“We Want Justice and Equality, Not Gender” Translating Class Struggle into Anti-gender Discourse

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Abstract

Neue „reaktionäre“ Bewegungen, die sich gegen Geschlechtergleichstellung und LBTIQA+-Rechte richten, werden in der Literatur als „anti-gender movements“ bezeichnet. Sie setzen sich aus ideologisch diversen Akteuren zusammen, die ein gemeinsamer Feind eint: die „Gender-Ideologie“. Der vorliegende Artikel konzentriert sich auf die tschechische Variante dieser Bewegung und zeigt auf, dass die sich mit ihr identifizierenden Personen besonders in Glaubensfragen sowie hinsichtlich ihres kulturellen und ökonomischen Kapitals erhebliche Unterschiede aufweisen. Der von Repräsentanten der Katholischen Kirche, neoliberalen und konservativen Intellektuellen artikulierte Diskurs versucht, gebildete Katholiken und Konservative der Mittelschicht anzusprechen, die vielfach der Idee des freien Marktes anhängen. Der Anti-Gender-Diskurs rechtsextremer Populisten zielt hingegen auf ungebildete Arbeiter und Personen, die im nach 1989 in Tschechien eingeführten neoliberal-kapitalistischen System mit Schwierigkeiten zu kämpfen haben.

I. Introduction

In the last decade, there has been a worldwide rise of opposition to gender progressive politics as well as women’s and LGBTIQA+ rights. Several countries in Europe witnessed protests against same-sex marriage, gender studies and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention.[1] The movement has already celebrated some

1 The Council of Europe’s convention tackling the issue of gendered violence.

tangible outcomes such as the cancellation of sexual and reproductive rights in several countries. Poland, for instance, banned the right to interrupt an unwanted pregnancy. A year later, the US Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade and ended the protection of the right to interrupt an unwanted pregnancy at the federal level. Slovakia ran a homophobic referendum on the definition of marriage. Hungary banned gender studies and introduced a law making it impossible for transgender people to legally change their sex. While several countries, including Slovakia, Czechia and Bulgaria, refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention, others, such as Turkey and Poland, withdrew from the convention after they ratified it. When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Russian president Vladimir Putin justified the invasion by claiming that the West had been systematically destroying Russian traditional values and forcing its decadent false values onto the Russian people.[2]

The increased emergence of such political decisions and ultraconservative rhetoric in different places all around the world is not a coincidence. It is the result of an ultraconservative movement known under the moniker of the "American Christian Right" that emerged in the 1970s.[3] Groups involved in this movement were able to connect transnationally with other ideologically similar groups across the world and infiltrate power structures, which allowed them to affect legislation from within.[4] This phenomenon is no longer specific to the US as the people involved in the activism and lobbying associated with this movement have been able to network transnationally and create a global network also known as the "anti-gender movement" (in this article also labelled as "anti-gender discursive coalition"). The anti-gender movement opposes gender-progressive politics by pushing a culturally conservative agenda. This coalition opposing "gender ideology"[5] consists of intellectuals, journalists, think tanks, far-right populist or Christian political parties, financially and ideologically tied grassroots organisations and religious institutions including the Vatican and the ultraconservative branch of the Catholic Church.[6]

2 Cf. Emil Edenborg, Putin's Anti-Gay war in Ukraine. In: Boston Review, 14.3.2022 (https://bostonreview.net/articles/putins-anti-gay-war-on-ukraine/; 21.8.2022).

3 Cf. Margaret Power, Transnational, Conservative, Catholic, and Anti-Communist. Tradition, Family, and Property (TFP). In: Martin Durham/Margaret Power (eds.), New Perspectives on the Transnational Right, New York 2010, pp. 85–105.

4 Cf. Neil Datta, Tip of the Iceberg. Religious Extremist Funders against Human Rights for Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Europe 2009–2018, European Parliament Forum for Sexual & Reproductive Rights 2021 (https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Tip%20of%20the%20Iceberg%20June%202021%20Final.pdf; 21.8.2022).

5 Cf. Elzbieta Korolczuk/Agnieszka Graff, Gender as "Ebola from Brussels". The Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism. In: Signs, 43 (2018) 3, pp. 797–821.

