groups of institutions in which laws are created: "The church in a country that is predominantly Orthodox should have one representative in each of the institutions... An example is the public broadcaster RTCG. This owes to the fact that politics is a matter of morality, and this is what the Church is

primarily concerned with."When we consider that in many countries the tried and tested formula for building the infrastructure of anti-gender actors within institutions was precisely the use of anti-gender narratives, such statements are important warning signs.

STATE ACTORS

From the Democratic Front and the Socialist People's Party to the Christian Democrats

The religious rally organised by the Serbian Orthodox Church was also attended by two ministers in the then Government of Montenegro, which had prepared the Draft Law on Legal Gender Recognition Based on Self-Determination that year. These were the **Minister of Health, Dragoslav Šćekić**, and the Deputy Prime Minister and **Minister of Agriculture, Vladimir Joković**, both from the Socialist People's Party. Also present were the **current director of the Health Insurance Fund, Vuk Kadić**, from the same party as the ministers; **former Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić** and **former director of the ANB Dejan Vukšić**, founders of the Christian Democratic Party; as well as president of the Committee on Human Rights and Freedoms of the Parliament of Montenegro, **Jovan Vučurović**, a member of the Democratic Front. Most of these actors are known for their statements that are either highly homophobic, misogynistic and transphobic or supportive of the heteronormative family. Thus, Minister Joković claimed that "you cannot vote for someone who does not have children", claiming that "unrealised people cannot lead the country responsibly", and even implying that they **do not belong in Montenegro**.

Jovan Vučurović, although he chairs the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Freedoms, is known for his homophobic statements, and his explicit refusal to retract them and apologise. His narrative highlights elements of **ascribing the LGBTIQ+ movement to the Western agenda, labelling activists as mercenaries ("Sorosoids")** and making right-wing appeals to one's own freedom of speech without restriction ("I am a free man, and whoever wants to initiate the procedure in Parliament to remove me from the position of chair of the Committee on Human Rights and Freedoms can do that, but I'm not going to change my beliefs for anything and not because I hold a particular role, yet this bastard doesn't understand that.") In addition, one of the methods he uses is an attempt to discredit the LGBT community, implying its connection with corruption, which is important because this is one of the main methods in Montenegro to discredit political opponents. (He stated that he doesn't pay too much attention to **"Sorosoids"** and NGOs that are looking to get their hands on a grant, so now they are concerned about the LGBT community. They have been **taking grants for years to protect Milo Đukanović, and now want to work against him**, because that's the way it is.")

Some of the state actors present at the moleban have also been known for introducing discriminatory measures within their departments and not doing anything to remove systemic obstacles to a dignified and quality life for all citizens. This is the case of Minister Dragoslav Šćekić, during whose mandate a number of rulebooks on medically assisted reproduction were introduced, which prohibits LGBTIQ+ people from accessing these methods, and whose cabinet, as well as the cabinet of his predecessors, did nothing to solve the problem of the shortage of hormone therapy treatments for transgender women, despite requests from civil society, especially the trans-feminist organisation Spektra. So, in addition to narrative methods, these state actors use institutional measures that introduce discriminatory regulatory practices, with little or no possibility of recourse. (In this case, there was a response from civil society that led to the institution of the Protector initiating a procedure against the Ministry of Health. However, this produced no results.)

WHO ARE THE KEY PROGRESSIVES?

MONTENEGRO PRIDE

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On 8 October 2022, the tenth annual Montenegro Pride event was held under the slogan "No more buts", and was the country's largest Pride March to date. During the preparatory activities, as well as during the Pride March itself, messages of **freedom, resistance, anti-fascism, love and unity** were communicated. These key points can also be seen as the key messages communicated by progressive actors.

"We choose to **resist the chains, to believe in freedom and to fight for it**. That's why this year we're telling everyone that in **our fight for our human rights**, there are no more buts," said Miloš Knežević, executive director of the LGBTIQ+ association Queer Montenegro, when announcing the Pride March. With regard to the constant debate about whether Montenegro Pride should be a protest or a celebration, the organisers chose an alternative path – that the Pride event would be both protest and celebration:

"There have been long discussions about whether we want Montenegro Pride to be more of a celebration or a protest, both this year and in previous years. We're all aware of the **need for continuing to protest** and to speak out through every avenue available to us about the problems we still encounter, but we're also aware of the emptiness that years of pain have left in each of us and that the **celebration of love in communion** must fill and overwhelm us, so it can't just be a protest," said Knežević.

The demands that were made during the announcement of Montenegro Pride addressed the current needs of the LGBTIQ+ community, such as the creation of **sanctions for hate speech, the full implementation of the Strategy for the Human Rights of LGBTI Persons, the adoption of laws and bylaws that would enable the implementation of the Law on Life Partnership of Persons of the Same Sex, and the identification of solutions for the lack of hormone therapy treatments for trans women**.

