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New Politics of Morality in Central and Eastern Europe: Actors, Discourse, and Context

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Abstract

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have recently witnessed a surge in protest, mobilization, and debates about marriage, abortion, gender, and feminism. This politics of morality has been notably more successful in the east than in the west of Europe: Most CEE countries have legally or even constitutionally precluded any chance of adopting same-sex marriage, some have rejected the Istanbul Convention, and many parliaments have debated 'gender' in a hostile manner. The rising conservative voice in politics appears to signal a sort of illiberal, conservative turn in post-Communist EU Member States. Most research on morality politics thus focuses on the conservative backlash in CEE or global conservative religious networks, while leaving particular Central European political dynamics aside. This article intends to shift the focus from the ideological or religious aspects of conservative mobilizations to the role morality politics has played in the context of increased political competition on the right and the rise of populism. Looking at actors, strategies, discourses, and the timing and context of individual types of mobilizations in CEE permits the analysis of the political logic of morality politics and especially an exploration of the instrumental nature of conservative mobilizations in detail.

Keywords: Politics of morality, Central and Eastern Europe, conservativism, mobilization, Christianity, populism

1 Introduction

In 2013, 80,000 marched 'for life' in the eastern Slovak town of Košice. When in 2019, 50,000 marched again in Bratislava, a Catholic website boasted: 'The Košice miracle has [been] reproduced!'[1] In more secular Prague, 3,000 and 10,000 'opponents of abortions and supporters of traditional families' participated in a similar 'national march for life'

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[1] https://prazsky.denik.cz/zpravy_region/pochod-pro-zivot-a-rodinu-pribrzdili-odpurci-akce-zasahovat-musela-policie-20190427.html; https://pochodzazivot.sk/

in 2013 and 2019 (respectively) too.[2] Under slogans such as 'life is joy' and 'I choose life not death,' pro-life groups, supported by the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), more or less explicitly demanded a restriction or ban on abortions, support for large families, and a cap on the demands of sexual minorities. Massive public opposition to abortion is surprising, to say the least, in both countries. The interruption of pregnancy was legalized throughout communist Eastern Europe in the 1950s, while induced abortion numbers have fallen significantly since the 1990s (Kocourková, 2019). The right to abortion remains supported by Czech and Slovak public opinion.[3] Elsewhere too, the issue of abortion has been re-politicized recently.

Since around 2012, conservative mobilizations have increasingly marked the political landscape throughout Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Issues that may have been considered politically marginal, long resolved, or far too moralizing (such as access to abortion, sexual education, the definition of marriage, and religious or 'civilizational' identity) have been subjects of political conflict. Traditions, values, and social norms are being debated in public gatherings, media debates, and during electoral campaigns. The 'politics of morality' regularly overshadows social and economic political issues.

According to the Hungarian historian Andrea Pető, the politics of morality is a 'new political phenomenon' with priorities very different from earlier public demands: people mobilize against international agreements, attend religiously motivated political events, and petition on behalf of majorities against individual or minority rights (Gelnarová & Pető, 2017). Large mobilizations against 'gender,' same-sex marriage, and abortions started in 2012–2013 and have not since ceased. The politicization of moral norms has polarized political landscapes into 'liberal' and 'traditionalist' or conservative camps. Legal, and in some countries even constitutional changes have redefined public norms. Public discourse has become markedly more conservative as the framing of women and minority rights has changed. Significantly, after decades of a socially liberal, secular order, petition- and protest-based campaigns are being carried out with an unprecedented level of conservative enthusiasm.

Yet the intensity of mobilization in this politics of morality does not seem to be correlated to the political relevance or practical policy impact of the demands. The question is therefore why have conservative issues and conservative values started to matter, and what explains their relative success in CEE? Two answers are at hand: populism, and the conservative reaction. Populist parties have made broad use of morality issues and their socially conservative positions in association with the new Global Right. The role of conservative Catholic civil society has recently been studied and conceptualized as a conservative turn in CEE (Kuhar & Patternotte, 2017; Bluhm & Varga, 2019; Köttig et al., 2017).

While the politics of morality has indisputable religious and ideological dimensions, this article is intended to focus on a different perspective and analyze the current conser-

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[2]   https://rcmonitor.cz/evropa/7281-Pochod-pro-zivot-v-Bratislave-%E2%80%93-kosicky-zazrak-se-opakoval

[3]   Support for 'the right to abortion' stands at 70 per cent in the Czech Republic (2019) and 65 per cent in Hungary (2015), while 51 per cent of Slovaks do not consider abortion wrong for socioeconomic reasons (2020). See: Czech Radio: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/cvvm-temer-tri-ctvrtiny-cechu-souhlasi-s-pravem-na-interrupci-a-vice-nez-60_1706152333_pj, IPSOS for Hungary: https://www.ipsos.com/en/global-attitudes-abortion, and Dennikn.Sk for Slovakia: https://dennikn.sk/1902200/vacsina-slovakov-interrupcie-za-istych-okolnosti-nepovazuje-za-nespravne-grafy/?ref=mwat.

vative shift; that is, the concrete dynamics of morality policies, i.e. their actors, strategies, alliances, and the timing and the political context of large mobilizations.