6 Cf. Neil Datta, "Restoring the Natural Order". The religious extremists' vision to mobilize European societies against human rights on sexuality and reproduction, European Parliamentary Forum on Population & Development 2018 (https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/rtno__EN_epf_online_2021.pdf; 21.8.2022); Agnieszka Graff/Elzbieta Korolczuk, Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment. London 2022;

They describe "gender ideology" as a neo-Marxist philosophy that denies the existence of biological sex and imposes non-traditional gender identities on people. As such, this movement promotes a new, advanced form of anti-feminism that opposes the liberation of women and portrays a new enemy: a global, liberal elite promoting an ideology that destroys all differences between women and men and, thus, the unit of a traditional family and, thereby, entire nations and, eventually, the entire white race. The actors involved in this network use various discursive strategies including anti-system populism, the construction of moral panic, scaremongering and claims to protect "free speech" or the "oppressed white, heterosexual majority". Furthermore, they argue that their views derive from a "natural order of things" and "common sense".[7] This discourse is particularly, but by no means exclusively, prevalent in the Central Eastern Europe (CEE) region where "gender ideology" is often described as Western ideological colonisation.

While previous research[8] uncovered the religious roots of anti-gender activism, the fundamental endeavour of this article is to deepen the understanding of the diversity of the movement's actors. Thus, the focus is placed on secular reasons due to which the anti-gender discourse thrives. To uncover these reasons, I draw on findings from an ethnographic examination of the Czech anti-gender movement. Despite the common understanding of the movement as religious, the Czech anti-gender movement proves that such discourse can thrive in a country often considered atheistic. The main argument of this article is that the movement, despite its religious roots, also has a strong class dimension which is often understudied. Shedding light on this dimension can provide a better understanding of the movement and, thus, explain how this originally religious discourse resonates among a primarily non-religious population.

In particular, I draw on three life-history interviews that I conducted with grassroots activists involved in the Czech campaigns against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. To interpret the data, I use the theory of symbolic boundaries,[9] (i. e., the constructions of the dichotomy between "us" and "them") and analyse the construction of "heroes" and "villains" in my interlocutor's stories. Furthermore, I apply insights from discourse theory[10] and demonstrate how certain formula stories can be re-contextualised in different discourses. I, thereby, demonstrate how my interlocutors' economic struggles were translated into their activism, which centres exclusively on cultural issues.

Roman Kuhar/David Paternotte, Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe. Mobilizing against Equality, London 2017.

7 Korolczuk/Graff, Gender as "Ebola from Brussels"; Kuhar/Paternotte, Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe; Datta, "Restoring the Natural Order".

8 For instance, cf. Anna Lavizzari/Massimo Prearo, The anti-gender movement in Italy. Catholic participation between electoral and protest politics. In: European Societies, 21 (2019) 3, pp. 1–21.

9 Cf. Michele Lamont, The Dignity of Working Men. Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class and Immigration, Cambridge 2000.

10 Cf. Ernesto Laclau/Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics, London 1985.

I begin this article by critically discussing the common understanding of the movement as the "patriarchy and angry white men striking back". I proceed to present activists with whom I conducted interviews and present my data collection methods. Afterwards, I briefly touch upon my positionality. I continue by presenting the theoretical framework. Finally, I present the findings of the analysis. I conclude this article by discussing the following paradox: the activists in Czechia who criticised the neoliberal capitalist regime self-identified with the subject position originally articulated by those who promote free market ideology.

II. The Patriarchy Strikes Back?

Anti-genderism is often interpreted as a masculinist political revival and a backlash against the current feminist movement as well as gender and sexual politics.[11] It is often described as a protest of angry white men losing their privilege.[12] However, as Eszter Kováts[13] correctly pointed out, such views are rather problematic. Firstly, the phenomenon also emerged in countries lacking the presence of a strong feminist movement. Secondly, it offers liberal feminists, who often find themselves having to defend EU and UN norms, a morally comfortable position: Revising their positions, language and agenda would imply legitimising and capitulating to the often false and extreme claims of their opponents.[14] Despite the dominant position of the backlash hypothesis, there is a growing number of studies which show that there is a correlation between opposition to "gender" and a societal crisis which is not directly related to the liberation of women or LGBTIQA+ people. Both Kristen Ghodsee[15] and Agnieszka Graff[16] argued that the narrative of "gender ideology as a tool of Western colonialism" is related to the fact that feminist policies were introduced through Western-funded NGOs in many post-communist countries. This top-down introduced feminism was "en-

11 Cf. Lucy Nicholas/Christine Agius, The Persistence of Global Masculinism Discourse, Gender and Neo-Colonial Re-Articulations of Violence, Cham 2018.
12 Cf. Michael Kimmel, Angry white men: American masculinity at the end of an era, New York 2013.
13 Cf. Eszter Kováts, The Emergence of Powerful Anti-Gender Movements in Europe and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy. In: Michaela Kötting/Renate Bizan/Andrea Petö (eds.), Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe, Cham 2017, pp. 175–190.
14 Cf. ibid., p. 182.
15 Cf. Kristen R. Ghodsee, The Enemy of My Enemy Is My Friend: The Curious Tale of Feminism and Capitalism in Eastern Europe. In: Katharina Blum/Gertrud Pickhan/Justyna Stypinska/Agnieszka Wierzcholska (eds.), Gender and power in Eastern Europe: changing concepts of femininity and masculinity in power relations, Cham 2021, pp. 15–25.
16 Cf. Agniezska Graff, Blaming Feminists Is Not Understanding History: A Critical Rejoinder to Ghodsee's Take on Feminism, Neoliberalism and Nationalism in Eastern Europe. In: Blum/Pickhan/Stypinska/Wierzcholska (eds.), Gender and power, pp. 25–33.

