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Poison in the Juice: “Gender Ideology” and the Istanbul Convention in Slovakia

Zuzana Očenášová*

ABSTRACT

The anti-gender mobilization seems particularly salient in Central and Eastern Europe. So called “gender ideology” unites contestation against various issues such as LGBT rights, reproductive rights, sex and gender education, gender mainstreaming or the very term “gender”. Less attention has been paid to the mobilization against the Istanbul Convention that has been targeted in some of the countries. Hence, this article presents a Slovak case study of the anti-gender mobilization that has led to the official refusal of the ratification of the convention. Through the method of explaining outcome process tracing it follows the process of anti-gender mobilization in the specific political context, its actors, actions and discourses. I argue that the success of this particular anti-gender mobilization has been facilitated by previously mainstreamed discourse into policies and politics and fostered by specific political circumstances whereby anti-gender mobilization and populist political representation acted in and opportunistic symbiosis. Political crisis did not only create space for this symbiosis, but at the same time amplified discontent with existent political and economic order and redirected it towards “gender ideology”.

Key words: gender ideology, anti-gender mobilization, gender-based violence, Istanbul Convention, populism

Introduction

Examples of anti-gender mobilization have been mapped across the world; however, it seems particularly salient in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Kováts – Pöim, 2015; Kuhar – Paternotte, 2017; Maďarová – Valkovičová, 2019; Korolczuk – Graff, 2018). While the literature so far focused mainly on contestation of LGBTI rights and sex education, less attention has been paid to the mobilization against the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, i.e., the Istanbul

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Convention (hereinafter IC). This paper analyses the anti-gender mobilizations against the IC in Slovakia as it is one of the few countries that officially refused its ratification. The opposition to the ratification did not contest violence against women as such, it has been rather perceived by the key actors as a Trojan horse for the introduction of “gender ideology” into Slovak legislation. As a result, the mobilization contested those IC articles that refer directly to the term “gender” as it would threaten children and national identity as gender stereotypical traditions are part of the nation’s cultural heritage¹. Moreover, gender-sensitive education would contradict parental rights ensuring education according to their belief². Opponents also contested the role of GREVIO as a group of “unclearly defined”³ and “so called”⁴ experts that would overrule national legislators. Nevertheless, the mobilization against the IC has not been the first anti-gender mobilization in Slovakia, which has a particular significance for the case study. In 2014 – 15, the referendum on sexual education and LGBT rights took place. The referendum did not pass the required quorum and as such it corresponds with other vocal, but unsuccessful European initiatives such as the ones in Croatia or Romania. However, unlike the referendum, the initiative hereby studied, which aimed to prevent the ratification of the IC, was successful, despite the decline in supporter mobilization. This study aims to explain the factors leading to the success of this mobilization.

Despite local specifics and strong emphasis on “the national and the traditional” of the anti-gender mobilizations, scholars have documented significant similarities across countries and transnational coordination (Kováts – Pöim, 2015; Kuhar – Paternotte, 2017). This study is informed by existent theories of anti-gender mobilizations, nevertheless, the existent scholarship does not fully explain the studied outcome in the Slovak case. Therefore, the presented paper employs the method of explaining outcome process tracing analysis, emphasising both systematic and case-specific mechanisms. While significant similarities with other anti-gender mobilizations across Europe can be found, I argue that case-specific mechanisms such as previously mainstreamed anti-gender discourse into policy making and the media, Catholic Church as a

¹ Request of the Forum for Public Affairs (20 November 2013). Petition of the Alliance for Family (20 November 2016).

² Request of the Forum for Public Affairs (20 November 2013).

³ Statement of highest representatives of Christian Churches in the Slovak Republic in respect of the Istanbul Convention (13 February 2018).

⁴ Petition of the Alliance for Family (29 November 2016).

direct political actor, weak gender equality policymaking structures, concurrent spread of alternative media and political crisis, are all factors which contributed to the success of the mobilization.