The argument developed here is that the arguable successes of Central European conservative mobilizations are also due to the special role the politics of morality has played in the peculiar context of right-wing populist politics. The largest mobilizations emerged at roughly the same time, around similar issues, and with a shared vocabulary and similar political dynamics, usually involving a fragmented right-wing opposition or a governing populist party.

The aim here is first to define the new morality politics and its forms and conceptualizations in CEE, and the methodology employed in the present argument. The second part will identify the main actors and their discursive strategies. The third chapter will analyze political opportunity structures – i.e. recurring patterns in the political dynamics of morality politics.

2   Approaching Central European politics of morality

Conservative protests and mobilizations against gender, abortion, same-sex marriage, etc. are part of a wider *politics of morality.* This term describes actors, discourses, and events linked to attempts to regulate moral issues through 'morality policies.' The term *morality policies* came into circulation in the late 1990s in US American political science (Mooney, 1999) and refers to political mobilization and conflict in relation to 'a set of atypical items, known as "morality issues"' (Engeli et al., 2012: 1), such as abortion, reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, etc. Morality policies generate conflicts around basic moral values, do not allow for a compromise, and are both socially salient and technically simple (Mooney, 2001). These issues typically include principled positions, for example, in relation to the prohibition of drugs, alcohol, religious dissent, or abortion (Mooney, 2001). Morality policies are distinct from social and economic issues due to their 'reference to fundamental decisions about death, marriage and reproduction, which is what connects them to the existing conflict between secular and religious political groups' (Engeli et al., 2012: 26). In the context of CEE, the politics of morality has been explored by the anthropologist Joanna Mishtal. Trying to understand why liberalization and democratization have led to 'declining tolerance for reproductive rights, women's rights, and political or religious pluralism' in Poland (Mishtal, 2015: 2), Mishtal explored the Catholic Church's return to social and political prominence. As she studied the 'religious and moral governance promoted in the name of Catholic-nationalist state-building' (Mishtal 2015: 13), her concept of a politics of morality helped conceptualize the redistribution of political power through the moralization of public norms.

Borrowing from Mishtal, the concept of a politics of morality used here is defined not only in relation to efforts to pursue various morality policies, but also in association with a certain type of power politics. When political actors systematically politicize moral issues in order to change public norms through legislative and judicial action or through public awareness campaigns, they engage in promoting not only certain morality policies, but also particular discourses, moral authorities, and political coalitions. This broader meaning reflects a shift from the occasional salience of moral issues as analyzed by Engeli et al. in 2012 in Western Europe, to a constant presence of politically polarizing politics of

morality in CEE. This article will not deal with all politics of morality, but with a very concrete, conservative type of contemporary politics of morality that differs from earlier conceptualizations, as described below.

2.1   The new politics of morality

The wider context of the early politics of morality was defined by the so-called culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s in US politics (Hunter, 1991). In response to the social and racial liberalization and the normalization of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, the evangelical right attempted to prevent or reverse federal norms regulating the racial desegregation of schools, gay rights, abortion, multiculturalism, and feminism. In the distinct context of Western Europe, morality policies were concerned with the legal and moral consequences of technical progress in bioethics, and with an increase in the acceptance of euthanasia and prostitution. In most countries, and especially in the Netherlands, morality issues were defined by the opposition between the secular, permissive, modernizing part of the political spectrum and the defensive Christian Democrats (Engeli et al., 2012).

More recent European morality politics is markedly different. Rather than controversially debating minor but ethically puzzling liberal or progressive issues, the new politics of morality is driven by a proactive conservative camp that seeks to prevent or reverse liberal legislation, or to incapacitate its effects through sophisticated advocacy and legal action. The conservative agenda has been set by the Catholic Church, activists, and by professionalized civil society organizations (CSOs), rather than by political parties.

The new politics of morality first appeared in Catholic European countries in the mid-2000s, in response to the socialist government's adoption of a same-sex marriage law in Spain (2004), in protest against sex education in Croatia (2006) and Italy (2007), and against same-sex marriage in Slovenia in 2009 (Patternotte & Kuhar, 2018: 7). Conservative mobilizations have had a transnational dimension since 2012 – after the success of a French protest movement called 'Demonstration for all' (La Manif pour tous, LMPT). LMPT mobilized hundreds of thousands for about two years to protest the legalization of same-sex marriage during F. Hollande's presidency. Because it managed to reach out far beyond the fundamentalist Catholic camp, also attracting moderately conservative and right-wing publics, LMTP proved the mobilization potential of this broadly conservative politics of morality (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018: 8).

The new European politics of morality shares several features with the latest mutation in US American conservative activism: individual mobilizations are ad-hoc, narrowly focused on one issue, and expressed in a civic language of rights (Gayte, 2019). On a discursive level, the former promotes a reformulation of social norms in a traditionalist, yet secular sounding vocabulary. It further puts liberal assumptions about the primacy of individual rights over collective norms into question, and seeks to delegitimize state intervention in certain spheres (gender-related policies, the definition of family, and sex education).