gaged in a complex 'dance' with emergent capitalism in the region".[17] According to Ghodsee, such feminism deeply embedded in the Western free-market ideology interpreted local patriarchies as the only cause of women's hardship and completely ignored the growing social issues caused by the dismantling of safety nets and increasing unemployment in the aftermath of the transition from state socialism to state capitalism. While being blind to the context, the Western feminists helped to construct "the image of the backward and uncivilised East European male who drinks too much, beats his wife, and is otherwise incapable of embodying the progressive, liberal habitus necessary for the citizens of modern democracy".[18]

Accordingly, I suggest that anti-genderism should not be viewed only as a manipulation of far-right populists, religious fanatics and demagogues but should be analysed as a double-sided coin. On the one hand, there is the supply side of anti-gender ideology which consists of a diverse coalition of actors who provide a rich variety of arguments communicated in a variety of communication and political styles depending on the ideological background of the particular actor. On the other hand, there is the demand side. Drawing on similar arguments as Ghodsee and Graff, I argue that the people on the demand side often protest against feminism or LGBTIQA+ rights to express their dissatisfaction with the neoliberal capitalist system introduced after 1989. After the transition from socialism to capitalism, these people not only witnessed the destruction of the welfare state but were further humiliated by the rhetoric of merit and lost their dignity.[19] I argue that these people, influenced by anti-gender ideologues, who re-articulated the economic crisis into a crisis of family, adopted anti-gender discourse and translated their socio-economic issues into a heteronormative paranoia and fear that they will lose the last safety net they have created in a system which deprives them of both economic security and dignity: their family.

III. The "Hard-Done-By" Anti-Gender Activists

After observing and studying the activities of the Czech anti-gender coalition for four years, I identified three ideological branches: Catholicism, neoliberalism and nationalism accompanied by anti-system populism. Even though the common feature of the anti-gender coalition is opposition to "gender ideology", I argue that "gender ideology" represents a different kind of enemy for each of these ideological streams. In accordance with that claim, I argue that it is necessary to bring a class dimension into the interpretation of the discourse to fully understand the phenomenon.

17 Ibid, p. 25.
18 Ghodsee, The Enemy, p. 18.
19 Cf. Michael J. Sandel, The Tyranny of Merit. What's Become of the Common Good?, London 2021.

I conducted life-history interviews with ten prominent faces of Czech anti-gender politics (i. e., the people who were active in the dissemination of anti-gender discourse). A majority of them were Catholics with close ties to the Church. They had graduated from university and worked as High School teachers, lawyers, priests and politicians or were housewives who devoted their time to anti-gender activism, which also helped them to make a living. Dorit Geva,[20] who studied the French variation of the movement, already demonstrated that the Catholic, conservative middle-class activists often joined the French movement because they struggled for recognition since they could not convert their moral knowledge into cultural capital in the context of the secular field of distinction. While she provided a valuable interpretation of the motives of the highly educated conservative Catholics behind their identification with the claims of anti-gender discourse, the understanding of the motives of non-religious activists requires closer scrutiny. Thus, I focus on the non-religious branch of the coalition (i. e., the lower-educated activists who tend to adopt the anti-system, populist variation of the anti-gender discourse). Drawing on the categorisation of Koen Damhuis who studied different groups of supporters of radical right politics, I call these activists "hard-done-by".[21] According to Damhuis, these citizens usually stem from the less privileged strata of society. Just like their parents, they are usually less educated, tend to make their living in relatively low-status and poorly paid jobs and share the feeling that their standard of living is deteriorating.[22]

Three of the people I interviewed fit the profile described by Damhuis. These three activists were involved in an organisation called Traditional Family (Tradiční rodina a. s.), which spreads conspiracy theories and pro-Russian propaganda and distributes openly homophobic and transphobic texts and visuals. The organisation had personal and professional ties to Czech far-right parties and politicians, including the Czech populist far-right party, the Party of Freedom and Democracy (SPD). In this aspect, these activists differed from the rest of the activists who all distanced themselves from far-right political actors during the interviews and presented themselves as sensitive, tolerant, and highly educated people who rejected politics driven by fear and hate. These three activists had much lower economic and cultural capital than the conservative Catholics involved in the movement. Because they presented themselves as atheists, there was no apparent connection between their motivation to mobilise against "gender ideology" and a religious faith.