At the Pride March itself, many statements were heard that were **a direct response to the opposition organised in the form of religious rallies**, which included statements aimed at promoting empowerment and resistance:

"And you justify it by saying all this is for the love of God. **Our family is being destroyed by those who are comfortable with the unrest.** Instead of introducing us to the Kingdom of Heaven, they give us an apple and say that we can see God if we eat it," said Hana Konatar, who gave a speech in a Lucifer costume, because, as she explained, she was subjected to tales of Hell's fire and brimstone as a child. This performance also represented an artistic expression of the appropriation of violence and its transformation into empowerment.

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There were also statements that **denounced pinkwashing** by officials ("We will not agree to them coming to the Pride March to be photographed with us. We want results. There are no more buts," said Kalezić), as well as statements that served as a reminder **of anti-fascist values** (We are fighting, as Kalezić added, to create an anti-fascist society based on solidarity. "It's important that the Pride March is seen and felt as a civil protest. We don't agree to any more 'buts', because we don't have the privilege of ever being able to back down from violence again," stated Jovan Ulićević, executive director of Spektra, while Staša Baštrica, gender equality programme coordinator of Queer Montenegro, called for "death to fascism, death to religious extremism.") In addition, there were calls for an **explicit introduction of education on sexual orientation in schools**. The Pride March also featured banners that directly referred to the moleban, such as "Christians for love and freedom" and "Practice the liturgy within your own four walls", as well as numerous anti-fascist statements of solidarity: "Humanity means defending the freedom of others", "We will not give away our own", "Our freedom is also your freedom", "Hormone therapy for all", "Queer brigade", "Montenegro = Anti-fascism" and many others.

These examples point to the potential of linking the queer struggle with anti-fascist values, as well as of situating the queer struggle in the context of a broader struggle for a democratic society

based on solidarity. Although the narrative contains liberal demands, which are useful and are grounded in the framework of social action, it is important to note the potential for intersectionality and to demonstrate the connection between the problems faced by LGBTIQ+ people and women and those that affect the entire society. This narrative can also be seen in the 2023 edition of Montenegro Pride, which continued this practice under the slogan "Self-determination" and during which messages that **linked self-determination with self-management** and calls for **internationalism and solidarity** and for the end of **colonisation, genocide and all oppressive policies, with a strong emphasis on poverty, could be heard.**¹³²

Representatives of Political Parties and Embassies

Representatives of political parties and embassies who appear at Montenegro Pride and who support LGBTIQ+ human rights and gender equality convey mostly liberal messages calling for respect for human rights, equality, democracy and the rule of law.

The tenth edition of Montenegro Pride was attended by Ivan Vuković, a representative of the Democratic Party of Socialists and at the time the mayor of Podgorica, along with his team. Also in attendance were Božena Jelušić, a member of the civic movement URA; Draginja Vuksanović, a member of the Social Democratic Party; Fatmir Đeka, Minister of Human and Minority Rights and a representative of the Albanian Coalition; Ana Novaković Djurovic, then Minister of Ecology, Spatial Planning and Urban Planning and a current MP for the URA party; and Goran Djurovic, then Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

¹³² "Pride March held in Podgorica under the slogan 'Self-determination'", *Radio Free Europe*, 2023. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/prajd-crna-gora-podgorica-samoodredjenje/32648089.html>

Some of their statements included:

"People have the right to express themselves; we have to respect human rights; this is a country that aspires to the European Union. The Earth is as rich as it is free. Of course, things can always be even better; we do have a few laws to pass," said Fatmir Đeka.

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"People living in same-sex unions should enjoy the same rights. Love is love," said Draginja Vuksanović.

"We are sending a message of freedom. Today we will walk in good spirits and send messages of love and tolerance," said Ivan Vuković.

These statements show that representatives of political parties link human rights to European integration and to the adoption of appropriate laws. Also, by emphasising love, the perception is created that the main problem of the LGBTIQ+ community is the inability to live freely with those they love, while talking about tolerance promotes coexistence with those with whom we disagree, including LGBTIQ+ people. It is also important to devote analysis to determining the effectiveness, limitation and reach of such statements, especially when we take into account that those in the 2023 parliamentary elections whose programmes addressed the needs of LGBTIQ+ people focused exclusively on the topics of protection from violence and the adoption of a new LGBTIQ+ strategy. In this sense, we recommend performing a deeper analysis of the effectiveness of liberal messages as counter-arguments to anti-gender narratives, while also examining whether such messages can help create supportive and solidarity-based narratives in society.

MEDIA

Several media outlets have critically reported on the moleban against Montenegro Pride. Some of them have already been mentioned in the quotes above, but in this section we will look at the media whose coverage contained a critical review of the events being analysed.