1. “Gender ideology” rhetoric and anti-gender mobilisations across Europe – dispatches for the Slovak case study

Anti-gender mobilizations or mobilizations against so-called “gender ideology” started in Europe in 2010s, having roots in the Catholic Church (Paternotte – Kuhar, 2018). Nevertheless, current mobilizations encompass a broader spectrum of religious and non-religious actors (Korolczuk – Graff, 2018). “Gender ideology” has not been clearly defined as a term, it unites contestation against various, often internally conflicting issues such as LGBT rights, reproductive rights, sex and gender education, gender mainstreaming or the very term “gender”. All these issues represent an ideological matrix, a global conspiracy imposing immoral values, which is led by corrupt elites that aim to gain power and destroy democracy and societal order (Paternotte – Kuhar, 2018). “Gender ideology” is often understood as a new form of totalitarianism emerging from Marxism and Communism (Paternotte – Kuhar, 2018). As a result, transnational bodies such as the United Nations or the European Union, and international treaties are often under attack from the actors of anti-gender mobilizations (Korolczuk – Graff, 2018), which is also the case of the IC contestations. Despite the observed similarities, the anti-gender mobilizations often use local policy debates or introduce new issues as a way of prophylaxis against anticipated policy developments (Paternotte – Kuhar, 2018), which was also the case of the referendum in Slovakia.

For diverse actors, “gender ideology” represents a symbol for rejection of various aspects of current socioeconomic order (Grzebalska – Kováts – **Pető**, 2017), which allows for the creation of new alliances between religious groups, right-wing and extreme-right parties (Kováts – Pöim, 2015; Kuhar – Paternotte, 2017; Grzebalska – Kováts – **Pető**, 2017). In this sense it serves as a “symbolic glue” (Grzebalska – Kováts – **Pető**, 2017). **Korolczuk and Graff** (2018) even argue that the core of anti-gender mobilizations is a brand of illiberal populism. Despite the fact that anti-gender mobilizations oftentimes rhetorically defend democracy and use various democratic means of participation, they place some topics, such as the proclaimed natural sexual order out of deliberation. In their fight against liberal individualism, they replace individual rights with family rights.

Family thus becomes a new political identity positioned against individualism, state and transnational market. It similarly receives a sense of agency and dignity as it provides voice to anxiety about global capitalism (Korolczuk – Graff, 2018).

Korolczuk and Graff (2018) argue that the key discursive strategy of the anti-gender mobilizations is “international colonization”. Within this frame, “gender ideology” represents neoliberalism and globalization as sources of contestation. Some anti-gender mobilizations thus tend to integrate the traditional critique of liberal values with the opposition towards global capitalism which serves as a new mobilization power (Pető, 2015). In the Central and Eastern European region, the representatives targeted for the declared “cultural colonization” are usually the EU and “the West”. Within this region, gender equality policies appeared within the process of Europeanization and the EU accession. Throughout the accession process, many gender equality policies were adopted without significant discussion, the accession being the crucial argument that has led to often formalistic adoption and weak institutional structures (Očenášová, 2012; Rawluszko, 2019). Moreover, within this process, local feminist and LGBT activists often strategically framed their claims as part of the Europeanization practices (e.g., Očenášová, 2012; Krizsán, Popa, 2012; Kuhar, 2012). As **Kováts (2021)** pointed out, gender became a symbolic marker of Europeanization and progress in “catching up with the West”. Hence, the connection of gender and the anti-EU sentiments is rather straightforward.

In order to enrich the existing scholarship with the knowledge stemming from the Slovak case study, the present analysis traced the process of public deliberation on IC using discursive-sociological approach taking into account actors, institutional, discursive and interactional aspects (Lombardo – Forest, 2012). While the mobilisation encompassed a wide range of actors involved in the process, including the Church, civil society actors, feminist NGOs, politicians and bureaucrats, the presented study focuses mostly on those mobilized against the IC and their various resources. The method chosen for the study is “an iterative research strategy that aims to trace the complex conglomerate of systematic and case-specific causal mechanisms that produced the outcome in question” (Beach – Pedersen, 2013, p. 19). Through the means of inductive analysis, I aim to uncover plausible causal mechanisms explaining the outcome. As a starting point, various publicly available materials such as campaign documents, petitions, statements and campaign videos and speeches, as well as transcripts of parliamentary debates have been gathered, as they were then

organized into a timeline and analysed. The first step of the analysis was to identify the breaking points of the outcome, their precursors, and the actors, their actions and discursive strategies involved. Further on, I identified systemic mechanisms by consulting the existing literature, and case-specific mechanisms applicable to the studied case.