20 Cf. Dorit Geva, Non au gender: Moral epistemics and French conservative strategies of distinction. In: European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology, 6 (2019) 4, pp. 393–420.

21 Cf. Koen Damhuis, Roads to Radical Right. Understanding Different Forms of Electoral Support for Radical Right-Wing Parties in France and the Netherlands, Oxford 2020.

22 Cf. ibid., pp. 119 f.

IV. The Method and Positionality of the Researcher

To analyse how these selected activists do boundary work, I conducted life-history interviews with them. This particular method is useful for unpacking the way activists make sense of the world around them and their role in it without necessarily eliciting the prefabricated ideology of their movement.[23] Every interviewed activist granted me permission to record the interview and use the information in my work. After evaluating the private nature of the information they shared with me, I used aliases (e.g., Alena, Dana and Jan) to maintain anonymity. Alena and Dana finished their education after graduating from high school and Jan was educated as a carpenter. Alena and Dana are women in their late fifties who agreed to meet with me after I sent an e-mail introducing my research to the official e-mail of their organisation. Jan is a man in his early fifties, who is known for being involved in protests against immigrants and the removal of the statue of Soviet-era commander, Ivan Konev, which stood in Prague until it was dismantled in 2020. I approached him personally during the debate on "gender ideology" and the Istanbul Convention that took place in the Czech Parliament building in February 2020.

Even though I see neutrality as a desirable outcome of any research, I am also aware of the fact that it is not possible to entirely separate one's values from the outcome of their work because researchers are always located in a particular historical and political context and their identity in terms of class, gender, age, race, education, values and biography plays a significant role at every stage of research including planning, data collection and writing.[24] Thus, I now briefly explain my positionality.

As a white, Czech national who comes from a working-class family, I was an insider. I conducted the interviews in my mother tongue and was able to understand the cultural references the interviewees used during our discussion. I was also able to detect the irony and satire frequently used by my interlocutors. On the other hand, as a university-educated, unmarried woman who self-identifies as a feminist, I was an outsider. To overcome the ideological incompatibility, I started each interview by asking the participants to tell me how they would describe themselves in two minutes. I would continue by asking for details about the things they mentioned in their self-description. Afterwards, I would continue asking about their childhood, where they grew up and so on. During the interviews, all three participants were friendly and expressed gratitude that somebody

23 Cf. Kathleen M. Blee, Inside Organized Racism. Women in the Hate Movement, Berkeley 2002.

24 Cf. Kim V.L. England, Getting Personal. Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research. In: The Professional Geographer, 46 (1994) 1, pp. 80–89; Frances B. Henderson, "We Thought You Would Be White". Race and Gender in Fieldwork. In: Political Science and Politics, 42 (2009) 2, pp. 291–294.

was willing to talk to them. Furthermore, the fact that I was about twenty years younger helped me to acquire more information because the participants had a tendency to see me as a student and wanted to explain how things were from the position of an older and wiser communication partner.

V. Re-Contextualising Economic Boundaries into Anti-Gender Discourse

Since the people I interviewed for this article draw heavily on anti-system populism, in which the division of society into two camps, "us" versus "them", plays a crucial role, Michele Lamont's theory of symbolic boundaries is useful for explaining how people imagine their own identities through the process of othering.[25] According to his theory, where people draw symbolic boundaries is dependent on where people stand in society. By drawing boundaries, people locate themselves or their group. Such categorisation is by no means a neutral act of sorting. It is a process entangled in struggles over recognition, symbolic power and the possibility of imposing one's preferred way of being as the most legitimate.[26] Thus, the theory can help to study the relationality of the given group by paying attention to the groups against which members of a particular group see themselves in an antagonistic relationship and how they perceive social hierarchy by interpreting the differences between themselves and others.[27]

In her book, "The Dignity of Working Men", Lamont discusses how the way working-class people make sense of their lives is often based on morality. While the boundaries drawn by upper-middle-class people are often related to their skills, career and cultural capital, the boundaries of working-class people are often related to their ability to be "good people" (e. g., by working hard, disciplining themselves and providing for their families). In contrast, these working-class people expressed a belief that people working in corporations were immoral people whose entire lives are only about money. By stressing the moral dimension, workers often dissociate moral worth from socioeconomic status. Richard Hoggart argued in his classic book, "The Uses of Literacy", that the working class feels "that they are often at a disadvantage, that the law is in some things readier against them than against others".[28] His claim overlaps with Lamont's theory, as according to him, working-class people often express this feeling by constantly dividing society into "us" and "them". These "them" represent "'the people at the top', 'the higher-ups', the people who give you your dole, call you

