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Tracing the anti-gender movement in Lithuania (1990-2023)

In May 2021, after a year of strict COVID-19 related restrictions in Lithuania, a protest of more than ten thousand people took place in Vilnius, attracting people from all over the country. Called “The Great March in Defense of the Family”, the protest was directed against the government’s management of the pandemic, as much as it was opposed to, as the organizers described it, “genderism”: the perceived attack on the traditional family, national values, and Christian morality (Ulinskaitė and Garškaitė-Antonowicz 2023). While the event was unprecedented in scale, it demonstrated only the peak of the iceberg of the ongoing discursive mobilization in the country. The Lithuanian anti-gender movement has been prominent in the public space for more than a decade, mobilizing against issues such as sex education, legal measures against violence against women (Istanbul Convention), and LGBTQ rights, especially same-sex partnership legislation, and, more recently, also against immigration, legalization of marijuana, and the anti-Corona measures (Lithuanian Family Movement 2023). Due to its eclecticism, it can probably be better understood not as a coherent movement, but as a network of actors, who come together in various contexts to (rather successfully) oppose many of the progressive policies in Lithuania and through that, build social capital and seek political power. The influence of the anti-gender movement on party politics can partly explain why Lithuania still has no legal recognition of same-sex partnership, has not ratified the Istanbul convention, and continues to retain a legal provision, akin to the infamous Russian “gay propaganda” bill, which enables censorship of pro-LGBTQ information (ECHR 2023), among other issues.

Various anti-gender mobilizations have been analyzed and studied around the globe, and across Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Graff and Korolczuk 2021). The transnational movement, which can be seen as a part of the general rise of the right-wing politics since the financial crisis in 2008, is promoted by religious extremists, authoritarian leaning national governments and political parties, and other actors, such as the Russian oligarchs and other financial elites (Datta 2021). This

eclectic movement is united by its opposition to the broadly defined phenomenon of the so called “gender ideology”, which is seen as a conglomeration of various progressive discourses and policies, as described above: LGBTQ rights, especially marriage and adoption for same-sex couples, sex education, reproductive rights and especially the right to abortion, gender mainstreaming (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). The anti-gender movement perceives such developments as threatening the natural gender order and traditional family structure and putting the society, usually defined as a specific ethnic-national or religious-spiritual community, in danger. The movement manifests in various ways – through initiating public protests and spectacles, forming NGO’s and new political parties, acting through existing structures, often related to the Catholic Church or other churches, lobbying, and spreading conspiracy theories in online and print media, etc.

This research therefore aims to launch the first comprehensive analysis of the rise and development of the anti-gender mobilization in Lithuania. The research project is based on the premise that to understand anti-gender mobilization one needs to employ both synchronic and diachronic approaches, namely, to see it as a deeply local, contextual and historically (in)formed phenomenon, yet also fundamentally a part of wider contemporary transnational networks and developments. While the anti-gender movement is by no means a specifically Eastern European phenomenon, as discussed above, the unique historical and geopolitical location of Lithuania – a post-Soviet country with lasting legacies of state-socialist discourses and practices, and vulnerable to the misinformation promoted by the Russian language media; a predominantly Catholic country with a strong religious lobby on the level of national politics; and a member of the European Union, well-integrated into international organizations and institutions – presents an intriguing case study so far largely overlooked among researchers of anti-gender mobilizations. While focusing on the specific socio-political and historical context of Lithuania this research aims to also contribute to broader theoretical debates regarding anti-gender mobilization, the use of homophobia and anti-feminism as political tools, and the populist far-right mobilization and rhetorical strategies in general. It therefore contributes to the transnational studies of contemporary populism in Europe, to the historically informed studies of post-socialism, and the role of gender and sexuality in politics.

