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Ideological Foundation of the Contemporary Anti-Gender Movements in Poland. Most Recent History in the Context of Strategies and Arguments²

This article presents a critical examination of the ideological underpinnings and societal impacts of contemporary anti-gender movements in Poland, utilizing a qualitative research approach supported by critical discourse analysis (CDA). This methodological framework allows for an in-depth exploration of the narratives, strategies, and implications of these movements within the broader socio-political landscape of Poland. Central to the discourse of these movements is the construction of phantom threats against perceived dangers like “gender ideology”, feminism, and “LGBT ideology”. These constructs are analysed as tools for reinforcing conservative-Catholic sentiments and providing political leverage to far-right groups. The article delves into the historical context, tracing the evolution of discourse on gender and LGBTQ+³ rights in Poland as well as its interplay with political decisions and events. The study further examines the strategies employed by these movements, including their use of populist rhetoric, emotional manipulation, and the creation of a dichotomous worldview. A significant focus is placed on the role of the Catholic Church in Poland in shaping and propagating these ideologies, particularly in relation to family, morality, and national identity. Moreover, the article assesses the broader implications of these movements for Polish society and beyond, highlighting their transformative impact on social norms, public policy, and the discourse on gender rights and societal values. This qualitative and discursive analysis contributes significantly to the understanding of gender politics in Poland, offering insights into the global dynamics of anti-gender movements.

Keywords: anti-gender movements, critical discourse analysis (CDA), gender politics, political rhetoric

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² This article is a result of the grant awarded to the FIERCE project (n.d.), under the Grant Agreement No. 101061748, which is funded by the European Union’s Horizon Europe Research and Innovation programme.

³ When quoting or referring to the resources, I use the abbreviation as it is used in the original, whereas in my own analysis I use the more inclusive abbreviation LGBTQ+.

Introduction

In recent years, Poland has become a battleground of ideologies, with anti-gender movements gaining significant traction. This development is not an isolated phenomenon, but is deeply embedded in the country's socio-political fabric, influenced by a combination of historical conservatism, the strategic manoeuvring of political entities, and the moral and ideological guidance of religious institutions, particularly the Catholic Church. The rise of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in 2015 marked a turning point for these movements, providing them with an institutional backbone to advance their cause. This partnership has been instrumental in pushing anti-gender ideologies from the fringes to the centre of Polish political discourse. The timeline from 2010 to 2021 is punctuated by events that underline the intensification of the anti-gender movement. Legislative attempts to restrict abortion rights, in particular the decision of the Constitutional Tribunal in 2020, catalysed public outcry and mobilised both supporters and opponents, highlighting the polarised nature of Polish society on this issue. In addition, the contentious debate over the Istanbul Convention and the portrayal of LGBT+ communities as a threat to the traditional family structure has been crucial in rallying conservative support, but has also sparked significant counter-mobilisation efforts. These include the Black Protests and a wide range of pro-LGBT+ initiatives that challenge the anti-gender narrative. The PiS government's alignment with anti-gender ideologies has facilitated the enactment of policies that reflect these views and embed them within the country's legal and institutional framework. This symbiosis between political power and anti-gender movements has not only legitimised but also empowered these ideologies, enabling them to exert a significant influence on Poland's socio-political landscape.

The concept of ideology plays a significant role in understanding the dynamics of social movements, including those around contemporary issues such as anti-gender movements. At its most basic, ideology is often seen as a system of beliefs, values, and ideas that individuals and groups use to make sense of the world and navigate their social realities (Eagleton 1991; Thompson 1990). This broad definition sets the stage for a more nuanced exploration of how ideologies function within social movements, serving as both a blueprint for action and a framework for interpreting social and political environments. John Levi Martin (2014) conceptualises ideology as actors' theorisation of their position and available strategies within a political field, highlighting the strategic use of ideology in rallying support, defining goals, and mobilising resources. Ideology is dynamic, evolving in response to the changing landscapes of political and social fields. Joseph Schull (1992) articulates ideology as a form of discourse, emphasising the negotiation

and contestation of power through ideological expression and the importance of language, symbols, and narratives in the construction of ideological battlefields. In turn, Jennifer Ponce de León and Gabriel Rockhill (2020) introduce the concept of ideology as encompassing different aspects of individuals' existence and meaning-making and focus on the affective and experiential dimensions of ideology, showing how social movements create compelling narratives that resonate with individuals on a deeply personal level. Finally, Ivan Demin offers a perspective that bridges philosophical and socio-empirical views, emphasising the role of ideology as both a set of beliefs and a paradigm of socio-political thought. This dual perspective is important for understanding how the ideologies that underpin social movements are both shaped by and shape social structures and individual consciousness (Demin 2022). The discursive approach to ideology sheds light on how anti-gender movements use language to create compelling narratives that resonate with individuals on a deeply personal level. Ernesto Laclau (2005) discusses how discourse based on binary oppositions of "us" and "them" constructs certain groups or individuals as "enemies", using "empty signifiers" that allow for multiple interpretations. Laclau (2020) further explores how these "empty signifiers", by virtue of their abstraction, become focal points in political discourse, enabling various demands to aggregate into a unified, yet inherently unstable, collective identity that opposes an antagonistic "other". Consequently, "gender ideology" emerges as a highly versatile and advantageous tool in the arsenal of these movements. In the Polish context, the definition of those perceived as "them" shifts according to the objectives of right-wing populists, historically encompassing groups such as migrants, the LGBT community, gender-related issues, or feminists advocating for equal rights and access to abortion. To bring about a change in popular consciousness, it is crucial to articulate the threats posed by the "other", threats that are ideologically based and capable of affecting everyday life. These threats must target something valuable and significant to the populace, thereby painting the "other" and the phantom threats (as termed by Buchowski 2016, and Bielecka-Prus 2018 in reference to the fear of refugees) in a negative and emotionally charged light. Such a strategy increases the likelihood of people committing to defend what they perceive as under threat. Constructing a phantom threat against "gender ideology", "feminism", and "LGBT ideology" effectively reinforces the conservative-Catholic sentiment, providing tangible political leverage to far-right politicians and their affiliates.