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The daily newspaper *Vijesti* ran an article critically entitled "Where was the moleban at times of domestic violence? How fighting for someone's rights can pose a threat". It was signed by the *Vijesti* editorial board and gave a voice to "all interested parties", i.e. it conveyed the statements of LGBTIQ+ organisations, political parties and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Throughout the text, a parallel is drawn between the various forms of violence on which the Serbian Orthodox Church is silent and does not organise molebans, trying to point out the inconsistency of the Church: "Yesterday, the MCP and the Diocese of Budimlje-Nikšić did not respond to *Vijesti's* questions as to why the Serbian Orthodox Church did not excommunicate or in any way sanction Bishops Kacavenda and Pachomi, and whether the activities of mafiosi and war criminals to whom the Serbian Orthodox Church, in the words of Patriarch Porfirije, has been awarding medals for decades, are 'blessed'." It remains an important question to what extent this approach contributes to the fight against the anti-gender movement, considering that one of the anti-gender actors (priest Gojko Perović) is one of this newspaper's most important columnists. In these columns, he communicates his "pro-democratic positions" through which he promotes not only anti-gender narratives but also legitimises the participation of the Church in the work of institutions, as well as religious rallies as an emancipatory movement. To effectively combat the anti-gender movement and its methods, it is not enough just to point out the its inconsistencies in relation to the topic of violence; it is also important to expose the anti-gender movement's structural connections and political and economic interests (individual and/or shared interests) and to place them in a broader political context, so as to ensure that the movement's overall agenda is examined analytically and critically. In this endeavour, critical investigative media play a key role in preventing the relativisation of anti-gender policies and all other related policies.

CASE 2.

Abortion Debate on Montenegro's Public Broadcaster

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The abortion debate organised by the national public service broadcaster, Radio Television of Montenegro (RTCG), was preceded by two key events. The first of these was a globally visible blow to reproductive rights, which came in 2022 when the US Supreme Court overturned the 1973 Roe vs Wade ruling that had provided the right to abortion at the federal level. That decision, or rather its global repercussions, encouraged local right-wing actors to express similar views to the public. In the context of our region, this echo seems particularly forced. It is obvious that the communication channels of the global right-wing counter-movement are exerting an influence, because abortion was legalised in socialist states long before it was in most Western countries. Available since the 1950s, this right was officially included in the 1974 Constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, putting the state in a unique position internationally in this regard. From the forefront of reproductive rights during socialism to their collapse after the 1990s, the march of progress was relatively short-lived due to the backlash carried out by the conservative actors who are currently dominant across the post-Yugoslav political space. In such a context, it is possible for priests to enter into debates about reproductive health and about a woman's right to bodily autonomy in general.

On the other hand, the priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro issued a statement supporting the annulment of the Roe v. Wade ruling, which appeared in the daily newspaper Dan. The Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, **Joanikije Mićović**, said the following in the statement:

"Intentionally terminating a pregnancy at any stage is a terrible sin and is directed directly against the original biblical

commandment of God to give birth. A man alienated from God wants to legitimise what is against God's law, which is, on the one hand, an expression of pernicious selfishness and self-centredness, and, on the other, an escape from life, giving up love and God's blessing. This sin leaves grave and long-lasting and traumatic consequences on the soul of the parents and is only cured by sincere and long-lasting repentance. Because of the above, we welcome every initiative to protect unborn children, especially that of the Supreme Court of the United States, as humane, saving and God-pleasing."¹³³

The same text contains a quote from Metropolitan Joanikije's predecessor, Amfilohije Radović, who also opposed abortion, calling it "infanticide, humanicide, Christicide and deicide", saying that "it is no coincidence" that this right was "legalised at the time of the atheisation of the human race", which at every opportunity confirms the anti-communist position of the Church:

"It is no wonder that in these same times Mother's Day was replaced by the celebration of 'women' (Women's Day), that is, something impersonal. The womb of a woman was created to be a workshop of life. By killing conceived children, the mother's womb turns into a workshop of death, as stated by the late Metropolitan Amfilohije."

In these two statements, another specificity of the region can be seen: through anti-gender discourses in our region, right-wing discourses from both the West and the East are refracted. On the one hand, we have a right-wing influence in the form of positive reactions to conservative policies in the United States. On the other hand, the Metropolitan criticises Women's Day, a holiday founded by communist women who started the February Revolution in Tsarist Russia. To what extent Amfilohije Radović was aware of the historical meanings inscribed on

¹³³ Milica Krgović, "Metropolitan Joanikije on the initiative to abolish the right to abortion in the United States: The Voice of Reason from the U.S. Court", *Day*, 10 May 2022. Available at: <https://www.dan.co.me/vijesti/drustvo/mitropolit-joanikije-o-inicijativi-da-se-ponisti-pravo-na-abortus-u-sad-glas-razuma-iz-americkog-suda-5119385>

Women's Day cannot be determined with certainty from this quote, but the criticism of socialist "atheistic" times and the influence of right-wing actors from both West and East on anti-gender movements in Serbia is certainly obvious.¹³⁴

In these statements, one can already see the essence of the Church's views on the body (and soul), which is further developed in the television debate analysed below. In addition, at the discursive level, there is an insistence on contradictions: life versus death, God-pleasing versus sinful, love versus implied hatred. Emotionally charged terms, such as child protection, traumatic consequences, and even the word "murder" in the context of abortion rights, are also employed. However, the contradiction enters the picture the moment the term **"workshop of life"** is used. Suddenly, questions of spirituality shift into the capitalist discourse of the "production" of life, which is only a step away from the idea of "producing" a nation. This discursive intrusion is not without a deeper meaning, because already at the level of language one can see the conservative triad that connects the body, family and nation.