Research design and work plan

The project is fundamentally interdisciplinary, as it uses the methods, methodologies and approaches from history, political science, and gender studies, as explained above. Most of the literature on anti-gender movement tends to emphasize the vagueness of the term “gender ideology”, seeing it

as a “symbolic glue” (Kováts and Põim 2015) or an “empty signifier” (Mayer and Sauer 2017). Birgit Sauer and Stefanie Mayer argue that the ambiguity and emptiness of the term “gender ideology” allows it to serve as a mobilizing tool for various actors across the political spectrum. In this sense, the anti-gender movement is a classic populist right-wing movement, which constructs an opposition between the simple people, or the nation, and the threatening enemy (Mudde 2007). However, it is also true that, as Paula-Irene Villa suggests, the “anti-genderist discourse has in fact correctly understood what “gender” is about” (Villa 2017). The opposition to the so called “gender ideology”, according to Villa, is based on a rather correct interpretation of the social constructionist notion of gender, and the perceived threat to the privileges and hierarchies in contemporary societies that the feminist and LGBTQ movements pose. In other words, anti-gender mobilization does not operate in a vacuum, but engages with specific cultural meanings.

Despite the strong presence of anti-gender mobilization in the Baltic States, including Lithuania, the existing research on the antigender mobilization in Lithuania only highlights some important aspects of its strategy and rhetoric, but does not analyze it systematically. Rosita Garškaitė-Antonowicz and Jogilė Ulinskaitė identify the fight against “genderism” as a key rhetorical strategy of the far-right populist movement in Lithuania (Ulinskaitė and Garškaitė-Antonowicz 2023). Martijn Mos analyzes the Lithuanian case study next to Hungary and Slovakia in his article on the anti-gender discourses (Mos 2023). Jorūnė Linkevičiūtė has analyzed the presence of anti-gender rhetoric in relation to reporting on the Istanbul convention in Lithuanian mainstream media (Linkevičiūtė 2021). Dovainė Buschman has analyzed the discursive tool, employed by the movement in Lithuania, to equate “genderism” with “communism” (Buschmann 2023). While these research articles focus on one or several important events or actors of the anti-gender mobilization, they do not aim to establish the contours of the social network underlying this mobilization, or a chronology of its development - a gap that my research should fill.

Given the lack of systematic research of the anti-gender mobilization in Lithuania, this research will first of all aim to trace the underpinning social network of this mobilization and the development of discursive strategies that it employs. For that purpose I will employ the *discourse coalition framework*, first introduced by Maarten Hajer (Hajer 2013) and successfully applied by Emil Edenborg in his study of how various political actors in Russia formed alliances and affinities based on their shared goal to protect “traditional values” (Edenborg 2023). *Discourse coalition framework* serves as a useful methodological tool, which allows to systematize publicly available textual, visual

and other information and in this way identify social networks and discursive patterns that characterize a certain ideological mobilization. During the initial research stage, I will therefore aim to identify the shared discursive elements (in particular – shared storylines and metaphors) that provide the background for anti-gender mobilization in Lithuania. This will allow me to map the outline of the main actors and trace their interactions, as well as establish a chronology of the development of a shared discursive framework. I hypothesize, that similarly to the Polish context (Graff and Korolczuk 2017; 2021) the debates surrounding the supposed threats of „genderism“ have been crucial in facilitating the building of far-right political alliances and the overall success of conservative politics in Lithuania. After systematizing publicly available information I will aim to establish contact with the main individuals involved in this mobilization and approach them for semi-structured interviews. While interviewing people related to right-wing movements comes with specific challenges, which have to be taken into account (Damhuis and de Jonge 2022), the interviews will be instrumental in examining personal motivations, biographical factors and declared values and beliefs, as well as potentially helpful in understanding the connections between different actors and organizations. The interviews should help deepen the comprehension of the social network underlying the *discourse coalition*.