2.2   The mobilizations

The new politics of morality entered CEE via Western Europe after protests against the adoption of same-sex marriages in Spain and France. Despite mass mobilization, these protests did not succeed in reversing this legislation. By comparison, conservative mobi-

lizations in CEE have been noticeably more successful when it comes to sustained mass mobilizations, political change, and discursive shifts.

CEE's politics of morality developed around three main issues: same-sex marriage, 'gender,' and abortion. Opposition to same-sex marriage is the most salient issue in CEE morality politics. There were four massive petition-based campaigns for legislative change and subsequent referenda in Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, and Romania between 2013 and 2018. In 2013, the Croatian organization 'In the Name of the Family' collected almost 750,000 signatures, or those of about 1 in every 5 voters, for a referendum on a constitutional law that was intended to adopt a heterosexual definition of marriage. Since Croatia lowered the threshold for ensuring the validity of EU accession referendum the year before, the referendum for defining marriage as a 'union of man and woman' passed with the participation of 40 per cent of voters (Petričušić et al., 2017). In 2012, this was preceded by a successful petition campaign in Slovenia that led to a referendum in which 55 per cent of voters rejected the new civil code that would have opened the way to same-sex marriage. In 2014, 400,000 (more than 10 per cent of all voters) signed a petition for a referendum in Slovakia, the latter who overwhelmingly voted in favor of an exclusively heterosexual definition of marriage, and rejected the adoption of children by homosexual partners and compulsory sex education in schools, but which initiative failed on account of the low level of participation (21 per cent) (Rybar, 2016). The last referendum took place in 2018 in Romania, where 3.2 million people (i.e., about 17 per cent of the electorate) signed a petition. The referendum had a similar result to the Slovakian one. In the Czech Republic, a conservative petition against same-sex marriage bill was a reaction to an earlier petition in support of the bill. It matched the number of signatures of the former and succeeded in stalling the bill.

Even when ultimately unsuccessful, these massive campaigns have had a profoundly polarizing effect and succeeded in firmly marking out gay rights as a divisive and politically risky topic. They have also stigmatized the concept of 'gender,' which has become a battlefield of its own. Because of the few mentions of the latter in the 'Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence' (the so-called Istanbul Convention, adopted by the European Council), opposition to its ratification started in 2012 in Poland (Graff & Korolczuk, 2015: 178). In 2013, Catholic bishops, the Law and Justice Party (PiS), and conservative groups engaged in public opposition to 'gender ideology.' In Slovakia too, the bishop's conference decried 'gender' as a dangerous ideology. Demonstrations against the Istanbul Convention started in 2015, after a failed referendum, and continued until 2019, when the Slovak parliament rejected the ratification a month before the elections. Five thousand people protested its ratification in Croatia, while ratification was also stalled due to conservative opposition in the Czech Republic.

Finally, pro-life events have regularly been held throughout CEE for almost a decade. 'National marches for life' have been massive in Slovakia and Croatia and are growing in the Czech Republic. An organization based in France, One of Us, has counted 150 pro-life events in Poland and a convention was held in Budapest in 2017 under the slogan 'The new world order: Life and Family. The core of our cultural debate.'[4] Abortion is an ongoing political issue in Poland, despite the ban on on-demand abortions in 1993.[5] The

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[4]   https://oneofus.eu/
[5]   https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52301875

new populist government in Slovakia reintroduced a bill restricting access to abortions after a similar bill was narrowly rejected in 2019.[6] In Croatia, on-demand abortions are legal but largely inaccessible, as most authorized doctors refuse to perform them using their right to conscientious objection.[7]

2.3   Aims and methods

There are two perspectives about the new conservative mobilizations, which focus either on 'conservativism' or on mobilizing. The literature usually stresses either their discursive content, or their social-movement character.

Leading Central European academics have argued that the underlying logic of anti-gender campaigns is ideological. E. Kováts sees anti-gender discourse as an accessory to the populist far-right ideology that uses 'gender' as 'a tool to create a them-and-us divide to delegitimize opposing groups in society and politics' (Kováts, 2017: 184). Korolczuk and Graff argue that the new conservativism uses the politics of morality as a basis for a new illiberal and authoritarian universalism 'that replaces individual rights with rights of the family as a basic societal unit and depicts religious conservatives as an embattled minority' (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018: 798). Anti-genderism is framed as an instrument of an illiberal ideology as it provides a powerful 'anticolonial framing' for the new Right. Conservative mobilizations are analyzed 'as symptoms and consequences of deeper socio-economic, political and cultural crises of liberal democracy' (Kováts, 2017: 185), since 'antigenderism has become a new language of resistance to neoliberalism' (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018: 800).

So far, only one monograph, 'Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe. Mobilizing Against Equality' has offered a transnational comparison of conservative mobilizations (with contributions by Kováts, Korolczuk, and Graff). This more restricted perspective shows the new politics of morality as a distinct, cultural phenomenon – namely, as a conservative backlash against societal liberalization buttressed by a transnational advocacy network, a shared discourse, and a common repertoire of action. The editors frame conservative mobilizations around their most salient feature, the anti-gender discourse, and trace them back to a specific, Vatican-inspired, Catholic reaction to women's emancipation (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2015). In a separate text, the authors warn against conflating the Global Right and populism with this distinctly Catholic phenomenon (Patternote & Kuhar, 2018: 8). From the latter's perspective, the morality politics of anti-gender activism is a religion-centered, modern, discursive phenomenon, and a transnational social movement of a conservative type.