25 Cf. Michele Lamont, Money, Morals, and Manners. The Culture of the French and the American Upper-Middle Class, Chicago 1992; id., The Dignity of Working Men.
26 Cf. Linus Westheuser, Pre-Political Bases of a New Cleavage? Social Identities, Moral Economy, and Classed Politics in Germany, PhD Thesis, Scuola Normale Superiore, p. 51.
27 Cf. Lamont, The Dignity of Working Men.
28 Richard Hoggart, The uses of literacy. Aspects of working-class life with special reference to publications and entertainments, Harmondsworth 1958, p. 53.

up, tell you to go to war, fine you, made you split the family in the thirties to avoid a reduction in the Means Test allowance".[29]

Since I draw on life-history interviews, I combine the theory of symbolic boundaries with the narrative analysis which is interested in how people develop social identities by telling stories about themselves. This theory argues that storytelling is not only an entertaining way of passing time but also a way for individuals to understand their own lives and those of others because such stories allow one to divide the social world into groups.[30] In other words, personal narratives help people to explain their experience of complex social and political structures (macro narratives): shared narratives or storylines serve to situate their actions and selves within larger structures.[31] Thus, narratives serve not only to create boundaries but also to maintain them.[32]

When telling their own stories, people often rely on pre-existing stories, or "formula stories", which exist on cultural and organisational levels.[33] These formula stories "seldom provide adequate descriptions of the practical experiences or unique characteristics of embodied people, rather they tend to have high drama, one-dimensional characters, and ignore real life complexity in others".[34] The people engaged in storytelling often recycle these formula stories and add details and complexity for themselves while treating others as caricatures.[35] These formula stories are not novel but are old existing "templates", which are reused and fitted to the particular story being told. To understand how these old formula stories were "twisted" into the anti-gender discourse, I applied insights from post-foundational discourse theory.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's classic book, "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics", explains how certain struggles are legitimised through existing discourses. For instance, they refer to early feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft who shifted the democratic principle of equality and liberty from the field of political equality between citizens to the field of equality between the sexes.[36] In what follows, I disentangle the origins of "anti-gender boundary work" and argue that the original narrative stems from class inequality which certain actors rearticulated and decontextualised.

29 Ibid., p. 53.
30 Cf. Dan P. McAdams, Introductory Commentary. In: Journal of Narrative and Life History, 5 (1992), pp. 207–211.
31 Cf. Heith Copes, A narrative approach to studying symbolic boundaries among drug users: A qualitative meta-synthesis. In: Crime, Media, Culture, 12 (2016) 2, pp. 193–213, here 196.
32 Cf. ibid.
33 Cf. Donileen R. Loseke, The Study of Identity as Cultural, Institutional, Organizational, and Personal Narratives: Theoretical and Empirical Integrations. In: The Sociological Quarterly, 48 (2007) 4, pp. 661–688, here 664.
34 Copes, A narrative approach, p. 196.
35 Ibid.
36 Cf. Laclau/Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, p. 154.

VI. "We Want Justice and Equality, Not Gender"

The bourgeois Catholics I interviewed – similarly to the anti-gender activists interviewed by Dorit Geva – often emphasised their high level of education. Unlike them, the interviewees belonging to the lower-middle and working class despised university education regardless of the field of study. During the interviews, they mentioned several professions which required a university degree and which they openly loathed. Among them were, for instance, psychologists, doctors and lawyers. There was a clear distinction between "us", the "normal people who use common sense", and "them", the overeducated professionals whose knowledge was, according to the interviewees, detached from the real world and who often produce useless concepts (e. g., "gender").

The knowledge of professionals was constantly undermined during the interviews. When I asked Jan what the concept of gender meant, he started yelling: "I always get so angry when I hear about gender. It is such stupid, stupid nonsense. Just hearing about it makes my blood pressure go up."

Science was frequently blamed for personal unfortune which the interviewees experienced. Alena, for instance, described a story about how her former husband and father of her four children came out as a transgender woman. She claimed that she tried to help him in the beginning by contacting two psychotherapists who would be able to help him with his mental health issues and convince him that he was a man and father of a family. She was disillusioned, however, when both of the experts supported her partner's choice to transition. According to her, this was the moment when she stopped believing in modern medicine and other sciences because they no longer served the people but promoted deviation. What Alena described is a common feature of populist anti-gender discourse, which relies on the idea that a state apparatus driven by "gender experts" imposes non-traditional gender identities on Czech people.