2. Anti-gender mobilization across borders - systemic mechanisms

This section begins with a brief overview of deliberation processes concerning the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, starting in 2011 when Slovakia signed the convention. Later on, it moves to a more detailed encounter with various modes of action, actors involved, and discursive framings and rhetoric strategies. Several similarities with other European anti-gender mobilizations were identified in Slovakia that create systemic mechanisms of the case study.

The first direct attack on the IC happened in 2013 in relation to the first ratification deadline. Conservative NGOs⁵ delivered a request to the government to stop the ratification process, nevertheless, it did not gain significant public or political attention. Simultaneously to the request, the Pastoral letter has been read in Catholic churches warning about “gender ideology”, being a part of “culture of death”.⁶ Despite these, the goal of ratification was included into the *National Action Plan for the Elimination and Prevention of Violence against Women*, which was being drafted the same year.

In 2014 – 15 the anti-gender mobilization initiated the so-called Referendum for family, targeting LGBT persons' rights and sex education. The referendum campaign was led by the Alliance for Family, comprising of various lay Christian organizations. It was the first referendum initiated by civil society in Slovakia and was also accompanied by a massive mobilization campaign. The actors of the anti-gender mobilization capitalized on the referendum experience in further IC mobilization that became the main battlefield for anti-gender opposition in Slovakia since 2016. Therefore, the referendum campaign cannot be excluded from the case study.

⁵ Request of the Forum for Public Affairs signed by more than a hundred of lay Christian and pro-life oriented organizations (20 November 2013).

⁶ Pastoral letter of the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia for the first advent Sunday (30 November 2013).

The rejection of the IC was one of the requirements of the Catholic Church proposed in the *Decalogue for better Slovakia* that the Conference of Bishops sent to political parties before the parliamentary elections in spring 2016.⁷ In autumn of the same year, the Alliance for Family delivered a petition refusing the IC ratification,⁸ which was followed by a supportive statement of the Conference of Bishops.⁹ Subsequently, the ratification was discussed on policy level, and due to the strong resistance from the anti-gender movement, it has been postponed.¹⁰ In autumn of 2017, as a reaction to another ratification deadline, as well as the EU signature of the IC, the “Stop the Evil from Istanbul” campaign has been launched. The campaign has been supported by the Catholic Church that together with other Cristian churches issued a statement against the ratification in 2018.¹¹ In 2019, a petition with 80 000 signatures against the ratification has been delivered to the Slovak National Council (i.e., Parliament) before the presidential elections. Consequently, the Parliament adopted two declarations against the ratification in 2019.¹² Due to their declaratory character, none of them had actual legal power. Finally, just few days before the parliamentary elections in 2020, the Parliament refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention, this time with a legally binding formulation¹³.

Literature dedicated to the anti-gender mobilizations has identified several cross-border patterns concerning strategies employed, actors and common discourses. Actions so far used by the mobilizations include campaigns, public protests, petitions, referendums, lobbying of elites and electoral mobilization. The offline collective actions were combined with skilful use of the Internet and social media (Paternotte – Kuhar, 2018). Mobilizations in Slovakia employed most of these strategies when fighting against the “gender ideology”. Some of these elements were present in the mobilization surrounding the referendum (i.e., festive protests, signature collections, lobbying the elites). The direct campaign against the IC, has had the form of public prayers in churches,

⁷ Decalogue for better Slovakia, Conference of Bishops (21 February 2016).

⁸ Petition of the Alliance for Family (29 November 2016).

⁹ Statement of the head of the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia to the Istanbul Convention (25 November 2016).