While the two perspectives are important pieces of the puzzle, neither deals with the concrete political context of Central Europe and the breadth of CEE's politics of morality. As Kuhar and Paternotte note, the development of conservative mobilizations is 'uneven' in Europe as state-church relations, timing, and discursive opportunities differ (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2015: 265–267). This is why this paper does not focus solely on the discursive or the transnational dimension of conservative mobilizations, but will fill this gap and attempt to answer questions pertaining to the latter's political opportunities and contextual dynamics: for example, which actors engage in conservative mobilizations, and what

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[6]   https://dennikn.sk/1937657/dlhsia-cakacia-doba-na-interrupcie-aj-zmena-poucenia-zaborskej-navrh-ma-podporu-koalicie/?ref=list

[7]   https://balkaninsight.com/2016/11/30/abortion-rights-under-fire-in-croatia-11-29-2016/

is their relationship? Are they ideologically driven, or opportunity-motivated? Is recent morality politics an ideological expression of an illiberal backlash? Or is it a tool of the populist repertoire?

This analysis assumes that an actor-centered analysis will permit a better definition of the phenomenon of the new politics of morality to be created. The study thus builds on the repertoires and opportunity structure of several major conservative mobilizations. This actor-centered perspective relies on conceptual tools of social movement theory, especially the perspective of transnational activism, discursive strategies, opportunities and constraints, and framing (Tilly, 1995; Kitschelt, 1998; McAdam & Tarrow, 2019). By identifying major events, their actors, their strategies, and their political opportunities, the study aims to analyze the various types of political logic of those who engage in a politics of morality. The study also uses extensive textual analysis of publications by influential actors (particularly G. Kuby and Catholic Church positions), as well as image archives and participant observation from several conservative mobilizations.

3   Conservative mobilization in CEE

Before exploring the political logic of conservative mobilizations, the related actors and strategies and goals need to be identified.

3.1   Actors

The politics of morality is implemented by several types of actors: single-issue Catholic advocacy organizations, transnational conservative networks that provide discourses and strategies, and finally, right-wing and centrist populists who make use of the mobilizations.

3.1.1   Catholic civil society

The Catholic Church contributed decisively to the successful mobilization of all the mentioned petition campaigns (Rybar, 2016). Croatian, Slovak (and Czech) episcopal conferences have stigmatized 'gender,' allowed priests to collect signatures for petitions,[8] encouraged believers to vote in referenda,[9] and helped organize the National Marches for Life.[10] But churches are not the primary agents in the morality mobilizations. A specific feature of the above campaigns is the leading role of professional conservative religious civil society.

The new type of CEE Catholic political activism was pioneered by the Croatian activist Željka Markić. A daughter of Catholic activists who have led a center for a natural family planning since the 1970s, Markić founded a small, single-issue organization 'In the Name of the Family' (*U ime obitelji,* INF) in 2013 and carried out the hugely successful referendum petition in Croatia.[11] This model was followed by the 'Coalition for Children' in Slovenia, the 'Alliance for the Family' in Slovakia, an eponymous organization in the Czech Republic, and by Romania's 'Coalition for the Family.'

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[8]   https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/12/croatia-religion-referendum/

[9]   https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/12/croatia-religion-referendum/

[10]   https://www.agensir.it/quotidiano/2016/1/13/slovakia-archdiocese-of-kosice-starting-a-series-of-holy-masses-to-support-culture-of-life/

[11]   http://www.veritas.hr/casopisi/2007_12/12_2007_sugovornici.html

The associations themselves do not represent a mass movement. They are (or were) small umbrella organizations which, nevertheless, had a clear agenda, mastered their media presence, and succeeded in gathering broad support from churches, religious societies, and from conservative or populist politicians. They nevertheless are specific morality entrepreneurs with strikingly similar names, programs, and strategies. Their logos, design, and online presentations (Paternotte & Kuhar 2015: 269) echo those of the original French organization.[12] Their secular discursive strategy suggests an organic coherence between individual manifestations of the recent politics of morality. Their objectives are limited to achieving single, clear-cut legislative goals. All formulate these goals concisely and non-ideologically; they do not in any way underline their Catholic identity, and they generally adopt the civil language of rights and a positive, almost festive outlook.

The temporal proximity and the nature of mobilization strategies also suggest that conservative mobilizations against same-sex marriage are part of a larger campaign, modelled after the LMPT.[13] The broad involvement of Željka Markić helps with mapping the transnational context of morality campaigns.[14] Assuming the role model of the successful Catholic activist, Markić supported other campaigns through a series of seminars in 2015 in Slovakia[15] and in 2018 in Romania.[16] She is further active in relation to advising pro-life activists at the European and global level. Markić is also a European Dignity Watch (EDW) lecturer and participant at Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) conferences.