Similarly, when asked how she became a political activist Dana responded by sharing a personal story with me. She explained that she had not opposed feminism in Czechia in the 1990s when it first began emerging. Instead, she embraced the idea that girls do not always have to wear pink and boys do not always have to wear blue. However, she started rejecting feminism after her father reported her to the authorities for not taking sufficient care of her two children and social workers came to her place and took her son away from her. She finished the story by saying: "This is the feminism we have nowadays." In my previous work,[37] I demonstrated that Czech anti-gender discourse often depicts gender ideology as the ideology behind a system of stealing children from their biological

37 Cf. Eva Svatoňová, "Gender Activists Will Kidnap Your Kids." The Construction of Feminist and LGBT+ Rights Activists as the Modern Folk Devils in Czech Anti-gender Campaigns. In: Martin Demant Frederiksen/Ida Harboe Knudsen (eds.), The Construction of Evil in the Contemporary World, Helsinki 2021, pp. 135–156.

parents and selling them to rich LGBTIQA+ people. This narrative often draws on real stories of people who lost their children and targets the most vulnerable people through scaremongering. Thus, it provided Dana with a narrative that could help her to make sense of her painful story.

Related to the distinction between "us, normal people" and "them, the elites" was another distinction between Prague, the capital, and the rest of the country. Prague was seen as the city where the overeducated elites sat in cafés and talked nonsense while everybody else outside of Prague "work[ed] their asses off". This became apparent when I, for instance, asked Alena about who helps their organisation with legal matters. She responded that they have a surprisingly nice lawyer: "I was even shocked that a lawyer could be that nice when I saw him for the first time," she said. "Afterwards, I found out that he was not from Prague, and it all started making sense. That is why he was nice, haha." When I asked Jan if he lived in Prague, his answer was: "Unfortunately, yes."

Furthermore, Dana claimed that the political development of the entire country was only dependent on what the people living in Prague wanted and the people outside of the capital were completely ignored. During our conversation, she admitted that she had not supported the Velvet Revolution. Before 1989, she had just become a store manager and was living her dream until the revolution changed everything. She believed that only the people living in Prague at the time wanted the revolution. Everyone else was living an easy, comfortable life: "It was all the students from Prague. Nobody cared about what we wanted. They were all screaming, 'Havel to the castle!' and I did not even know who Havel was." Václav Havel was the first democratic president of post-revolution Czechoslovakia and independent Czechia as well as a well-known philosopher, playwright and member of dissent intellectual circles. By claiming that she did not know who Havel was, Dana once again distanced herself from the overeducated liberal intellectuals who tend to portray Havel as the symbol of Czech humanism and democracy.

Democracy was generally described as a fraud. Jan, for instance, told me that politics and elections were theatrical performances, in which "normal people like us" were extras or – even worse – the theatrical scenery. He claimed that "we, the people", have no chance to be part of the play. According to him, all we can do is "whistle when we don't like something and that's it".

In summary, all of the interviewees strongly emphasised the conflict between "us, the people" and the "corrupted politicians and experts". For example, when I asked Jan what he would like to bring to politics (he had attempted to enter official politics), he again positioned himself in contrast to the corrupted politicians and claimed that his goal was to: "Show that money is only a means, not a reason, to live. I would use the money, which, in fact, would not belong to me as a politician because it is from the people and should be spent on things other than Ferraris and huge villas. I would use it to serve the people and help the people who are not well off. (...) I would run programmes for homeless people, single mothers, families, seniors, and people who live in poverty because that is what this country lacks!"

Such distrust of the state, political elites and experts materialised further in the way the interviewees talked about "gender ideologists", who were always described as powerful people who stood above them and controlled them. According to my interviewees, the "gender ideologists" represented the state control apparatus whose aim was to bully the poor, powerless people. Members of this apparatus were seen as those who come into your house, "find that you do not have enough oranges in your fridge" and take your children away from you. Alena, for example, believed that we needed to prevent the ratification of the Istanbul Convention because otherwise people could report their neighbours just because they had a fight at home, which – according to her – can happen now and then. As a result, these people could lose their children forever. She asked me: "Why should anybody control whether it is a man or a woman who cooks at home? All this talk about old gender stereotypes! Give me a break. A family should decide how they divide their work at home themselves. Why should anybody criticise me for doing something when it is at home behind my closed door?"