This article delves into the ideological foundations of the anti-gender movements in Poland, offering a critical examination of their narratives, strategies, and societal impacts. With Poland presenting a distinct case in the wider European context, the study aims to elucidate the intricate dynamics and implications of these movements. Central to this exploration is the challenging task of defining

the meaning of “gender ideology” and the scope of the term. As highlighted by Stefanie Mayer and Birgit Sauer (2017), the fluidity of “gender ideology” makes it a successful rallying cry, capable of uniting a broad spectrum of Christian conservative and right-wing actors with divergent ideologies. This term finds its primary existence within the discourse of right-wing populism, a discourse often aimed at cultivating confrontational dynamics and amplifying societal and cultural divides. This article is not only an academic acquire to understand the shifting paradigms of gender politics in Poland, but it aims also to contribute to the broader discourse on gender and sociopolitical movements, shedding light on the underlying ideologies that drive anti-gender movements in Poland and beyond.

Literature review

The ideological underpinnings of anti-gender movements in Poland have attracted considerable scholarly interest, reflecting broader trends in Europe where gender and sexuality have become focal points of political contestation. The Polish case is particularly illustrative, given the country’s strong preoccupation with conservative and religious values that intersect with national identity and politics. Several scholars have addressed these dynamics, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the forces shaping anti-gender movements in Poland. At the core of the literature on anti-gender movements is the positioning of these movements within a broader populist moment (Graff, Korolczuk 2018, 2022). Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk describe how these movements exploit conservative and nationalist sentiments by presenting gender studies and LGBTQ+ rights as an existential threat to traditional values. This phenomenon is not isolated to Poland, but reverberates across Europe, indicating a broader trend of political and social conservatism exploiting populist sentiments. Bożena Chołuj (2021) critically examines how the concepts of gender and LGBTQ+ identities, often portrayed as foreign or unfamiliar within Polish discourse, are mobilized by right-wing populism and religious fundamentalism in Europe to forge alliances, mobilize support, and enact transformations within society. The transnational nature of these campaigns, as explored by David Paternotte and Roman Kuhar (2017) or Izabela Desperak (2023), further highlights the global alliances and strategies that strengthen anti-gender movements. Poland emerges as a key site in the wider network of right-wing mobilisation, demonstrating the interconnectedness of these campaigns across national borders. As highlighted by researchers (Szwed, Zielińska 2017; Duda 2016; Mishtal 2015), central to the Polish context is the significant role of the Catholic Church in shaping the discourse on gender and sexuality. Rafał Pankowski (2010), on the other hand, describes how in Poland nationalism

and xenophobia mix with debates on gender and sexuality, creating a climate conducive to anti-gender views, reinforced by the influence of the Catholic Church. The gender dimension of right-wing politics, analysed by Sauer (2024), reveals how conservative and far-right actors mobilise gender issues. This mobilisation serves not only as a political strategy, but also as a way to affirm and maintain traditional gender roles, often in opposition to advances in gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. First-hand accounts and sociological insights into the anti-gender movement, such as those provided by Klementyna Suchanow (2020) offer vivid insights into activism and resistance to restrictive policies on women's reproductive rights and LGBTQ+ rights. Similarly, Bogumiła Hall (2019) discusses how the contemporary anti-gender movements in Poland are intertwined with the rise of feminist activism, particularly among the younger generation. These accounts not only document protests and movements, but also present them as part of a larger struggle against conservative and fundamentalist agendas. In turn, the notion of "gender ideology" as a conservative tool is critically analysed by Jennifer Ramme (2022), providing insights into how this notion is being mobilised across Europe, with Poland serving as an important case study. The mobilisation against "gender ideology" illustrates wider European opposition to gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights and highlights the strategic use of disinformation and moral panics.

Methodology

This article integrates a qualitative research methodology with a specific focus on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), adopting the dialectical-relational approach as outlined by Norman Fairclough in *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (2013). By examining the ideological underpinnings and societal effects of anti-gender movements in Poland, this methodological framework facilitates a nuanced understanding of how discourse functions as a social practice to shape societal norms and influence power dynamics. This approach is particularly relevant for analysing the discourse surrounding anti-gender movements, as it allows for a critical examination of language and its role in constructing identities, shaping perceptions and mediating social relations. The methodology used in this research is underpinned by an extensive analysis of documentary evidence from 2012 to 2020, comprising a variety of primary and secondary sources. Legislative texts and policy proposals, such as the "Stop Abortion" bills archived in the database of the Polish Sejm, provide insights into the legislative efforts and political strategies of anti-gender movements. In addition, public speeches and statements by influential political figures, including those by members of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) and the campaign speeches of President Andrzej Duda, are analysed

for their rhetorical strategies and the narrative frameworks they employ. These sources are complemented by pastoral letters and public statements from the Polish Bishops' Conference, which elucidate the religious and moral arguments used against gender and LGBTQ+ rights and highlight the Catholic Church's stance on "gender ideology". An integral part of the dataset comprises media narratives, analysed through content from both mainstream and niche media outlets known for advocating anti-gender positions. These include articles from "Gazeta Polska" and broadcasts from TVP Info, which have played a crucial role in propagating anti-gender rhetoric. The study also includes publications and analyses by *Ordo Iuris*, which provide critical insights into the legal and moral frameworks mobilised to counter "gender ideology". Articles from the right-wing magazines "Do Rzeczy" and "Sieci" further enrich the dataset, providing perspectives that resonate with anti-gender sentiments and nationalist narratives. These media sources reveal how anti-gender discourses are shaped and disseminated, influencing public opinion and social discourse. Academic contributions, including journal articles, reports, and monographs, add depth to the analysis by providing scholarly critique and analysis of the anti-gender movement.