After the global consolidation of right-wing efforts towards the attack on abortion and the repercussions in the Montenegrin public through the appearance of Metropolitan Joanikije, the media entered the scene via an episode of the public service TV show "Naglas" ("Out Loud"). This particular episode focused on the right to abortion, and RTCG changed its title three times – from "Abortion – a Woman's, State or Church Issue", to "The Right to Terminate a Pregnancy – YES or NO?" and then finally to "Abortion – From Constitutional Right to a Taboo Topic?" – from the time of the announcement to the actual broadcast on 16 May 2022. The show was hosted and written by the journalist **Marija Marković**, and her guests for this episode were **Dr Slađana Ćorić** from the Montenegrin Ministry of Health; **Dr Vojislav Šimun**, a specialist in gynaecology and obstetrics at the Clinical Centre of Montenegro (KCCG), Archpriest Stavrophor of the Serbian Orthodox Church **Gojko Perović**, and **Paula Petričević**, a feminist, activist and professor of philoso-

134 Nada Bobičić i Marijana Stojčić, „Antirodni diskurs u medijima u Srbiji,” *CM: Communication and Media* Vol.18, Br. 1 (2023): 3-31. <https://doi.org/10.5937/cm18-42035>

phy. Before the recording of the show, a group of predominantly female citizens gathered in front of RTCG's headquarters to protest, firstly, that this issue was being discussed as if it were up for debate and not a guaranteed right, and, secondly, that a priest was included in the debate. The protest was announced on social networks under the title "What belongs to a woman is hers – what belongs to the Pope is his".

As a case study, this show is interesting for a number of reasons. On one level, questions are raised about the role and social significance of the media. The first is what limits should there be on a media debate format that opens the door to questioning an individual's human rights. The second is to what extent can editorial policies, especially those of public service broadcasters, raise the visibility of conservative social actors, especially when we take into account that the enthronement of Metropolitan Joanikije was broadcast on RTCG's Parliamentary Channel. On the other hand, the debate format itself provides valuable material for analysis, because it directly challenges the views of progressive and right-wing actors. In addition, actors connected to the state apparatus in various ways are introduced into the story – health care professionals as participants in the debate and RTCG's editorial board members as the creators and producers of the debate show. The debate also sparked multiple reactions in the run-up to, during and after the broadcast, prompting the analysis to be expanded to include the actors involved in these responses.

WHO ARE THE KEY PLAYERS IN THE DEBATE?

State actors

As for the order of speaking during the debate, RTCG's editorial board put representatives of the profession at the start of the programme: Dr Slađana Ćorić from the Montenegrin Ministry of Health and Dr Vojislav Šimun, a specialist in gynaecology and obstetrics at the Clinical Centre of Montenegro. During the debate, it will seem as if the order of speaking begins with the "least vocal" participant and moves to the "loudest" speaker, both in terms of minutes and in terms of openly confrontational arguments. For the most part, the government official stuck to statements clothed in bureaucratese, while Dr Šimun stepped outside the language of medicine and bureaucracy, at one point even addressing the priest directly with the more familiar term "Father".

Part of the exchange between Marija Markovic and Dr Šimun concerned the right of gynaecologists to so-called conscientious objection on the one hand, but on the other the obligation of the state to fulfil a woman's right to have an abortion performed. In response to the moderator's question/comment formulated as to whether the invoking of conscience should be allowed to deny a woman's rights, the answer was again that a woman's right to abortion is guaranteed, and the state must somehow ensure that this right is upheld. However, a practical conclusion was not drawn about the consequences of the so-called practice of conscientious objection, should it become widespread, as is the case in neighbouring Croatia. In the second segment of the episode, this issue came up again, with Paula Petričević adding a counter-argument. She asked whether a cardiologist has the right to deny heart surgery to a patient for religious reasons, and if the answer to that question is a categorical no, then why is this possibility introduced at all for abortion.

Seen from this perspective, it becomes evident that under the guise of the so-called conscientious objection, which

puts religious views above even professional rules and the Hippocratic Oath, certain groups are attempting to sneak conservative ideas in through the back door. This is a well-known tactic of right-wing actors, who abuse democratic mechanisms by ironically demanding more rights for themselves, in order to try to abolish, or at least radically restrict, the rights of others, especially when it comes to gender and sexual equality.

A year after the debate, Dr Šimun became the Minister of Health in the 44th Government of Montenegro, which was elected on 31 October 2023. This new government is composed of 23 members, only four of whom are women, with none serving as deputy prime ministers, which means it has even less gender parity than previous governments, who also did not score high in this category.