¹⁰ Governmental resolution n. 379/2017 (16 August 2017).

¹¹ Statement of highest representatives of Christian Churches in the Slovak Republic in respect of the Istanbul Convention (13 February 2018).

¹² Resolution of the Slovak National Council n. 1697 (29 March 2019), and n. 2261 (28 November 2019).

¹³ Resolution of the Slovak National Council n. 2310 (25 February 2020).

followed by marches to state institutions' buildings. Sermons and public prayers have been recorded and widely shared on social networks. At the same time, the petition against the ratification has been distributed in the gatherings. These actions had a strictly local character, only one nationwide protest was organized in February 2020. What we can see is the wide repertoire of actions, which are applied distinctively to particular causes. The actions centred at the families (the Referendum for Family) have rather festive character utilizing the emotional and mobilization potential of the trope. In contrast, public actions against the IC were framed as prayers or acts of worshipping. Despite these distinctions, the two campaigns closely intersect in discourses and actors, and are mutually supportive.

The actors of anti-gender mobilizations across Europe comprise of representatives of civil society, Catholic and other churches, and political elites. While the involvement of the last two varies across countries (Paternotte – Kuhar, 2018), civic mobilization seems to be central to the activities. In Slovakia, the activists organized under various umbrella organizations such as the Alliance for Family (during the referendum) or the Slovak Convention for Families (during the IC mobilization), with personal intersection of individuals between the two. The engagement of the Catholic Church varies across borders and depends on the state-church relations, the association of Catholicism with nation building, and church past legacies (Paternotte – Kuhar, 2018). In Slovakia, the Catholic Church has played a significant role not only by mainstreaming the “gender ideology” discourse in its pastoral letters, what is more, the lay and Church activities which engaged in mobilization against the IC happened via parishes and were coordinated. In addition, one of the key charismatic speakers against the IC - Marián Kuffa has been a Catholic priest.

Recent scholarship on anti-gender mobilization also pays particular attention to the cooperation of religious actors with right-wing and populist political elites (Kováts – Pöim, 2015; Grzebalska – Kovats – Pető, 2017; Korolcsuk – Graff, 2018). In Slovakia, the main allies belonged to populist right-wing and extreme-right parties (i.e., Slovak National Party and Kotlebovci - People's Party – Our Slovakia), as discussed further.

Anti-gender mobilizations across Europe share similarities in the mobilising potential of the “gender ideology” discourse and its frames. Discursive frames mapped internationally include that of “child in danger”, “gender as an attack on families”, “attack on the nation” (Paternotte – Kuhar, 2018), “gender as unscientific and contradictory to the unchangeable truth on sexual order”

(Garbagnoli, 2016). All of the frames can be also traced in Slovakia.

The central metaphor of the Slovak “Stop the Evil from Istanbul” campaign has been the “poison in the juice”, in which violence against women represents a juice full of vitamins, but flavoured with a poison of “gender ideology”. “Child in danger” was one of the most dominant discursive frames applied via various homo and transphobic arguments against the IC in Slovakia. In this sense, the endangered child serves as a mechanism to provoke moral panic in order to attract attention, rouse concern and legitimize mobilization claims (Paternotte – Kuhar, 2018). Moral panic has been further reinforced by the presence of military (“*prayer as a bombardier*”) and terrorist metaphors („*ambulance full of terrorist with bombs*”¹⁴) to uncover the agenda of “gender ideology”. Another entity under threat is the “traditional family” - the discourse often refers to the rights of children to a father and a mother¹⁵, and parental rights to control children’s education¹⁶. The notion of family is closely linked to an idea that sexual order transcends history (Garbagnoli, 2016). It is understood as a conjugal heterosexual bond that reaffirms ineradicable male and female identities that are based on complementarity. As a statement by a union of Christian churches put it in 2018: “*A conflict is not the natural relationship between a man and a woman, but a vocation to the harmony and the complementarity of each other in God’s work of marriage and family*”.¹⁷ The concept of gender is often portrayed as being unscientific, as it is detached from biological sex, which is opposed to the seemingly invariable natural order. As such “gender ideology” is “*against God, solid science and common sense and nature*”¹⁸.