Through the dialectical-relational approach of CDA, this research methodically uncovers the complex layers of meaning within anti-gender discourse. It demonstrates how language is strategically utilized to gather support, establish group boundaries, and justify specific viewpoints, and legitimise ideological positions. Through examining a diverse sources, the research provides an in-depth analysis of the ideological underpinnings and societal impacts of anti-gender movements in Poland.

The intersection of politics, religion, and rights: Tracing the anti-gender movement in Poland

Despite the fact that Poland has had one of the strictest abortion laws in Europe since 1993, numerous political parties have often used the issue of abortion as a smokescreen, invoking it whenever they wanted to highlight other issues or controversies. In addition, the Catholic Church opposed even the smallest measures to liberalize reproductive rights in Poland and supported any action that might restrict women's rights. In the 21st century, they gained another strong supporter in the form of fundamentalist groups in particular, who adopted contemporary tactics to combat what they called "gender ideology".

Scholars often point to specific stages in the development of discourse on the topic of gender and LGBTQ+ rights in Poland, most often triggered by specific events or political decisions and clearly correlated with the election calendar

(Grochalska 2020; Graff, Korolczuk 2022; Duda 2016). As pointed out by Korolczuk and Graff, three major phases can be distinguished: “The early one, 2012–2015, was focused on sex education and opposition to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, both accused of deceitfully introducing ‘gender ideology’ into Polish culture. [...] The second phase unfolded in 2016–2018, around the time when Law and Justice came to power. It was focused first on vilifying refugees as rapists and – after PiS won the elections – on abortion rights [...]. The third phase has consisted mainly of attacks on LGBT minorities; it began in the spring of 2019 [...] the end of Poland’s anti-gender campaigns is nowhere in sight” (Graff, Korolczuk 2022: 71).

As observed by Monika Grochalska (2020) between 2011 and 2012 the term gender rarely appeared in public discourse in its literal sense and wording. And although issues that are intrinsic to gender for gender scholars emerged during this period, the term itself appeared quite rarely. In Polish politics the topic of gender identity has become present mainly due to the only transsexual member of the Polish parliament so far – Anna Grodzka (2011–2015). In this area of discourse, there have been verbal constructions clearly indicating that gender should be understood as a social construct. Grodzka has pointed out in her public statements that transsexuals are people who “feel themselves to be of the opposite sex to the one they have been assigned in documents”. On the other side of the political scene that time The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention), civil partnerships and abortion have been explicitly labelled by right-wing politicians and publicists as “promoting feminism, abortion, homosexuality, and other deviant behaviour” (Piłka 2011). Marian Piłka (right-wing politician, publicist, and historian) also saw “deviants” as a threat to spiritual and moral strength. During this period (2010) there was the first civic initiative project in the history of Poland establishing a total ban on abortion “Stop Abortion”, which was supported by several hundred thousand citizens (Obywatelski projekt ustawy 2011). It failed to obtain a majority in the Sejm and was rejected in 2011 (Szołucha, Rzeplińska 2020).

Although it is difficult for researchers to pinpoint exactly when the anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ mobilisation in Poland began, April 2012 and the public expression of opposition to “gender ideology” and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the Minister of Justice at that time – Jarosław Gowin – are cited as one of the major starting points of the Polish anti-gender campaign (Graff, Korolczuk 2022). Minister Gowin’s main argument was that the Istanbul Convention is a hidden Trojan horse whose real aim is the destruction of traditional family. The narrative, according to which Polish feminists and politicians supporting the Istanbul Convention, civil partnerships, and women’s rights to abortion are traitors and part of an international conspiracy against the traditional gender order has

also begun to be constructed and further supported by the Polish hierarchs of the Catholic Church (Graff, Korolczuk 2022).

2013 was a year in which the word *gender* began to appear extremely frequently in public discourse and was discussed from various approaches. It was even chosen as the word of the year by a committee of linguists and cultural studies experts (*Gender słowem roku* 2014). 2013 was also the year when the voice of representatives of the Catholic Church became particularly visible in the discussion on gender, and as in the global context, also in the Polish context, the Catholic Church became the main force behind anti-gender and anti-feminist campaigns. During the mass on 16 October 2013 at Wrocław Cathedral, Archbishop Józef Michalik suggested a link between paedophilia and the promotion of “gender ideology”: “Abuse of children by adults is reprehensible. However, no one pays attention to the causes of this behaviour. Pornography and the false love shown in it, the lack of love of divorcing parents, and the promotion of gender ideology” (Schwertner 2013). In his opinion, the blame for child abuse by adults also lies with feminist environments, especially “the most aggressive Polish feminists”, who “for years have mocked the Church and traditional ethics, promoted abortion and fought against the traditional model of family and marital fidelity” (Bieńczak 2013).