3.1.2   The conservative Internationale

EDW and ADF are examples of professional lobbies that have helped spread an American type of politics of morality within the EU. EDW gathers together a range of American and European conservative organizations that are working towards a conservative redefinition and restriction of sexual and reproductive rights. The list includes the European branch of the American Center for Law and Justice; the influential conservative Polish Catholic think-tank Ordo Iuris, which in 2016 submitted a bill aimed at totally criminalizing abortion in Poland; the Spanish organization CitizenGO, which provides technical support to conservative online petitions; and a host of other traditionalist groups. Their representatives meet regularly at traditionalist conferences, EU lobby groups such as Agenda Europe, and the Russian-sponsored World Congress of Families (Datta, 2018).

EDW is a lobbying group that provides advice and advocacy on the issues of 'family defence' and the 'right to life' – that is, on abortion, euthanasia, and gay rights.[17] A prominent anti-human rights organization,[18] EDW advocates the notion of human *dignity*

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[12]   lamanifpourtous.fr

[13]   Tajni plan obiteljaša: Žele zabraniti razvod, pobačaj, kontracepciju, prenatalnu dijagnostiku…, *Faktograf.hr,* 28. 4. 2018, https://faktograf.hr/2018/03/28/agenda-europe-istanbulska-konvencija-obiteljasi/

[14]   https://balkaninsight.com/2018/11/21/new-world-order-the-natural-family-franchise-goes-global-11-05-2018/

[15]   0 "Na Slovensko pricestuje známa chorvátska aktivistka Željka Markić" 4, 12.01.2015, online: https://rim-katolicka-cirkev.webnode.sk/news/na-slovensko-pricestuje-znama-chorvatska-aktivistka-zeljka-marki%C4%87-4/

[16]   https://stiripentruviata.ro/declaratia-de-presa-a-d-nei-dr-zeljka-markic-membra-a-comitetului-de-initiativa-care-a-organizat-un-referendum-pentru-casatorie-castigator-in-croatia/

[17]   https://humanistfederation.eu/campaign/514/

[18]   https://humanistfederation.eu/campaign/514/

instead of human *rights,* elevates the 'complementarity of sexes' over gender equality, and promotes the absolute protection of life and of 'traditional families' rather than individual rights to sexual self-determination. EDW has monitored European referenda, agreements, and EU legislation with regard to morality policies. It was also involved in the European Citizens' Initiative 'One of us' – a pro-life petition which received over 1.7 million signatures in 2013.[19] AFD, in turn, is a conservative legal advocacy group that has, among other groups, participated in prominent freedom-of-religion cases at the European Court of Human Rights, such as *Lautsi v. Italy* in 2011.

The rise of the new politics of morality is related to the consolidation of a professionalized transnational conservative civil society (Datta, 2018). Since around 2013, the network has helped build up capacities for communicating, mobilizing, and setting agendas. Importantly, this conservative network has adopted formerly liberal strategies to achieve social change: these include single-issue mobilizations, the building of large coalitions, legal action, positively formulated goals, and a civic, secular language of rights.

3.1.3   *Right-wing populists*

Conservative mobilizations have rarely originated within political parties. Rather, Catholic activists have sought support from the political class by building single-issue coalitions against the policies of liberal or leftist governments. During the time of the four mentioned referenda, right-wing parties were in opposition and all supported the motions. In Poland and Hungary, where, under populist governments, conservative mobilizations cannot feed on the opposition logic, morality politics is nevertheless very present. It is used as a top-down populist governance tool. In Hungary, there is little pro-life or anti-gender civic activism, but a 'palpable anti-gender discourse' (Kováts & Pető, 2017: 117). The conservative discourse has developed in right-wing media around issues of sexual education, sexual minorities, and the translations of G. Kuby since 2013. It has been given a prominent place by the Fidesz government, originating both from Fidesz's small coalition partner, KDNP (the Christian Democratic People's Party), and from Orbán himself. Orbán's government introduced the 'fundamental right to life from the moment of conception,' restrictively defined marriage in the Hungarian constitution of 2012 (Grzebalska et al., 2017: 72), closed the last gender studies department in Budapest,[20] made abortion less accessible, etc. Conservative morality politics help Orbán profile himself as a pro-natalist illiberal – for example, by hosting the US and Russian-sponsored World Congress on Families.[21] In Poland, PiS has emphasized its anti-abortion stance several times since 2016 and used aggressive anti-LGBT rhetoric since 2019 as a way of opposing liberal centrist political adversaries – especially the mayor of Warsaw, who emerged as the most serious PiS presidential candidate. The move of PiS was supported by some 60 per cent of municipalities who adopted 'resolutions against LGBT propaganda.' These resolutions were proposed by Ordo Iuris, a conservative advocacy group and PiS auxiliary.[22]

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[19]   europeandignitywatch.org/about-us/
[20]   https://www.dw.com/en/hungarys-university-ban-on-gender-studies-heats-up-culture-war/a-45944422
[21]   https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/26/hungary-lgbt-world-congress-families-viktor-orban
[22]   https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/25/a-third-of-poland-declared-lgbt-free-zone/

3.2 Discursive strategies

Besides legislative changes, the most consequential achievement of conservative mobilizations is a discursive shift in the framing of social issues. Criticism of purported 'gender ideologies' has permitted the integration of various conservative elements into churches, civil society, and the general public within a new, secular master frame of the new politics of morality.