The declared ideological background of gender is central to the frames, as it is in contrast to the real values and democracy based on Christian tradition. “Gender totalitarianism” particularly resonates in the context of the totalitarian past of Slovakia and it is further reinforced by rhetorical strategies applying dichotomies (i.e., good vs. evil, radical and experimental vs. verified, unchangeable, us vs. them), and the role reversal of victim-perpetrator which allows for self-victimisation (Paternotte – Kuhar, 2018). The already mentioned

¹⁴ Stop the Evil from Istanbul campaign video: Marián Kuffa (November 2017).

¹⁵ Stop the Evil from Istanbul campaign video: Marián Kuffa (November 2017).

¹⁶ Request of the Forum for Public Affairs (20 November 2013).

¹⁷ Statement of highest representatives of Christian Churches in the Slovak Republic in respect of the Istanbul Convention (13 February 2018).

¹⁸ Marián Kuffa / Slovak Convention for Family (2020) Invitation to public prayer (February 2020).

priest Marián Kuffa has regularly repeated that he might be jailed or even killed for his activism.¹⁹ On the one hand, the imaginary persecution evokes persecution of believers which happened during the socialist period, resonating with the historical legacy and the threat of yet another totalitarianism. On the other hand, it articulates the importance of “gender ideology” contestation and legitimizes all means used in the “cultural war”.

The Slovak case study shows common similarities to other anti-gender mobilizations when modes of actions, actors involved, discursive framing and rhetorical strategies are concerned. These constitute the systemic mechanisms of the case study; however, these alone cannot explain the successful outcome of the mobilization. I argue that the explanations lie in specific socio-political circumstances, which allowed the actors of the anti-gender mobilization to seize this window of opportunity.

3. Policy and political turmoil - case-specific mechanisms

Contrary to the referendum mobilization which occurred in 2014 and 2015 during the relatively stable political period of dominant left-leaning SMER-SD government, the mobilization against the IC occurred under conflicting coalition government (still led by SMER-SD) that faced unprecedented political crisis in 2018 caused by the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée which provoked massive protests and has led to governmental reconstruction. The investigation of the murder led to numerous corruption scandals involving the ruling government, which had direct influence on the parties’ public support. Thus, political instability played a major role in the refusal of the ratification.

In order to seize the possibilities available, the discursive framing of “violence” within the rhetoric of anti-gender actors changed over time. Although public statements by the actors condemned violence, the shift from framing of “violence against women”²⁰ through “domestic violence”²¹ (which is not gender-specific), to general victims of violence²² (whereby battered women are just one target group) is apparent. Similarly, the concept of gender-based violence has been in the beginning criticized as lacking clarity, but was not directly

¹⁹ Stop the Evil from Istanbul campaign video: Marián Kuffa (July 2018).

²⁰ Request of the Forum for Public Affairs signed by over a hundred of lay Christian and pro-life oriented organizations (20 November 2013).

²¹ Statement of highest representatives of Christian Churches in the Slovak Republic in respect of the Istanbul Convention (13 February 2018).

²² Petition of the Slovak Convention for Families (2019).

contested²³. Later on, the causes of domestic violence were attributed to individual pathologies (Dianiška, 2019) or to the individualism and weakening of institutions of family and marriage²⁴. Discursive shifts from women as victims of violence to general victims of violence demonstrate successful mainstreaming of the anti-gender discourse as reference to the original IC document terminology has been no longer necessary. The call for policy action also shifted from stopping the ratification process in 2013 to withdrawal of a signature since 2018. The gradation of political demands similarly indicates growing self-awareness of the anti-gender actors.