The Catholic Church’s stance on gender was officially sanctioned by the pastoral letter of the Polish Episcopate, which was read out in all churches in Poland on 29 December 2013, where church authorities emphasise the destructive impact of gender on traditional values and the family. The Polish Episcopate wrote: “In view of the increasing attacks of this ideology, we feel urged to speak out strongly in defence of the Christian family, the fundamental values that protect it, to warn against the dangers of promoting a new type of family life” (List Pasterski Episkopatu Polski 2013). Of particular concern to the bishops was the fact that, according to “gender ideology” / “genderism”, a person would be free to determine his or her sex. They warn that this is to lead to – society accepting the right to form new types of families, for example those built on homosexual relationships. The bishops stressed also that “gender ideology” is the result of a decades-long ideological and cultural transformation, firmly rooted in Marxism and neo-Marxism, promoted by certain feminist movements and the sexual revolution: “Genderism promotes principles that are totally contrary to reality and to an integral understanding of human nature” (List Pasterski Episkopatu Polski 2013).

Interestingly, as Jenny Gunnarsson Payne and Sofie Tornhill (2023) noticed, the usage of “ideology” in the term “gender ideology” closely mirrors the traditional Marxist interpretation of ideology. However, paradoxically, the underlying cognitive misunderstanding in this context pertains to the concept of “gender” itself being ideological, given that it associates biological sex with a “socially constructed” nature. The Episcopate alarmed in its pastoral letter (Gunnarsson Payne, Tornhill 2023)

that “gender ideology” has been introduced for months, without the knowledge of society, in the Polish education system, health care, the activities of cultural and educational institutions and non-governmental organisations.

Although the rights of homosexuals were not mentioned in this letter, it became obvious that the main threat to Polish children is, in the opinion of the Catholic Church, homosexuality, described as “LGBT propaganda” and in 2019 as “LGBT ideology”. In the Church’s discourse on gender, a fairly consistent narrative model can be discerned. The primary protagonist here is the Church, which defends the family, society. The enemy is named (“gender ideology”), although not fully defined. As already mentioned, such definitional fluidity and a certain undefinition of “gender ideology” and its supporters – “genderists” – is functional in the sense that it allows a common label to be given to phenomena and subjects negatively evaluated by the Church (e.g. feminists, representatives of sexual minorities, supporters of “in vitro fertilisation” (IVF), people who advocate the right to abortion). “Gender ideology” is presented as something external, alien (starting with the name itself), as an enemy that, through manipulation and deception, tries to infiltrate the ranks of the opponent (Szwed 2019). The appeal of the church hierarchy on 29 of December 2013 was met with a very quick response from right-wing politicians. On 8 January 2014 The Parliamentary Group “Stop gender ideology!” was established, and it can be seen as one of the turning points in the campaign against gender in Poland – a moment of its politicization. Immediately after the victory of PiS in autumn 2015, anti-gender mobilization intensified with President Duda’s first veto, which was against the Gender Accordance Act. The Act would have made the legal recognition procedure of gender change easier and more accessible. In the following years, the dominant topic was mainly abortion, influenced by the Catholic Church, and women’s reproductive rights, against which the government took legal actions.

Also as recently as autumn of 2015 the anti-choice network “STOP abortion” led by the Ordo Iuris Institute Foundation launched a massive campaign in favour of a total ban on abortions. In the spring of 2016 the Stop Abortion Committee started to gather signatures supporting citizen’s law proposal, which included a total ban on abortion and the threat of criminal prosecution for both doctors and women (Obywatelski projekt ustawy 2011). The main politicians of the ruling party (PiS) have declared their support for the proposed law (The Prime Minister Beata Szydło and Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of PiS). However, due to the mass protests of Polish women (the Black Protests and the Polish Women’s Strike) in the autumn, on 6 of October 2016 PiS voted to refer the initiative to the parliamentary committees, thereby withdrawing the proposal (Majewska 2016; Muszel, Piotrowski 2018; Kowalska et al. 2019). Further waves of protests in 2017, 2018 and much smaller in 2019 followed, and the networks of feminist activists consolidated, crystallised, and matured.

Labelling supporters of abortion as adversaries of Poland and its values was easily accomplished within the ultra-right and Catholic milieu, as since the early 1990s the abortion law conflict in Poland not only showcased diverse societal perspectives on the matter but also became intertwined with the reformation of the Polish post-communist state (Kramer 2009). Advocates for stricter regulations positioned themselves as contributing to the rejection of the communist legacy and a revival of traditional Polish values (Watson 1993), closely associated with Catholicism. As feminist circles advocated for abortion rights, they were immediately positioned on the opposing spectrum. This positioning also implied a stance against traditional Polish Catholic values. This categorisation linked feminists with a perception of being aligned with values deemed anti-Polish.

In 2019, when the Law and Justice party was gearing up for European Parliament elections, this time it is the LGBTQ+ community and anti-gender discourse that is being used to mobilise conservative voters feeling fear of cultural change and socio-economic marginalisation, and the systemic mobilisation against LGBTQ+ people entered a new phase. The main narrative used against LGBTQ+ people was built on the message about the “sexualization of children” and “protection of traditional families”. In Jarosław Kaczyński’s words, this was “an attack on the family” and “an attack on children”. He called “LGBT ideology” an imported “threat to Polish identity, to our nation, to its existence and thus to the Polish state” (Noack 2019). Until the October parliamentary elections, anti-LGBTQ+ attacks became the dominant thread of the pre-election political battle.