3.2.1 The hostile takeover of 'gender'

The concept of 'gender ideology' first appeared in public in France during the mobilizations against gay marriage in 2012, and shortly after in CEE. The phrase 'gender theory' sounds like a neutral description of what gender studies, feminism, and queer theory do. However, its roots date back to the late 1990s, when the term 'gender' was appropriated by church theologians and Catholic publicists, and negatively redefined in a broader Catholic environment.

The concept of 'gender ideology' is central to the RCC's response to the international acceptance of women's rights and gender equality in the 1990s, after the term 'gender' was first officially mentioned in a UN document. In 2003, the Pontifical Council for the Family issued a Lexicon and in 2004 a Letter to the Bishops on the cooperation between men and women, in which the concept of gender was criticized as an ideology (Anić, 2012: 29). All discourses and policies whose perceived impact was the 'denaturalization of the sexual order' (Garbagnoli, 2016) were categorized as 'gender theories.' Church documents define the term 'gender' as 'culturally formed sex,' which is supposed to replace the natural, essential sex binary with sexual fluidity. Since then, 'gender,' consistently referred to as 'gender ideology,' has been systematically targeted by conservative critics of feminism studies as sign of global Marxist elites purportedly seeking to eradicate the sexual differences between men and women (Case, 2011: 805) The strongly simplified, decontextualized, and alarming interpretation of the concept has since the early 2000s been popularized as 'gender ideology' by several Catholic lay publicists: namely, Dale O'Leary (*Gender Agenda*, 1997), Tony Anatrella (*Gender, la controverse*, 2011), and Gabriele Kuby (*Gender. Eine neue Ideologie zerstört die Familie*, 2014). The lay publicists have translated Church social doctrine into a secular language and made 'gender theory' a central concept in the new morality politics.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the term 'gender ideology' was introduced by the German Catholic publicist Gabriele Kuby. Her extensive and seemingly academic book *The Global Sexual Revolution: Destruction of Freedom in the Name of Freedom* explains modern social 'evils' such as high divorce rates, sexual permissiveness, and the social acceptability of homosexuality as due to the liberalizing effects of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Kuby's arguments are not original. Her book is an extensive, eclectic, and sometimes almost copy-paste compilation of the arguments of the above-mentioned Catholic publicists and of Vatican documents. It has become the single most cited text of reference for conservative activists.The national-conservative intellectual think tank, the European Conservative, offers a more elaborate discourse, especially concerning the criticism of liberalism, reformulation of human rights, and the apologies of Orbán, Marion LePen, Salvini and PiS, and warrants special study.

Kuby brought conservative discourse into Central Europe and has been credited with starting the politics of morality in Slovakia (Farkašová, 2019) and with strengthening the conservative discourse in Hungary (Kováts & Pető, 2017: 121). Her books have been translated into two dozen languages (incl. Hungarian, Czech, Croatian, Slovak, and Polish) and the author has undertaken several lecture tours hosted in church venues in CEE (Slovakia in 2012, 2013, and 2014; Croatia in 2013; Romania and the Czech Republic in 2014).[23] The book met with considerable success. The Czech translation sold out; Croatian Catholics found in Kuby's books an 'authentic Catholic answer' to the issues of gender and sexual revolution (Anić, 2012: 33). In Hungary, she was named visiting professor at one of the National Bank's foundations (Kováts & Pető, 2017: 117). Kuby has actively participated in petition-based campaigns in Croatia, and later in Slovakia. Most importantly, a plethora of religious periodicals and local parish web pages have published translations of interviews or excerpts from her books, and Church officials have reproduced her arguments.

3.2.2   The culturalisation of Christianity

Kuby's texts and interviews have played the role of a cultural critique of rapid social change and have helped many conservatives to make sense of civilizational issues for which the Church itself has no simple answer. Post-communist Europe was expected to be especially open to a conservative Reconquista because it has not been through the so-called sexual revolution to the same extent as Western Europe. In Kuby's words, 'Eastern European countries were saved by Communism from the cultural revolution in the West in 1968.'[24]

Kuby uses a secular language and strongly stresses her secular concerns: the atomization of society, the weakening of social cohesion, and 'neoliberal' exploitation. Both G. Kuby and T. Anatrella associate 'gender' with an ambivalent genealogy: they portray the latter as a project of left-wing ideology, so-called cultural Marxism, which undermines the dignity of traditional social roles, aims to break social hierarchies, and subverts social norms in order to make individuals more manipulable by world capital. Hence, Kuby's popularization of the Catholic response to liberalization genderism cannot be reduced to a religious narrative. It is also a traditionalist critique of neoliberalism and globalization (Graff & Korolczuk, 2018: 815). In Kuby's texts, traditionalism is the answer to both the spread of social liberal norms and the effects of a globalized neoliberal capitalism.

It is no paradox if the formulation of the traditionalist answer is thoroughly secular. In his analysis of the Catholic response to secularization in the wake of the 1960s, Olivier Roy explored the options of the Catholic 'lay offensive.' In his view, the Catholic Church could choose to reconquer politically lost positions and impose its norms through an alliance with the state (such as it attempted in Croatia and Poland through international treaties), or to withdraw into Christian communities (such as in 'The Benedict Option' of Rod Dreher) – or engage in a spiritual Reconquista. For Roy, the Vatican has chosen the third way. However, the Church has now to work with a secularized, individualized, pagan society. Hence it must 'reconstruct religion starting from [...] culture' (Roy, 2019: 146).