PROGRESSIVE ACTORS — FEMINISTS and ACTIVISTS

Activists were directly involved in the debate through the participation of Paula Petričević, but also indirectly through the protest in front of RTCG's headquarters.¹³⁵ This group of activists, with the support of progressive allies, continued to be active after the debate aired, publishing original texts, issuing media statements and posting on social media.¹³⁶ Among those participating in the protest were activists Maja Miličković, Nada Drobnjak and Jelena Marković.

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The day after the debate was broadcast, the Centre for Women's Rights (CŽP) published the following succinct and decisive post on Facebook:

In lieu of an announcement:

¹³⁵ Most of the media covered the gathering, while somewhat more extensive reports from the protests were published, among others, in the following media reports: "Građanke poručile: Parola 'Vi nijeste za život, vi ste za kontrolu i moć' nikada nije bila važnija", *Cetinjski list/RTV Cetinje*, 16 May 2022. Available at: <https://cetinjski-list.com/gradanke-porucile-parola-vi-nijeste-za-zivot-vi-ste-za-kontrolu-i-moc-nikada-nije-bila-vaznija/>

Lela Šćepanović, "Posle pola vijeka od prava na abortus u Crnoj Gori pravi se pitanje", *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 17 May 2022. Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/31855117.html>

¹³⁶ Comments and responses are listed by date of publication: Duška Mihailović, "Žena nije inkubator za ispunjavanje želja ni crkve ni države", *Radio Titograd*, 17 May 2022. Available at: <https://radiotitograd.me/titogradske-vijesti/zena-nije-inkubator-za-ispunjavanje-zelja-ni-crkve-ni-drzave/>

Maja Miličković, "Odgovor Maje Miličković na reagovanje menadžmenta RTCG", *Gradska televizija*, radio, 18 May 2022: <https://gradski.me/odgovor-maje-milickovic-na-reagovanje-menadzmenta-rtcg/>

Zilha Kalač, "Mizoginija raširila krila, dvije godine klerikalizacije društva ostavile trag", *Portal Analitika* 23 May 2022. Available at: <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/mizoginija-rasirila-krila-dvije-godine-klerikalizacije-drustva-ostavile-trag>

K. Janković, "Nedopustivo da se vjerske institucije bave pitanjem prekida trudnoće", *Pobjeda*, 29 May 2022. Available at: https://issuu.com/novapobjeda/docs/pobjeda_29052022

Paula Petričević, "Abortus i rodno zasnovani govor mržnje", *Centar za istraživačko novinarstvo Crne Gore* (CIN), 6 Jun. 2022. Available at: <https://www.cin-cg.me/abortus-i-rodno-zasnovani-govor-mrznje/>

Dušan Pajović, "Ni državu ni boga blizu jajnika tvoga", *DiEM* 25, 6 Jun. 2022. Available at: <https://diem25.org/drzavu-boga-blizu-jajnika-tvoga/>

Jelena Šušanj, "Konzervativni vjetorvi duvaju u naš oblačić stečenih prava", *Portal Analitika*, 11 Jun. 2022. Available at: <https://www.portalanalitika.me/clanak/konzervativni-vjetorvi-duvaju-u-nas-oblacic-stecenih-prava>

Aleksandar Radoman, "Srpska Sparta i ristobiologizam", *Antena M*, 23 Jun. 2022. Available at: <https://www.antenam.net/stav/162496-srpska-sparta-i-ristobiologizam>

We will mount a strong response against any initiative to limit a woman's legally guaranteed right to a safe abortion and bodily autonomy, as well as against any organisation that launches such an initiative. The government, of which we are equal citizens, has a duty to protect our rights. Our bodies belong to no one but us!

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#mybodymychoice" (CPU, 17 May 2022)¹³⁷

During the debate, Paula Petričević answered four rounds of questions and was involved in several exchanges, primarily with Gorko Perović. The first of the questions she was asked was whether such topics were suitable for debate at all, or whether they should be treated as a guaranteed right on which society has a consensus. While starting from the assumption that one has the freedom to express different viewpoints, Petričević highlights the problem that arises when a worldview that denies women the right to freely decide about their own bodies seeks to impose itself on everyone. She explicitly exposes the process through which right-wing currents of thought have gradually, but increasingly, found their way into democratic institutions, thereby exerting pressure from within:

"It simply happened that not a single right has been won, not a single freedom that we enjoy has ever been won and preserved once and for all. And we should be aware of that. Today we are talking about **the right to manage one's own body**, but tomorrow we may be talking about another right. So, no right is preserved forever, it's not given to us with any guarantee. **We don't have a guarantee of that.** In this sense, we have an obligation to defend those rights won through bloodshed and struggle whenever they are threatened."

Despite this warning, she notes that the situation in Montenegro is still not as bad as in the region, and that there is no reason to panic for the time being. At the end of the debate, she concludes that she

¹³⁷ Centar za ženska prava. (2022). Umjesto saopštenja. Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/womensrightscenter.mne/posts/5295821187130743/?paipv=o&eav=AfZ-vSzsgdpbbNX8LcFLtqDqAxIJRGm6Nel_oMrJ5GVtoeWoh4mjhxPfx1SwTa5fXE&_rdr

hopes that the legal procedures will be respected in Montenegro, although she is not optimistic about what will happen at the regional and global level.