In addition, the mobilization against the ratification was this time more extensively supported by various newly established conservative media (e.g. Christian TV and radio, web portals and social networks), and alternative (including conspiracy) media which have significantly contributed to the spread of “gender ideology” rhetoric since the referendum campaign (Valkovičová – Maďarová, 2019). Conspiracy media have actively disseminated “gender ideology” discourse (Gehrerová, 2020) as the “global conspiracy by liberal elites” frame (Paternotte – Kuhar, 2018) corresponded with their goals²⁵. Similarly, the media have actively promoted hatred against various groups such as LGBT persons or migrants, often coupled with hoaxes and disinformation (Smatana, 2016). In addition, **Valkovičová and Maďarová** (2019) suggest that conspiracy media created a space for alliance building among anti-gender mobilization actors and the then marginalized populist-right and extreme-right-wing political elites. Anti-gender mobilizations would not be successful without building strong alliances. As a result, “gender ideology” discourse became mainstreamed in public deliberations, as it also entered the rhetoric of political parties.

In addition to already mentioned actions, actors of the anti-gender mobilization participated in various advisory and consultative bodies, including those on gender equality. Although the Catholic Church and lay civil society activists intervened with policy making before 2013, this year marks the

²³ Request of the Forum for Public Affairs signed by over a hundred of Lay Christian and pro-life oriented organizations (20 November 2013).

²⁴ Statement of highest representatives of Christian Churches in the Slovak Republic in respect of the Istanbul Convention (13 February 2018).

²⁵ Dominant conspiracy radio *Slobodný vysielateľ* (Liberty Broadcaster) and print magazine *Zem a vek* (Earth and Age) operate since 2013, conspiracy on-line portal *hlavnespravy.sk* since 2012 but its activity significantly increased during the referendum campaign in 2015 (Smatana, 2016).

beginning of their significant involvement, which also corresponds with an increase in the organizational capacity and visibility of their civil society organisations. Although the Catholic Church representatives and civil society anti-gender activists act as separate actors in policy making, it is obvious that their activities are coordinated and synergic.

Having access to policymaking bodies, the actors of anti-gender mobilisation opposed two national strategic documents concerning gender equality²⁶ and human rights²⁷, with the argument that they allegedly promoted “gender ideology”. While the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2014-2019 was adopted as suggested, the final version of the national strategy concerning human rights was the result of a compromise stemming from contestation (TASR, 2014). Consequently, “gender ideology” discourse entered policy making and its activists have been legitimized as relevant policy actors (Valkovičová, 2019). In this context, it became easier for them to participate in policy discussions on the IC which contributed to the gradual postponement of the ratification. While there was still some interest of the government to follow through with the ratification in 2014, the elites resorted to calm the heated public debate by postponing since 2016.

Enhanced involvement of anti-gender mobilisations’ actors in policy making has been facilitated by weak policymaking infrastructure focused on (gender) equality and low political interest in the issues. The gender equality policymaking mechanisms and implementation of policies have been often criticized as formalistic and externally motivated by international conditionality (Očenášová, 2013; Pietruchová, 2013). The coordination of gender equality policies belongs to the competencies of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family and its former Department for Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities. Despite its legislative competencies, the executive power of the department was limited. Moreover, as **Valkovičová** (2019) demonstrated, the advisory body focused on gender equality – Committee for Gender Equality has become the space of contestation under the influence of civil society anti-gender mobilization’s actors. As none of the Slovak governments ever set gender equality among their priorities or considered it to be an integral part of policy making (Maďarová, 2014), the change of attitudes towards the IC ratification under such circumstances does not come as a surprise. While in

²⁶ National Strategy for Gender Equality 2014 – 2019

²⁷ National Strategy for Human Rights Protection and Promotion of 2014

2013 the Prime Minister Robert Fico (SMER-SD) actively supported the ratification, in 2018 he considered it to be potentially anti-constitutional and rejected it (Gehrerová, 2018).