This culturalization of religion is what Catholic lay activists work towards. They for-

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[23]   https://web.archive.org/web/20150419183951/https://res.claritatis.cz/cr/6792-ztrata-svobody-ve-jmenu-svobody-globalni-sexualni-revoluce

[24]   My čekali svobodu. Rozhovor s Gabriele Kuby, immaculata.minorite.cz/images/immaculata/pdf/IM133.pdf

mulate a nostalgic vision of a religious past in a secular language, based on a pessimistic cultural diagnosis and provided with a political response: the traditionalist reaction. This reaction explicitly formulates Christianity as a cultural identity – an identity attached to the symbols of Christianity, rather than to its spiritual substance and practice. The politics of morality has thus become the most actionable element of 'Christianist' activism (Brubaker, 2017a).

3.2.3   'Gender' at the core of the politics of morality

Since 2013, the discursive take-over of 'gender' has succeeded. The simplified and negatively charged notion of 'gender ideology' has largely established itself as a neutral, descriptive term in the public sphere. 'Gender' and 'gender ideology' have been systematically conflated and 'gender ideology' has become the main ideological motor of the new morality politics.

The Church actively spread moral panic concerning 'gender' through widely read episcopal letters in 2013. The Polish Episcopal Conference wrote: 'Gender ideology is the product of many decades of ideological and cultural changes that are deeply rooted in the Marxism and neo-Marxism endorsed by some feminist movements, and the sexual revolution. [...] It maintains that biological sex is not socially significant and that cultural sex, which humans can freely develop and determine irrespective of biological conditions, is most important. [...] The danger of gender ideology lies in its very destructive character both for mankind, personal contact, and social life as a whole' (Kolorczuk, 2014). T. Pieronek, a Polish bishop, caused a short-lived scandal by describing 'gender ideology' as 'a worse threat than Nazism and Communism.'[25] Slovak and Croatian episcopal letters followed suit.

In the Czech Republic, during a national holiday sermon in St. Wenceslas in 2019, Petr Piťha, a priest and a former minister of culture, characterized the Istanbul Convention as a 'perfectly perverted law, which is [...] directed against the traditional family. [...] The proposed laws and their proponents have adopted the ideology of Marxism and Nazism. [...] Either we are free [...] or we are not. Now, for example, we are supposed to adopt the Istanbul Convention in the name of a powerful pressure group of genderists and homosexualists.'[26] This remarkable speech was later criticized by several Church voices informed about gender issues, such as Tomáš Halík.[27]

Alarming pastoral letters proved to be consequential interventions concerning the definition of marriage, women's rights, and the scope of human rights. Invoking a bias against minorities, Czech Republic's new ombudsman, Křeček, refused to deal with ethnic and sexual minority rights. The Slovak ombudswoman's annual report was rejected by parliament for her defence of abortion and sexual minorities.[28] The director for gender equality at the Slovak Labour ministry quit because the new Labour minister forced the office 'to accept the comments of the Conference of Bishops of Slovakia, who are trying to erase gender equality from the vocabulary altogether.'[29]

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[25]   https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/27/opinion/sierakowski-the-polish-churchs-gender-problem.html
[26]   https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/kazani-arcibiskupstvi-katedrala-svateho-vita-svaty-vaclav-petr-pitha-istanbulska-umluva.A181009_100435_domaci_lreNa
[27]   Klaus hájí neobhajitelné (říjen 2018), http://halik.cz/cs/clanky-eseje/clanek/465/
[28]   https://dennikn.sk/1892658/spravu-ombudsmanky-poslanci-potopili-zastavala-prav-zien-a-lgbti-ludi/
[29]   https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22408264/director-of-gender-equality-department-quits.html

The reach of the politics of morality was thus strengthened by a unified, traditionalist discourse of conservative civil society that caused shifts in the public framing of 'liberal' issues. The conservative framing of gender equality and minority rights has created a platform for right-wing and populist groups to unite against their liberal or centrist adversaries. Coding policies in terms of morality issues whenever they include reference to 'minority,' 'gender,' 'abortions,' and 'LGBT' issues has become a tool for political struggle.

4   Morality politics and political context and opportunities

The relative success of a politics of morality and its ongoing salience is certainly due to the professionalization and breadth of its actors, of the effective discursive strategy and a multi-layered discourse that combines civilizational, cultural, and political criticism, and moral appeal. However, traditionalist answers hardly seem sophisticated or engaging enough to constitute an ideological alternative to liberalism. In fact, the ideological content is thin or shallow, and the diagnosis of civilizational evils is arguably dilettante and naively moralizing. Its appeal is clearly other than ideological, and the reasons for its success need to be sought elsewhere – namely, in the political dynamic of the contexts and opportunities of conservative mobilizations.