Yet the question remains open as to whether progressive actors could perhaps use the current situation, which is relatively unalarming, to deal preventively and pro-actively with this issue, especially considering the agility and determination that right-wing actors have shown both in Europe and in the wider international arena. A year after the debate, it seems that things are not changing significantly for the worse, but it is not very encouraging that the new Minister of Health insists on the right of so-called conscientious objection. On the other hand, as long as the right to abortion is in place and the state does not deny it to any woman, it can be said that bodily rights are still respected, at least at a basic level. However, considering that the Ministry of Health has adopted a set of discriminatory regulations on medically assisted reproduction, which deny access to reproductive technologies for lesbian, bisexual and trans women, as well as the donation of sex cells to gay individuals, and that the only response to this came from civil society and the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms, who initiated an inquiry on its own (but six months later, no results have been announced), it is difficult to conclude that these acquired rights will not be undermined by such "petty" moves.¹³⁸

In the second round of questions, Petrićević focused more specifically on the negative impact of church structures on the state, and how such pressure affects the respect of basic reproductive rights and their ongoing expansion. In her discussion of influential factors, the activist cites in particular the **example of Poland**, where the Catholic Church, in conjunction with the state, has placed the foetus on an equal footing with women in terms of rights. Building on this example, she warns that the misogynistic and inappropriate statements of Metropolitan Amfilohije and the Bishop of Bačka Irinej cause concern among the Montenegrin public, especially women. She then links this ideology to **nationalist ideas about demography** (the following quote of hers refers to statements made by priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church that she read in the debate):

¹³⁸ Damira Kalač, "Donacija spermatozoida i jajnih ćelija može, ali uz limite za gej osobe", *Vijesti*, 5 Mar. 2023. Available at: <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/646196/donacija-spermatozoida-i-jajnih-celija-moze-ali-uz-limite-za-gej-osobe>

"It points to one notorious thing, which is that a woman does not recognise herself as a free and autonomous being. If you are charged with the duty to give birth, if you qualify for humanity by 'realising' yourself as a mother, if you are the culprits on duty for the spread of the 'white plague'. I find that expression disgusting. I don't see why demographic or population policy, its goals, its effects, its methods, etc., should be compared to a deadly old disease, and why the blame should then be placed on women who have not given birth or cannot give birth. Well, they are the least condemned. But if motherhood is taken as a qualification for the realisation of women, then we have a problem."

At this level of analysis, a direct relationship is observed between the female body, her role in the family, and the broadest level of the state. This triad is unquestionable for right-wing actors, which is why they exert social pressure so that it is not questioned in any way. This is the reason why they oppose gender equality and sexual freedom, because each further step towards emancipation curtails the social influence and ultimately the material gain of conservative actors whose common interests bind them together.

Later in the debate, Petričević presented several more important arguments for ensuring access to free and legal abortion and for respecting reproductive rights:

"The right [to abortion] must exist, because control over women's sexuality and women's reproductive capacity is a fundamental **lever of patriarchy**. A woman cannot be free until she can decide about her own body – whether she will have children, with whom she will have children, when she will have children, how many she will have, etc."

In conclusion, Patričević formulates recommendations aimed at preventing abortion, considering it to be a last resort to contraception. On the one hand, she stresses the importance of sexuality and reproductive health education, viewing it as the only way to reduce the number of abortions. On the other hand, she makes arguments against the criminalisation of abortion, citing the following reasons:

1) it reduces the number of legal abortions, which would mean we would have even less knowledge about illegal ones; and 2) it would increase women's mortality rates and endanger their mental and physical health, raising the risk of infertility and complications. Through this approach, which emphasises the importance of education, another state actor – **educational institutions** – is brought up for the first time both in the debate and in the reactions to it.

However, by emphasising education itself, as if it were taking place in a vacuum, the structural level is somewhat overlooked, which needs to be taken into account for a more thorough analysis of such a complex matter. Nor is the right to abortion separate from the broader level of reproductive health and availability of contraception among different communities. To what extent are these rights being exercised and what is the level of general health in economically disadvantaged women and in various minority communities, such as in LGBTIQ+ communities, who already face inadequate health care?¹³⁹ All these issues need to be considered if we want improve the reproductive health of everyone, not just those in the middle class of the majority community.

Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro

The priest Gojko Perović participated in the abortion debate as a representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church, whose Metropolitan had just sparked a controversy by praising Trump's abortion ban and thus infamously put Montenegro on the map of the global anti-gender movement. He was the last person to speak in the debate, after medical professionals and a feminist activist, which is a position that can be read at least two ways. On the one hand, it could be interpreted that his voice carries the least weight on this subject. But on the other hand, speaking at the end of this format

139 Tea Dakić, "Iskustva sa zdravstvenim radnicima/cama i zdravstvenim sistemom", in *Oснаživanje transrodnih, rodno varijantnih i interpolnih žrtava nasilja. Research on the Need for Psycho-Social Services TIRV for Victims of Violence*: Podgorica: Asocijacija Spektra, 2022, 32–33. Available at: https://asocijaciaspektra.files.wordpress.com/2023/07/istrazivanje_velika-publikacija_finalno.pdf

also has advantages, because discursively such participants look as if they are the one who completes the circle of issues and they typically have the last word.