The anti-gender mobilisation has also taken on a more local character. Since March some regional and local self – government units – mainly from the historically conservative south-east of Poland – started declaring themselves “LGBT-free zones”. A key role in this local mobilisation was played by the *Ordo Iuris* Foundation, which also reacted quickly to the Mayor of Warsaw’s actions and prepared the text of *The Local Government Charter of Family Rights*, encouraging local governments to adopt it (Graff, Korolczuk 2022). The Charter’s propagators describe themselves as a “coalition of pro-family organisations” and warn on the website dedicated to the initiative that “some local governments today are trying to undermine the constitutional rights of families and parents, without whose permission they are implementing permissive sex education classes in schools”, therefore it is necessary to take a stand “on the side of the constitutional values under threat – the family, marriage as a union between a man and a woman, motherhood and parenthood” and urgently adopt the “Local Government Charter of Family Rights”, reaffirming the constitutional guarantees of the rights of families and the rights of parents and creating real guarantees for their observance” (*Samorządowa Karta Praw Rodzin* n.d.). In response to these actions, the *Atlas of Hate* was created on which by 30 March 2020 more than 80 local governments, including five voivodships were marked as being declared as “free zones”

from “LGBT ideology” or/and accepted the Local Government Charter of Family rights (Graff, Karolczuk 2022).

However, international pressure and, above all, the vision of losing funding from the European Union⁴ have resulted that shortly thereafter most of the local authorities decided to withdraw from their anti-LGBT declarations. The tense atmosphere of the summer 2019 election campaign was also heated up by the Pro-Life Foundation’s campaign, which culminated in August in the submission to the Sejm of a bill “Stop paedophilia”, which provided for increased penalties for paedophile acts, but also to criminalise sex education. At the vote on 16th April 2020, the draft was referred to a parliamentary committee for further work.

The Catholic Church has not remained neutral in the anti-LGBTQ+ campaign of 2019 either. The statement from the side of the Catholic Church that caused perhaps the greatest outrage at the time was that of Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski about the “rainbow plague”. “Fortunately, the red plague is no longer on our land, but this does not mean that there is not a new plague that wants to take over our souls, hearts, and minds. Not Marxist, Bolshevik, but born of the same spirit, neo-Marxist. Not red, but rainbow”, said Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski, the Metropolitan Archbishop of Krakow, on 1 August 2019 (so two months before the parliamentary elections) during a Mass commemorating the 75th anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising (*Arcybiskup Jędraszewski* 2019).

Both during the 2019 parliamentary campaign and the 2020 presidential campaign “gender” and “LGBTQ+” terms have been dehumanised and depersonalised and were called a hostile ideology. PiS described LGBTQ+ as something Western and destructive, a factor that is alien to Polish tradition and culture. For example, President Duda in June 2020 during his second presidential campaign said at a rally: “Ladies and gentlemen, they’re trying to make us believe that these are people. But it’s just an ideology”. He also argued for the need to oppose it, as it is more descriptive of children than communist ideology that Poles have fought against in the past. “It was not for this my parents’ generation fought for 40 years to expel communist ideology from schools [...] so that we now accept that another ideology should come along, an ideology that is even more destructive to humanity, an ideology which, beneath the platitudes of respect and tolerance, conceals profound intolerance and elimination, the exclusion of all those who do not wish to submit to it” (Gwiazda 2020).

Definitely a turning point for both sides of the political spectrum speaking out on gender issues and above all on women’s reproductive rights was the Constitutional Court verdict of 22 October 2020 declaring the rationale allowing the termination

⁴ The European Commission withheld funding to five local authorities, calling for the repeal of anti-LGBT declarations, which resulted in the resignation of these declarations in four regions.

of pregnancy in the case of severe foetal abnormalities unconstitutional. This has sparked nationwide and international protests that lasted throughout the winter until the spring of 2021.

The year 2021 brought further legislative initiatives, from the anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ environment, such as the “Yes to family, no to gender” project and another homophobic citizens’ initiative “Stop LGBT”. Both of them have been referred to by the Sejm for further work in committees. The most recent citizens’ bill is called “Abortion is Murder” (December 2022). Among other things, the bill provides for a ban on public advocacy of any action regarding the possibility of aborting a pregnancy inside and outside the country and provides for imprisonment for such actions. However, PiS politicians announced that they would not support a bill that would further restrict abortion laws in Poland.

2023 is the year in which the next parliamentary elections in Poland are scheduled (probably for autumn). The ruling party, ultra-conservative environments, and the Catholic Church will probably continue their crusade against “gender ideology” and LGBTQ+. The question that has yet to be answered is who or what the Law and Justice Party will put on the “electoral sacrificial altar” this time. The presentation of the “enemy” to the Poles will officially start the election campaign, full of political tactics and inherent belief systems embedded within the discourse against the designated “enemy”.

Anti-gender arguments in the perspective of populist manipulation

According to Teun van Dijk (2000), one of the guiding principles for analysing the ideological aspect of discourse involves manipulation, which hinges on the approach of showcasing oneself positively while presenting others negatively. The central mechanisms characterizing manipulation encompass ideological polarization, positive self-presentation through moral superiority, discrediting the opponent and emotionalizing the argument.

In the Polish case of anti-gender movement ideological polarization is manifested as the juxtaposition of “us”, the defenders of traditional values and Polish identity, suggesting that they are the ones safeguarding the natural and divine order (**positive self-presentation through moral superiority**) and “they”, whom they label as foreign agents, deviants, or proponents of “civilization of death”, etc. (**ideological polarization**). By doing so, they imply that their cause is inherently righteous. The movement often characterizes proponents of gender equality or LGBTQ+ rights as agents of corruption and moral decay (**discrediting the opponent**). This creates a sense of unity within the anti-gender movement. They present their efforts as stemming from a genuine concern for the welfare of society, positioning themselves

as having the moral right to defend traditional Polish culture from external threats. This involves constructing the argument in a manner that employs rhetoric emphasizing threats to the general populace and, more specifically, vulnerable subjects like childhood (**emotionalizing the argument**). Furthermore, it incorporates elements of moral panic, notably the portrayal of homosexual influence as a contagion and the subversion of a universally accepted anthropology rooted in the complementarity of traditional masculinity and femininity codes.