Furthermore, the interviewees described "gender ideologists" as greedy and privileged because they were lazy and did not do much while having "astronomic salaries". According to Alena, "they [gender ideologists] push for the Istanbul Convention because it is such a good business for them because the state will keep sending them money." The interviewees often spoke as though the law did not apply to gender ideologists. Alena mentioned the group GREVIO, the expert body responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Istanbul Convention by the countries who ratified it.[38] She stated that it was outrageous how members of the group will have immunity from personal arrest or detention. She felt that people who were working for the Istanbul Convention had privileges that normal people could not have. Those laws did not apply to everyone equally. She compared the people from the GREVIO group to Nazis: "You know this Istanbul Convention is about raising 'a new human'. Now, this might be a very harsh metaphor, but after the Second World War, the Nazis faced the Nuremberg trials. (...) Why should the people from the GREVIO group have absolute immunity? Why should they have immunity after they stop working for the group? It does not make any sense. They should also go to trials for the evil they do just like the Nazis."

Moreover, there was a clear distinction between "us, the people who respect the natural order" and "them, the deviants", who do whatever their pleasure dictates and are celebrated in modern democracies. Such stories are often flavoured with nostalgia for old heteronormative times. In this case, it was particularly the communist dictatorship in which the police interrogated anyone who deviated from the norm. Alena, for instance, stated that reasons for imprisonment in the past are now celebrated as forms of heroism. The narrative of following the rules of the heteronormative order is linked to the "moral capital" of workers (i. e., their ability to work hard and provide for their families). According to this logic,

38 Cf. https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/grevio; 2.9.2022.

the LGBTIQA+ minority failed to do so because their lifestyle was self-centred, individualistic, centred on fun and pleasure and, thus, immoral.

Related to their self-understanding as morally good people, they often interpreted their activism as their urge to help people like them. They stated that they took justice back into their hands after it had been taken away from ordinary people. Describing the organisation, Dana said: "We are the problem solvers." She further explained that she was always proud when she met people in the street whom she had helped in the past and they recognised her and thanked her. Similarly, Jan described a feeling of pride when he received messages from people "thanking him for saying out loud what they were afraid to say". This emphasis on helping people "like us" was described by Hoggart who claimed that working-class people have a strong sense of being part of a group and put emphasis on being friendly, cooperative and neighbourly.[39]

All three interviewees emphasised the role of emotion in their activism. They all stated that anger and frustration drove them to political action, which not only empowered them but also provided them with an important social capital. Alena, for instance, kept mentioning journalists and other well-known figures from anti-gender circles who became her friends after she founded the organisation. She was also proud of what she had learned through activism. In the beginning, it was difficult for her to orient herself in the political procedures for delivering a petition to the Parliament: "When I heard about all the procedures, I started sweating. It was very intimidating. I was like 'Really? I have to go through all of this? I will have to talk there?'" She finished the story with pride, "I made it in the end!"

I was told a similar story by Jan, who described how honoured he was when people were reaching out to him on Facebook and thanking him "for saying out loud what they all thought but were afraid to say because people would label them as fascists". By drawing on these stories, the activists portrayed themselves as heroes helping the poor and powerless. Unlike the corrupted elites, they were not active in politics for the money and the status but because of their urge to fight injustice.

Finally, a strong boundary work did not emerge only between classes but also between entire regions – in particular, "us, Czechs (or Eastern Europeans)" and "them, the West". Alena, for example, told me that two of her good friends were living in Germany and Italy and both followed the situation and regularly informed her about the madness that was already going on there. She concluded: "You know, what happens in Germany comes here within the period of one year." As I demonstrated elsewhere, the narrative of "the degenerated West, which imposes its deviant values on the rest" has roots in the Russian anti-gender discourse and originates from an old narrative of Russian moral sovereignty.[40]

39 Cf. Hoggart, The uses of literacy.

40 Cf. Chrissy Stroop, A Right-Wing International. Russian Social Conservatism. The World Congress of Families, and The Global Culture Wars in Historical Context. In: The Public Eye, (2016) Winter, pp. 4–22.

This dichotomy also stems from global inequality. In particular, it stems from inequality between the EU member states in which countries from the CEE region are often perceived as underdeveloped, backwards and laggard. The West is, in turn, seen as imposing its values onto others. As Ivan Kalmar argues, the CEE region serves as a source of cheap labour and resources for the richer West. From a narrative perspective, these two imagery halves of Europe represent two characters. Western Europe (often referred to by the metonymy, EU) is seen as the villain and oppressor, while Central/Eastern Europe is seen as both the victim and the hero who can save the decadent West from degeneracy.

VII. Conclusion

Based on interviews with three Czech anti-gender activists belonging to the lower middle-class, this article argued that the anti-gender discourse of far-right populists is adopted and disseminated by people for non-religious reasons (despite the discourse's religious roots). This particular group of activists, labelled here as "hard-done-by", actively adopted anti-gender discourse to express their dissatisfaction with the inequality and capitalism introduced after the transition from state socialism. I argued that these interviewees frequently expressed communist nostalgia and the feeling that everything is worse than it was before the Velvet Revolution.[41] In accordance with narrative theory, their stories were strongly based on the "us" versus "them" division – the "gender ideologist" representing the corrupted elites who intervene in the lives of ordinary and powerless individuals.