Perović opened his remarks during the debate by noting the connection of the Serbian Orthodox Church to the so-called **Christian world**, i.e. to international religious anti-gender actors. Over the course of the debate, he cited the examples of the Metropolitan of Moscow and the Pope, thus lending further support to the thesis of parallel – Western and Eastern – influences on the local anti-gender movement. The negative view of the Serbian Orthodox Church on the issue of abortion rights is thus presented as a normal position that enjoys wide international acceptance. This is the first tactic that Perović employs – creating legitimacy by association with the global anti-gender movement.

In the first round of the debate, he also uses a rhetorical tactic that could be symbolically called "distorting" the image of other participants. Here the aim is to problematise the practices of progressive actors so that they no longer look so positive, and on the other hand, to paint conservative practices in a kinder light so that they no longer look so scary. In this regard, Perović explains how the Church approaches the issue of abortion "on a case-by-case basis" (as if abortion rights fall under its domain of responsibility), presenting it as less of a judicial body and more of a "democratic" institution, which, according to him, is not a medieval "organisation of men plotting to oppress women".

The theses he presented at the beginning evolve over the course of the debate. Among other things, he advocates for the democratic value of "tolerating" one another, citing as an example his own experience of "suffering" criticism for his clero-fascism. At the same time, he explains that the Church respects state institutions and laws, including the law on the right to terminate pregnancy up to the tenth week. That is why he argues that the Church does not adhere to medieval principles, using very symptomatic and extremely racist, colonial language when he says that we live "in a civilised society, not in a jungle". Thus, even in a situation where an attempt is made to soften the image of the Serbian Orthodox Church as a conservative institution, this attempt is repeatedly thwarted by its representative's choice of words.

On the other hand, on the same principle, he uses logical ambivalences, or grey areas, to criticise progressive rights as not pro-

gressive enough because they are susceptible to abuse. By explicitly opposing selective abortion as an "anti-civilisational act", he discursively takes the side of the "protector" of the female gender, implicitly questioning the right to abortion as an example of symbolic emancipation. Because if abortion can also serve to influence the number of girls born, then it is questionable how progressive abortion is. Of course, this type of argument fails to analyse why selective abortions occur in the first place, and how deeply patriarchal the image of the world is for which right-wing actors themselves advocate, which when combined with neoliberal precarious living conditions, lays a suitable groundwork for abusing the practice of abortion. In another form of abuse, Perović twists the message behind the Centre for Women's Rights' campaign, which is a vivid example of a right-wing attempt to co-opt actions that are conceived with progressive intentions in order to convey completely different or even completely opposite points of view.

An important aspect of this analysis is how Perović, as a representative of conservative actors, explicitly highlights the right-wing method of infiltrating democratic institutions, a point that Petričević also criticised from her perspective. As a representative of one of the global flagships of the anti-gender movement – the Christian Church – Perović explains the logic behind politics, which he characterises as the "ABCs of democracy". Through the mediation of the faithful, who are also citizens, church structures exert pressure on democratic institutions. In addition, believers enter politics by representing ideas that the Church itself stands for. In this way, they infiltrate the institutions whose democratic work they obstruct using the very democratic principles that are available to them as citizens. This is not a rare practice, as Petričević sums it up in the debate: "It would not be the first time that **democratic values are endangered through democratic processes.**" Ironically, Perović unmasks the practice of religious communities abusing democratic institutions in the direction of abolishing rights and reducing democracy, but he does not notice that this is a very similar mechanism as in the case of selective abortions, which he himself earlier criticised.

In addition to ideological and argumentative stunts related to the broadest institutional and societal level, Perović touches on the topic of family and bodily autonomy of women, or more precisely, explicitly denying it over and over again – such as by introducing into the story the rights of the child, which he wrongly and tendentiously equates with the foetus, as well as by insisting that "a woman's body is not only hers". The same body of argumentation includes examples of "lucky" cases of unperformed abortions, an unsuccessful attempt to get a description of abortion after the 20th week of pregnancy from a medical professional, an account of the experiences of religious women and their feelings of remorse for abortion. By evoking emotionally charged images, right-wing actors show their readiness to influence social attitudes on issues of bodily autonomy at the level of changing the style of speech about abortion. These examples are more reminiscent of the still very vivid medieval ecclesiastical discursive habits and are in sharp contrast to the intended construction of a more democratic image.