The campaign "Stop the Evil from Istanbul" offered politicians a strong geopolitical narrative. First, the evil coming from Istanbul refers to anti-Ottoman mythology present in Slovak culture and at the same time resonates with anti-Muslim sentiments raised during the migrant crisis in 2015. Second, "Brussels" as a reference represents a cultural colonizer, imposing neoliberal values, contrasting with the declared "traditional and national" ones. Neoliberal individualism and materialism were criticized not only as sources of pathologies leading to violence, but also as an imminent feature of the economic and political order. Confounding "gender ideology" with neo-liberal democracy allows for embracing other populist rhetoric, such as contestation of multiculturalism, as this quote by an extreme-right parliamentarian demonstrates: *"So called liberal democracy is in reality a totalitarian neo-Marxist dictatorship and tyranny by minorities [...] Neo-Marxism represented by its most important part multiculturalism became official ideology of the EU who builds upon it a new cultural socialism."*²⁸

Moreover, Europeanization is within this rhetoric understood differently from its narrow model of vertical norm adoption. It rather symbolizes asymmetrical West - East division within the EU (Kováts, 2021), as the actors directly oppose the narrative of the West impersonating progress. The frustration of being secondary Europeans and being "not progressive enough" leads to the rejection of Europeanization and its articulation through populist and extreme-right rhetoric as the quote by another parliamentarian illustrates: *"If this is the progress, the spectacular graduation where this great liberalism leads us, then thank you very much. I did not ask for it, I do not demand it for Slovakia"*²⁹. Hereby, the West is portrayed as a threat for Europe: *"...so called developed liberal West represented by the European Union builds anti-civilization in contrast to European civilization, its antic and Christian cultural heritage and values"*³⁰. Both discursive strategies – the "Westernization of gender" and "linking progress to preservation of traditional/Christian values" (Slootmackers et al., 2016) are used as complementary in the process of balancing discursive

²⁸ MP Natália Grausová, Peoples' Party Our Slovakia, in 58th parliamentary meeting in February 2020

²⁹ MP Milan Mazurek, Peoples' Party Our Slovakia, in 53rd parliamentary meeting in November 2019

³⁰ MP Natália Grausová, Peoples' Party Our Slovakia, in 58th parliamentary meeting in February 2020

power between the East and the West. In addition, the discursive potential of “gender ideology” allows for uniting various contested issues under an umbrella term, such as neoliberalism, failure of democratic representation or weakening of social and political security (Grzebalska – Kováts – Pető, 2017). As populism is a “thin-centred ideology” (Mudde, 2004) it can easily incorporate other ideological presumptions (Paternotte – Kuhar, 2018) and integrate them within its agenda as the analysis of parliamentary discussions on the ratification demonstrates.

Circling back to the factors of political stability, it is important to note that parliamentary discussions on the ratification of IC happened in the context of presidential elections in 2019 and parliamentary elections in 2020. The pre-election period created political windows of opportunity for anti-gender mobilizations in Slovakia. The constitutional protection of marriage (as a sole union of a man and a woman) was adopted during the presidential election campaign in 2014. Likewise, the ratification of the IC became strongly politicized within the presidential election campaign in 2019 and the parliamentary campaign subsequently reacted to it. While the Slovak National Party has not been directly involved in the presidential campaign, the leader of Kotlebovci - People’s Party Our Slovakia also ran as a presidential candidate.

Alliance of the two political parties with the civil society anti-gender campaign organizers became more apparent during the 2020 parliamentary election campaign. Leaders of these parties met several times with the “Stop the Evil from Istanbul” organizers, who were also engaged in further initiatives. Personal overlaps were even visible on the list of party candidates. Erik Zbiňovský, one of the coordinators of “Stop the Evil from Istanbul Campaign” ran for the Slovak National Party and brother of the priest-activist Marián Kuffa also ran as a candidate for Kotlebovci - People’s Party Our Slovakia (Gehrerová, 2020). Nevertheless, the agenda of these minority parliamentary parties would not be sufficient for the refusal of the ratification without additional support. While during the referendum of 2015, political parties were reluctant to ally with anti-gender actors and their initiatives (with the exception of Christian Democrats) (Jancová, 2015), in 2019 and 2020 the support of political elites expanded. On one hand, this points to the normalization of “gender ideology” discourse to mainstream politics. On the other hand, it can be understood as the result of direct political calculus – for example, the strongest party SMER-SD traded the rejection of the IC for the support of Marián Kuffa for the presidential candidate (Takač – Rabara, 2019).