Tracing the history of the anti-gender and anti-feminist movements in Poland, it is possible to identify some of the most important arguments used by their leaders and supporters, which are perfectly consistent with the populist manipulation strategies outlined.

Protecting traditional values and families

In Poland, the defence of what is dubbed as “authentic Polish cultural identity” serves as the cornerstone of anti-gender movements, framing the Polish family as inherently heteronormative, conservative, and Catholic (Graff, Korolczuk 2018). This narrative is not merely rhetorical but manifests in concrete policies and campaigns aimed at protecting the traditional family model from what is perceived as the corrosive influences of “gender and LGBT ideology”. For example, the “Stop Paedophilia” bill purportedly aims to protect children but effectively serves to suppress comprehensive sex education and frames it as an attack on traditional family values (Pankowski 2010). Further, public events like the “March of Independence”, often turn into platforms where slogans such as “Family is the foundation of the nation” are vociferously advocated, reinforcing the association between national identity and traditional family structures (Kuhar, Paternotte 2017). Even the educational system is not immune; textbooks often portray family in traditional roles, subtly indoctrinating the following generation (Banach 2017; Gajda et al. 2023).

This narrative of protecting traditional family values also dovetails with religious institutions in Poland. The Polish Catholic Church, a significant cultural and political force, often disseminates the same message during sermons and through its educational materials, presenting the traditional family as the bulwark against the alleged moral decay brought on by “gender ideology” (Jędrzejczyk 2013). In this sense, the church not only provides moral justification for the narrative but also mobilizes its vast network to propagate these ideas (Szwed, Zielińska 2017).

Protecting children

The narrative of child protection is intricately woven into the fabric of anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ discourses, serving as a potent tool for the perpetuation of heteronormative and conservative ideologies. Within this framework, the main line of argument against LGBTQ+ individuals and associated ideologies hinges on the supposed “sexualization of children” and the need for “protection of traditional families”. This rhetoric is often propagated by key politicians of the right-wing, who go to great lengths to establish a spurious connection between homosexuality and paedophilia, thereby exploiting societal fears and prejudices to further their agenda (Kulpa, Mizielińska 2016). This narrative is not merely abstract but manifests in tangible legislative efforts, such as the “Stop Paedophilia” and “Stop LGBT” bills, which ostensibly aim to protect children but effectively serve to stigmatize and marginalize LGBTQ+ communities (Kuhar Paternotte 2017). Another vivid example is the “Yes for Family, No for Gender” campaign, which also leverages the child protection argument to oppose comprehensive sex education and propagate traditional family values (Pankowski 2010).

Moreover, policies like the “LGBT-free zones” and the “Local Government Charter of Family Rights”, prepared by *Ordo Iuris*, are framed as proactive measures to safeguard children and, by extension, the traditional family. These policies and campaigns, often backed by ultra-conservative organizations, not only normalise but institutionalise the narrative, rendering it a mainstay in public discourse and policy-making (Krzyżanowski 2018).

Western demoralisation (Brussels, gender, LGBTQ+) as a source of problems

The narrative of Western demoralization, particularly emanating from Brussels, serves as a powerful rhetorical device in anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ discourses. Coined evocatively as “ebola from Brussels”, this narrative posits that Western ideologies related to gender and LGBTQ+ rights are infecting and weakening the moral and cultural fabric of Poland (Korolczuk, Graff 2018). This is not an isolated rhetoric but has permeated various facets of Polish society, from political speeches to media coverage, where feminism and LGBTQ+ rights are often framed as the Achilles’ heel of Western Europe, allegedly rendering it susceptible to the perceived dangers of mass migration (Krzyżanowski 2018).

A prime example of this narrative in action is the rise of right-wing political parties that have garnered significant support by portraying Poland as both a victim and a potential saviour of Europe in a moral decline. This dual role capitalizes on the pride and historical consciousness of the Polish populace, mobilizing it

against what is portrayed as the corrupting influence of Western liberal ideologies (Pankowski 2010). Such portrayals often appear in public speeches, political manifestos, media articles, and even educational curricula, making the narrative a ubiquitous aspect of Polish social and political life (Synowiec 2022).

Furthermore, the narrative finds support in the form of international alliances with other conservative movements, such as Hungary's Fidesz or Italy's Lega Nord, thereby positioning Poland within a broader network of resistance against Western demoralization (Holesch, Kyriazi 2021). This narrative is also often supported by the Catholic Church in Poland, which frames the struggle against Western ideologies as a form of religious and moral duty, adding an additional layer of existential significance to the discourse.