Conclusion

In relation to the previous analysis, it can be concluded that Montenegrin right-wing actors are familiar with European and global anti-gender trends and that they are trying to develop similar methods according to the same model, agilely adapting to the local context. On the other hand, those progressive actors who are standing up to efforts to restrict rights in the corpus of gender and LGBTIQ+ equality policies are also familiar with the abuse of democratic means in the direction of limiting and abolishing democracy in this region and beyond. At this sensitive moment for the Montenegrin context, when the anti-gender movement is still not dominant, but is becoming increasingly influential, and in a particularly worrying trend, gaining entry into state institutions through cooperation with parties on the right-wing spectrum, it is necessary to bear in mind two basic levels through which the backlash on gender equality is carried out.

Discursive level:

- The use of emotionally charged language through vivid examples from life, complemented by graphic and taboo depictions of various aspects of physicality.
- Contrast is often used as a stylistic figure suitable for presenting conservative ideas in a positive light, as those that are pro-life and pro-love in the face of death and hatred.
- The ambivalent "blurring" of the boundaries between what is conservative and what is progressive, in order to make it more difficult for the general public to navigate between different ideological options.
- Twisting and attempting to co-opt the argumentation on which the corpus of rights guaranteeing gender equality is based, in order to draw completely opposite conclusions.
- Obfuscation also conceals the groundlessness of conservative ideas and arguments in modern science.
- A revisionist critique of the socialist, emancipatory period as totalitarian and criminal.

Organisational and social level:

- Active presence on the streets and all domains of the public.
- Increasing representation in the media, through columns, guest appearances and participation in debates, on topics that should not belong to the corpus of activities of religious institutions in a secular society.
- Using the dual position of believers in society – as members of religious communities and as citizens who have the right to political organisation – in order to lobby through civic institutions for the restriction or abolition of hard-fought-for and guaranteed gender equality rights.
- Collaborating and establishing linkages with regional and global anti-gender actors and incorporating their methods and ideas.

Considering all these aspects, it becomes clear that anti-gender actors act persistently and systematically, which requires the same response in order to prevent the further deterioration of democratic principles in the opposite direction. Both at the level of discourse and at the level of organisation and public action, it is of utmost necessity to act equally persistently, with clear argumentation and transparent ideological articulation.

What Are the Key Messages?

	ANTI-GENDER ACTORS	PROGRESSIVE ACTORS
BODY	<p>"Cases of gender reassignment for justified and very specific medical reasons represent a completely different reality than the propaganda and justification of same-sex relations."</p> <p>Love as the opposite of totalitarianism.</p> <p>We must prevent generations from remembering men carrying offspring for nine months in the womb.</p> <p>"A woman's body is not just hers."</p>	<p>"We are people of flesh and blood, we are rejected and trampled on for love."</p> <p>"A woman cannot be free until she can decide about her own body – whether to have children, with whom she will have children, when she will have children, how many she will have, etc."</p> <p>"Today we are talking about the right to manage one's own body, but tomorrow we may be talking about another right."</p>
FAMILY	<p>The Christian family as "normal, moral and chaste".</p> <p>Football as part of the everyday context of a heterosexual family, instead of "LGBT advertising".</p> <p>Innocent children who must not be contaminated by "LGBT propaganda".</p> <p>The heterosexual family as the foundation for productive and useful members of society, as opposed to the unproductive members of the LGBT community.</p> <p>If it is a sin to cut down a tree, it is a sin to take away the image of a mother from a child.</p>	<p>Our family is being destroyed by those who are comfortable with the unrest.</p> <p>"We are people of flesh and blood, we are rejected and trampled on for love. They incite our fellow soldiers to hate us."</p> <p>"If you are charged with the duty to give birth, if you qualify for humanity by 'realising' yourself as a mother, if you are the culprits on duty for the spread of the 'white plague'.... But if motherhood is taken as a qualification for the realisation of women, then we have a problem."</p>
NATION	<p>A moustache is a symbol of famous ancestors, not "gay men's butt cheeks".</p> <p>Linking "killing babies in the womb to LGBT people.</p> <p>The Gay Pride parade promotes something we've never had.</p> <p>It is democratic and civil to defend the existing legal regulation of the family.</p> <p>"This is an announcement of biological warfare against our people and against the Orthodox faith."</p> <p>"I'm not going to be held hostage by some gay Satanic sect."</p>	<p>"I believe that there are more of us who stand on the side of law and freedom, and that there is no way for those who would deny us our rights to win."</p> <p>"It's important that the Pride March is seen and felt as a civil protest. We do not agree to a single 'but', because we do not have the privilege to ever back down in the face of violence."</p> <p>"They disown us, we disgust them, but they don't give up their salaries and privileges."</p> <p>"Here we celebrate human rights and every victory we achieve is a victory for everyone in society. We are here for the whole community because there are no more 'buts'."</p> <p>"Death to fascism, death to religious extremism."</p> <p>"Control over women's reproductive capacity is a fundamental lever of patriarchy."</p> <p>"It would not be the first time that democratic values are endangered through democratic processes."</p>

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1 <https://fmk.singidunum.ac.rs/profesori/aleksa-milanovic/>

2 <https://guerrillafoundation.org/our-people/activist-council/#>

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3 <https://mronline.org/2023/03/14/gendered-violence-as-an-inextricable-thread-of-capitalism-1/>

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