After establishing the outlines of the anti-gender mobilization, during the later stages of research, I will employ the theoretical tools from feminist and queer theory to understand the mobilizing power and appeal of the anti-gender mobilization. My starting hypothesis is that we have to see *homophobia* (Bosia and Weiss 2013b; Bosia 2013) and *misogyny* (Manne 2017; Kaul 2021) as the central tenets of this movement. Studies of political homophobia show us that we have to understand homophobia in politics not as an expression of prevailing social views, or an inescapable reaction to international pressure or local activism, but as a deliberate strategy in pursuing power and control (Bosia and Weiss 2013a). Similarly, studies of misogyny in politics show that it is an often used strategy by authoritarian-leaning governments in order to oppose progressive policies and promote militarized securitization strategies (Kaul 2021). It is worth noting that both misogyny and homophobia are inextricably linked in as much as they perpetuate a strict gendered and sexual hierarchy and privilege normative heterosexual masculinity (Serano 2007). The research will therefore pay particular attention to how, according to this hypothesis, the anti-gender movement engages in a (national) community building through the construction of the sexual and gendered

“other” and will examine the conditions for its ongoing appeal as a political mobilization tool in the context of Lithuania.

Work plan and outcomes

The research project will combine archival research with discourse analysis and qualitative interviews. Taking the period between 1990 and 2023, through my archival and desk research I aim to trace the chronology of the development and transformation of the anti-gender mobilization, indicating the main events that have garnered public attention for the movement or gave it tangible political power. In the second stage of research I will identify the main actors (individuals, organisations, and institutions) of the anti-gender mobilization and their interrelations and will aim to perform qualitative interviews with the leading individuals (up to 10) and do extended research on the organizations and institutions. Finally, I will analyze the discursive produced by this mobilization and how it has transformed over the period between the 1990s and the 2023s with particular attention to the use of homophobia and misogyny as political rhetorical tools. For archival and desk research I will mainly work at the Lithuanian National Martynas Mažvydas Library, Vilnius University Library and the Lithuanian State Archives. First, I will review newspapers and magazines (1990-2023), looking for articles referencing “gender ideology”, “genderism”, “LGBT propaganda”, “radical feminism” and other keywords still to be established. Using previous research results and my own initial findings I will aim to reconstruct the chronology of the main events and debates in the public sphere that gave stage to anti-gender rhetoric (potentially related to Gay Pride events in Vilnius and Kaunas, to the ratification of the Istanbul convention, to sexual education initiatives, and to same-sex partnership proposals, among others).

Second, I will work with the parliamentary transcripts of the hearings of the laws related to various LGBTQ and gender equality issues to see if they contained “antigender” rhetoric and which parties and MPs engaged in it, as well as to identify lobbying efforts. I will identify the main NGO’s involved in anti-gender mobilization and will analyze their publications and other public appearances (some of the most prominent such organizations are ProPatria, The Free Society Institute, and, more recently, The Lithuanian Family Movement). Finally, I will examine also the main Church related organizations and the statements of the Lithuanian Bishops Conference. I will identify the individuals, who are recognized as the most prominent public speakers for the anti-gender cause: politicians; religious figures; as well as academics and other public figures. After identifying the main organizations and individuals and analyzing the public discourses I will aim also to take semi-

structured interviews with some key actors in the anti-gender mobilization. I plan to collect up to 10 interviews with various individuals from diverse organizations, groups, political parties and churches.

The research part of this project should be concluded in March 2025. The research should result in two peer-reviewed publications, submitted to high ranking scientific journals. The first publication will deal with anti-gender mobilization in Lithuania as a social network and a discourse coalition and would embed it into the transnational context. Estimated submission date: June 2025. Envisioned journals: East European Politics and Societies, Journal of Baltic Studies, Nationalities Papers, European Journal of Women's Studies, or other journals of a similar level (or edited volumes). The second publication will focus on the specific local rhetorical strategies of this mobilization and their historical and geo-political context from a feminist and queer theoretical lens. Estimated submission date: October 2025. Envisioned journals: Journal of the History of Sexuality, Contemporary European History, NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research or similar journals (or edited volumes).

This project is dedicated to examine and understand the social mobilization based on discriminatory, anti-feminist, homophobic, and racist beliefs. The power of anti-gender ideology is striking, in Lithuania and transnationally, as it has successfully influenced political decisions and formed the popular opinion regarding sensitive issues, such as the protection of the rights of sexual minorities and ensuring the basic human rights for women and other vulnerable groups. It is of crucial importance to understand both the historical roots of this mobilization, and the contemporary networks that enable it to continue to flourish.

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