Gender as an “ideology” like Marxism or even worse

According to this narrative, cultural Marxists, together with members of the LGBTQ+ community, aim to ban opinions dissenting from the liberal mainstream and subvert the basics of the democratic civil society through undermining marriage, family, and the “natural male and female roles”. The claims of leading Law and Justice politicians (Suchanow 2020: 4) are in line with those of the Catholic Church hierarchy (Łoziński 2013) who – as archbishop Henryk Hoser, Chairman of the Team of Experts on Bioethics of the Polish Bishops' Conference, Ordinary of Warsaw-Praga (Jędrzejczyk 2013) – derive gender from Marxism, and indirectly also from Stalinism: “Gender ideology is an offshoot of Marxism and it must not be forgotten that it is a new way of class struggle. Except that the classes become women and men. The proletariat are women and men are the holders, the capitalists who oppress the proletariat. The greatest harm that radical feminism does to women is to masculinise them. [...] Masculinisation existed in Marxism. It was a very strong feature of Stalinist ideology. [...] And this, after all, goes against the vocation of women to give life, not to destroy it”. Moreover, gender is far worse than Marxism: “Gender is more dangerous because it goes further than Marxism. [...] The idea is that the older generation has no impact on the upbringing of the younger generation, and that the young are brought up by their peers”. In the anti-gender discourse, the reference to human rights is closely linked to human dignity, provided by the rejection of “gender ideology” or “LGBT ideology” and remaining faithful to traditional values. As stated on the website of the ultra-conservative organization Ordo Iuris, its main field of activity is “the protection [...] of human and civil rights”, resulting from the “inherent and inalienable dignity of the human being” (Jędrzejczyk 2013).

To bring these topics into the public discourse while simultaneously participating in the manipulation strategies, specific media outlets in Poland have been instrumental. For instance, outlets like “Gazeta Polska” and “wPolityce.pl” often publish sensationalised articles with provocative titles such as *The LGBT Agenda: The End of Polish Families?* or *Gender Ideology: A Threat to Our Children*, thereby creating an atmosphere of fear and urgency. These publications commonly frame LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality as foreign influences that aim to erode core Polish values (Krzyżanowski 2018). Additionally, televised discussions on networks like TVP Info, a public broadcasting company, often feature panels that are disproportionately composed of anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-gender ideology voices. In one such discussion titled “The Dangers of Gender Ideology in Schools”, the panel predominantly consisted of figures known for their conservative beliefs, thereby giving weight to the notion that gender ideology is a peril that must be guarded against.

Through these means, these media outlets not only publicise but also become active participants in the manipulation strategies, using fear-inducing narratives to influence public opinion and policy directions (Synowiec 2022).

How can we explain this anti-gender/anti-feminist backlash?

The contemporary ultra-conservatives’ success is seen as an offshoot of neoliberal policies, where every sphere of social life is subject to economisation, all institutions are managed according to the logic of profit maximisation and people are defined mainly by their purchasing power. In the process of political transformation initiated in Poland in 1989, strong social pressure and the pursuit of a “thick line” policy, separating all that was associated with the previous system determined the choice of the then Polish elite of the neoliberal option, despite the low theoretical and practical background associated with it (Dąbrowska-Prokopowska 2018). The dominance of egoism and the acceptance of brutal competition have led to the erosion of the ethics of cooperation. *Homo economicus* has triumphed (Witoszek 2020).

As it is stated by Wendy Brown (2003: 52) it: “erodes the root of democracy in principle at the same time that it raises the status of profit and expediency as the criteria for policy making”. The result is the socio-cultural crisis triggered by the rage of those who feel lost in the neoliberal race, further reinforced by insecurity, a sense of loneliness and fear.

The recent intensification of anti-gender movements illuminates the intricate nexus between neoliberalism, social conservatism, and feminist activism, challenging the notion that these movements are merely a product of “neoliberal conservatism”. Contrary to popular belief, neoliberalism, primarily an economic doctrine

as outlined by Brown (2003), does not inherently espouse progressive social values. As David Harvey (2005) and Stephanie L. Mudge (2008) argue, neoliberal policies can co-exist and even flourish alongside social conservatism, debunking the misconception that the two are mutually exclusive. This complex co-existence is further complicated by the role of feminism, which has often been accused of insufficiently critiquing neoliberalism. Nancy Fraser (2009) and Catherine Rottenberg (2014) contend that certain feminist discourses, particularly those emphasizing individual choice and empowerment, inadvertently align with neoliberal agendas of market flexibility and consumerism. Such alignment raises critical questions about the ways in which feminist goals can be co-opted to serve neoliberal purposes. Adding another layer of complexity is the resurgence of anti-gender ideologies, particularly in the wake of economic crises. These movements capitalise on social anxieties exacerbated by economic instability but do not offer comprehensive economic alternatives. Instead, as Gunnarson Payne and Tornhill (2023) note, some regimes introduce family-centered social benefits, reinforcing traditional gender roles while navigating the contradictions of neoliberalism. Furthermore, the assumption that global modernization inevitably leads to progressive social values such as gender equality and sexual rights must be interrogated. Theories of “developmental determinism” overlook the complexities and nuances involved in societal change, as argued by scholars like Arturo Escobar (1995) and Amartya Sen (1999). In summary, the multi-layered landscape shaped by the rise of anti-gender movements underscores the imperative for an interdisciplinary approach that combines insights from sociology, economics, and gender studies to unravel these complexities and develop effective strategies for social change.

The anti-gender mobilization provides a specific response to the undemocratic consequences of neoliberal global governance. In a post-Cold War context where capitalism is largely perceived as lacking any viable alternatives, anti-gender movements have emerged as unexpected critics of the global economic order (Graff, Korolczuk 2022). It aims to reestablish fixed and “natural” concepts of masculinity and femininity, which are viewed as foundational to society and human civilization. Firstly, their persistent focus on cultural and moral concerns tends to overshadow economic inequalities and opportunities for democratic participation, relegating these issues to a supporting role in comparison to the overarching “gender” agenda. The anti-gender discourse predominantly revolves around “natural laws” and Christian morality, relegating both democratic and economic matters to secondary importance. Anti-genderists argue that if we get rid of these dangerous diseases as gender, feminism, LGBTQ+, it will be possible to rebuild a stable, secure world where the family provides lasting support and human bonds are more important than profit. And it is fear that is the most effective emotion used by ultra-conservatives in Poland in the process of political manipulation. “Fear

management” appears as an effective method of controlling or managing entire groups or societies, as it can achieve various political objectives simultaneously (Cywiński et al. 2019).