When talking about "gender", "gender ideologist" and "democracy", they used formula narratives often present in the discourse of working-class people. Among them were, for instance, the moral boundaries between "hard-working, genuine people" and the "corrupted, greedy elite". While the workers interviewed by Lamont distinguished themselves from white collars, these activists talked about people working in human rights NGOs. Despite the employees of Czech NGOs earning rather low salaries, these activists ascribed to them similar characteristics as the workers interviewed by Lamont ascribed to the white collars. These "gender ideologists" were, in contrast to the interviewees, described as greedy, immoral, overly educated and detached from the lives of normal people. The interviewees portrayed their opponents as cunning people who do useless jobs to which foreign powers (such as the EU) send lots of money under the label of "promotion of human rights and equality".

This narrative was further strengthened by the fact that feminism was introduced to Czechia in the 1990s and early 2000s through NGOs sponsored by the West. Thus, women's groups acquired access to the political system due to

41 Cf. Kristen Ghodsee/Mitchell Orenstein, Taking Stock of Shock. Social Consequences of the 1989 Revolutions, Oxford 2021.

EU pressure despite the relatively closed domestic political opportunity structure. The fact that Czech women's groups were dependent on EU funding also elicited a cultural shift – raised awareness of new issues such as gender mainstreaming, gender discrimination in the workplace, domestic violence and issues related to balancing the professional and family lives of women and men.[42] While Czech women benefited from the increased awareness of such issues, this top-down introduction was articulated by anti-feminist actors as the unimportant and contrived issues of Western women that do not overlap with the issues of Czech women. Furthermore, these issues were often embedded in free-market ideology and seemed to focus mostly on issues of middle-class women.

What the interviewed participants shared was that they all expressed a feeling of being hard-done-by by the contemporary system. The common feature was that they missed the order of the old days and that they had the feeling that, whoever has money can now do whatever they want. They often sounded bitter when they explained how nobody appreciated how they tried to play by the rules (i. e., they became parents and took care of their families). According to them, the fact that you care for other people is completely overlooked in this individualist society. Instead, anyone who is "sexually deviant" and "wears weird clothes" in public is celebrated as a hero. Moreover, feminism was blamed for disrespecting how individual people care for their families without any reward. To my interviewees, it seemed that feminists cared only about middle-class women getting managerial posts. However, as Graff[43] argued, the introduction of the state capitalism meant dismantling social provisions in the realm of care (e. g., those regarding childrearing, elderly care and necessary care-work for the sick), and individuals with disabilities were abandoned and became invisible labour. While wealthy people could afford to employ professionals, vulnerable people living in precarious conditions ended up performing these tasks themselves. Thus, it is possible to conclude that, although the frustration of the anti-gender campaigners was targeted at feminists, the campaigners were dealing with tangible issues caused by the neoliberal political system.

Paradoxically, anti-gender discourse in Czechia emerged for the first time in the work of people belonging to the conservative and neoliberal think tank, Civic Institute (Občanský Institut), which embraces the idea of a free market economy. This organisation, which arose from a pre-revolutionary Catholicism, is centred on the idea that a 100 % pro-market economy must be introduced to prevent the rise of a communist dictatorship. They cite Friedrich Hayek and Milton as sources of their inspiration. Therefore, I argue that the power of anti-gender discourse lies in the fact that it appeals to people who are neither religious nor

42 Ondrej Císař/Katerina Vráblíková, The Europeanization of social movements in the Czech Republic: The EU and local women's groups. In: Communist and Post-Communist Studies, 43 (2010) 2, pp. 209–219.

43 Cf. Graff, Blaming Feminists.

profiting from the pro-market economy. Furthermore, this target audience often opposes such economic regimes, seems to be in favour of socialism and expresses communist nostalgia for when "the law measured everyone the same way". The involvement of these activists is beneficial for the religious and neoliberal middle-class, anti-gender actors.

Bourgeois conservative activists use a sophisticated communication and argumentation style and distance themselves from far-right political actors and their strategies. However, these "populist anti-gender activists appeal to the working class and economically struggling people" and use a low communication style which helps them to disseminate their knowledge beyond the circles of the conservative middle class. As one of the participants told me, every time she wrote promotional material, she sent it to her friend who provided her with valuable feedback: "She says things like, 'Look, there is a strange word here. I'm a housewife and when I iron laundry, while my children are crying here, I really don't have time to look up your smart words.' So, I change it according to her advice. In the end, it is thought through to the very last detail. It should be comprehensible to people of all age groups, even to the simplest grandmother."

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