To conclude, the case specific mechanisms of the anti-gender mobilization against the IC in Slovakia can be identified as the following: mainstreaming of the anti-gender discourse (into policymaking and media content), the influence of the Catholic Church and lay civil society organisation over policy making, and the alliance of anti-gender activists with populist and extreme-right political parties who instrumentally adopted the discourse in the context of a political crisis. In addition, the concurrent spread of alternative media facilitated mainstreaming of the discourse. Weak gender equality policymaking institutional structures and low political interest in these issues enhanced the growing influence of anti-gender actors in policy making.

Discussion and conclusions

Anti-gender mobilizations build their capacities on various discursive and rhetoric strategies. Civil society actors and the Church reinforce those inducing moral panic with frames such as “child in danger” and “threat to families”. “Gender ideology” has been presented as a covert conspiracy by liberal elites, destroying traditional societal pillars and replacing them by individualism as a social experiment leading to new totality. The frame of totalitarianism is often used both referring to historical legacy of communism and a new “liberal totality”, the combination of which is in CEE countries particularly culturally resonant (Rawluszko, 2019). Parallels with historical legacy are often present to mirror other fears such as anti-Muslim sentiments raised by the migrant crisis. Such variety of discursive frames allows for creation of strategic or instrumental alliances with political elites engaging in populist rhetoric, who share similar “modus operandi” and the alternative media space. However, this also allows them to adopt framing related to other causes of their political agenda, such as nationalism, conservatism, critique of neo-liberalism and multiculturalism or anti-EU attitudes.

As the case of Slovakia proved, the pre-election political situation has been crucial for the incorporation of the anti-gender mobilizations’ demands into policy making. The situation was strategically exploited by civil society and Church actors, as well as by political parties who often temporarily embrace anti-gender discourse and agenda as it boosts their own narrative or in cases in which ideological resonance is less straight-forward serves as an attention diversion. The rejection of the ratification in Slovakia would not be possible without the support of politicians whose ideological stance is less clear and who

capitalized on the conflict and redirected attention from the corruption scandals they have been involved with. Observing similar strategies to cover up governmental scandals by “gender ideology” rhetoric (e.g., in Hungary and Poland), ironically, the mobilization claiming to be fighting „corrupt transnational elites” is hereby instrumentally used in specific contexts by corrupt local elites to gain or remain in power.

Another important factor is the previous experience of anti-gender mobilization during the 2015 referendum campaign. The actors mobilizing against the ratification could capitalize on the experience in terms of organizational structure, mainstreaming of the discourse and participation in public deliberations and policy making. However, without a serious political crisis related to the corruption, the policy results of the mobilization would be less tangible. Furthermore, political crisis facilitates the spread of anti-gender mobilization on various levels - not only does it allow for the formation of instrumental political alliances, but it also amplifies disillusion of existent political and economic order, and thus enables the redirection of social distrust towards opposition to “gender ideology”.

“Gender” thus serves not only as a “symbolic glue” for various political actors (Grzebalska – Kováts – Pető, 2017), but it also creates an opportunistic symbiosis beneficiary for the actors. Populist rhetoric enhances mainstreaming and normalization of “gender ideology” discourse, leads to the opening of political opportunities for the agenda and may serve as a springboard for anti-gender activists into politics. Simultaneously, the discourse studied within the Slovak case unites against common enemies, as it is saturated with Eurosceptic, nationalist and anti-Muslim themes. Acceptance of anti-gender discourse thus paves way to contestation of other facets of identity politics and may lead to the discrediting of liberal democracy. Simultaneously, populists instrumentally adopt the narrative to the extent that fit into their agenda both by strengthening positive mobilization around family values and by uniting against common enemy. Moreover, it facilitates saturation of the discourse with Eurosceptic, nationalist and anti-Muslim themes. Acceptance of anti-gender discourse thus paves a path to contestation of other facets of identity politics and cultural superiority and as a result to discrediting of liberal democracy.

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