In addition to “fear management”, the ultra-conservatives are also conducting a “dignity revolution” attractive to underprivileged groups. In this revolution, an enemy is needed in order to be able to better build a “tribal dignity” based on national pride and collective fantasies about wronged people and treacherous elites (Witoszek 2020). Using the dichotomy of “we – they”, “our – foreign”, on the one hand, anti-genderists point to the image of enemies, portraying them as those whose invasion should be feared and defended against (leftist elites, feminists, gender, LGBT, Brussels), while on the other hand, a “safe haven” and the source of dignity can be found in enduring and unchanging values: traditional family and morality, nation, and the Church. Such argumentation is further reinforced by the Catholic Church, which, despite rapid secularisation, is still an important, opinion-forming actor in this game.

Anti-gender movements cannot be simply categorised as mere backlash, expressions of homophobia, manifestations of anti-feminism, or merely strategic endeavours of the Catholic Church. Instead, their multifaceted nature demands a more comprehensive approach. Analysing these movements through a broader lens is essential due to their intricate interplay with global socio-political dynamics. They often share common ideologies and tactics across borders, making it evident that their roots go beyond local circumstances. Their ability to draw strength from international networks, share strategies, and influence one another showcases the necessity of understanding them in a transnational context. By doing so, researchers can unveil the underlying forces that fuel these movements, such as the rise of conservative ideologies and the backlash against progressive values on a global scale. Furthermore, conceptualizing these movements solely as a reaction to gender-related issues overlooks their broader implications. While gender-related concerns are undoubtedly central to their agendas, these movements also connect with larger socio-economic, political, and cultural factors. According to Graff and Korolczuk (2022), it is owing to its wider scope that today anti-gender politics has managed to achieve a greater public appeal, forging alliances across a spectrum of political actors and movements with an authoritarian and illiberal leaning.

Politically, the success of these movements highlights the erosion of trust in established democratic systems. As these movements gain traction, they expose the vulnerability of liberal democratic values in the face of growing populist sentiment. This erosion of trust can lead to a weakening of democratic institutions and a polarization of societies, further exacerbating the crisis. Culturally, anti-gender fundamentalism uses “fear management” and taps into anxieties surrounding cultural identity and perceived threats to traditional norms and values. By presenting

themselves as defenders of a particular way of life, anti-genderists attract individuals who fear the loss of their cultural heritage in the face of globalization and multiculturalism. From a socio-economic standpoint, anti-gender fundamentalism can arise as a response to economic disparities, resulting from neoliberal economy and technological advancements. The anti-gender movement often offers a sense of identity and belonging that resonates with those who feel left behind by rapid changes in the economy. And last but not least, although it may not yet be significantly pronounced or prevalent in Poland, we should conscientiously pinpoint the ideological “gripes” inherent within the anti-gender discourse and uncover its vulnerabilities concerning its criticism of market capitalism and corporate authority. This endeavour will enable them to identify strategic openings for launching effective political challenges (Gunnarsson Payne, Tornhill 2023).

In other words, the rise of anti-gender movements demands a comprehensive analytical approach that transcends the confines of individual country case studies. Such movements are not solely about gender-related concerns or the strategies of particular institutions. Instead, they are intertwined with larger global dynamics, reflecting broader socio-economic, political, and cultural crises faced by liberal democracies. Understanding these movements requires acknowledging their multifaceted nature and recognising their role as symptoms and consequences of these deep-seated challenges.

Conclusion

Examining the ideological foundations and social ramifications of contemporary anti-gender movements in Poland, this article provides a comprehensive and nuanced perspective on the complex dynamics shaping these movements. Using a qualitative research methodology complemented by critical discourse analysis, the article traces the interplay between socio-political developments, the strategic manoeuvres of political entities and the ideological guidance provided by institutions associated with the Catholic Church in the promotion and propagation of anti-gender ideologies. Central to the discourse of these movements is the strategic construction of phantom threats against perceived dangers such as “gender ideology”, feminism, and “LGBT ideology”. These constructs serve as key tools for reinforcing conservative Catholic sentiments and providing political leverage for ultra-right groups. The victory of the Law and Justice (PiS) party in the 2015 parliamentary elections was instrumental in moving anti-gender ideologies from the periphery to the core of Polish political discourse, highlighting the deeply polarised nature of Polish society on contentious issues such as abortion rights and LGBTQ+ rights.

The article outlines key stages in developing the discourse on gender and LGBTQ+ rights in Poland, each characterised by specific events or policy decisions, demonstrating the adaptability and strategic evolution of the anti-gender movement in response to the changing socio-political landscape. It also highlights the central role of the Catholic Church in shaping and disseminating anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ ideologies, illustrating its profound impact on societal norms, values, and the broader discourse on gender rights.

The wider implications of these movements for the Polish society and beyond are critically assessed, highlighting their transformative impact on social norms, public policy and gender rights discourse. Through qualitative and discursive analysis, the article makes a significant contribution to the understanding of gender politics in Poland and provides valuable insights into the global dynamics of anti-gender movements. This analysis not only sheds light on the specific case of Poland, but also contributes to the broader discourse on gender and socio-political movements, highlighting the underlying ideologies that drive anti-gender movements in Poland and beyond.

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