4.1   The symbolic politics of moralist mobilizations

A surprising feature of the massive mobilizations during the four referenda campaigns is their symbolic character. Unlike in Western Europe, the campaigns did not protest an actual plan to adopt same-sex marriages (with the possible exception of Slovenia). The three remaining states did not allow registered partnerships, and had already defined marriage exclusively as between a man and a woman. In Slovakia, a constitutional definition of family was adopted a year ahead of the referendum. Only in Slovenia and the Czech Republic was a vote on a same-sex marriage bill a real possibility, but this has so far been fended off by a conservative opposition. Hence, the referenda did not seek any fundamental change. So it cannot be said that the campaigns have failed: symbolically, they were very successful. They confirmed the existence of popular opposition to liberal norms and the public role of churches. They also introduced a traditionalist language into public debates.

The politics of abortion also has a strongly symbolic character. A legal ban on abortions is unrealistic outside of Poland, despite regular National Marches for Life. However, in Slovakia, for example, further administrative restrictions on abortions have a good chance of being adopted after Slovakia elected a thoroughly conservative parliament in 2020. In Poland, the conservative government has tried to extend the ban to cover health-threatening pregnancies, causing strong protests in 2016.[30] The symbolic, discursive, and moralizing character of conservative campaigns is also an expression of political power. As Joanna Mishtal has shown, having dominance over reproduction behavior is more important to the conservative establishment than the actual incidence of abortion. Illegal abortions continue to be carried out in massive numbers in private clinics, which covertly advertise their services. This breach of law rarely gets prosecuted. Anti-abortion campaigns

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[30]   https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/23/abortion-poland-mass-protests-against-tightening-of-law

have been accessory to what Mishtal calls a Church-led *moral governance* that produces docile men and women within a larger religious-nationalist state building project (Mishtal, 2015). A more subtle form of conservative moral governance is in the making elsewhere. Access to abortions in Slovakia and Croatia became difficult after many private and public clinics started refusing to carry them out on conscientious grounds. Hungary has, too, imposed lengthy administrative procedures on abortion.

4.2   Unifying the right-wing opposition

The second striking character of conservative mobilizations is their role in structuring the right-wing political spectrum in opposition and in government. The political context of conservative mobilizations shows three rather contingent features.

First, all four major petition campaigns in CEE (and the French and Spanish protests) took place under socialist governments, and were backed by a fragmented right-wing opposition. The mobilizations helped unify the right-wing camps behind a broadly conceived conservative proposition. Second, the governments were led by nominally socialist parties (SDP and Smer governments in Croatia and Slovakia, SDP-supported governments in Romania and Slovenia). Those were direct or indirect heirs of former communist parties that later turned into champions of Europeanisation. The right-wing opposition adopted the rhetoric of protecting freedom, family, and tradition against the purported cosmopolitan liberalism of left-wing governments. These center-left parties could be framed as 'socially liberal.' The conservative cultural framing of liberalism made parallels between communist and post-communist social engineering as destructive of national churches and 'traditional values.' Third, these socialist parties have also presided partly or fully over the EU accession project. They have thus been credited with implementing European standards of governance and liberal norms, including antidiscrimination laws that protect individuals, minorities, and the environment. An important element of the conservative mobilization is the criticism of social change that is seen as imposed from outside: Brussels is made responsible for dictates that purportedly favor minorities and has introduced an incapacitating political correctness and foreign social norms – including multiculturalism and gender fluidity. Such a foreign 'moral order' is explicitly framed as a demographic risk by Catholic proponents: weakening social hierarchies would lead to fewer births and would jeopardize the survival of Christian nations – during a time when a 'youth bulge' threatens the South (Kuby, 204: 373). Hence, conservative mobilizations have a strong anti-colonial element (Graff & Korolczuk, 2017) in which socialist (or post-communist) elites are framed as allies of foreign, anti-national policies.

The referenda hence occurred when both the right and conservatives benefited from them. The morality framing of the socialist or center-right as 'liberals' helped the opposition to develop a common denominator for broad right-wing mobilization. The whole right has supported the campaigns and has thus legitimized the claims of a conservative fringe. Morality mobilizations have shifted the whole right towards conservative positions. In Poland, anti-gender campaigns have 'enabled a political alliance between nationalism and religious fundamentalism, contributing to the right-wing electoral victory of 2015' (Graff & Korolczuk, 2017: 178).

By framing political adversaries, especially the left, as 'liberals,' the politics of morality has contributed to culturalizing political cleavages. However, a culturalist strategy has

little traction when it does not get translated into political strategy by centrist or ruling parties. The fate of several leaders of successful mobilizations highlights the primacy of party politics over purely cultural dynamics. Croatian and Slovak activists tried to transform their accumulated capital into electoral politics by founding political parties. So far, all have remained unsuccessful because center-right coalitions did not integrate them. Željka Markić moved into the field of nationalist agitation and collected numerous signatures (370,000) for a change of election law that would restrict ethnic minority rights. A moderate nationalist coalition government, however, blocked her referendum initiative on formal grounds. The Kuffa brothers, morality agitators in Slovakia, were pushed towards the political extreme.

4.3   Competition on the right

The politics of morality is not unaffected by party dynamics: between the right-wing parties and the conservative citizen movements, the parties prevail. But party competition on the right leads to intensified morality politics. In a situation of a generally weakened left in CEE, political competition has largely moved to the right-wing side of the political spectrum. New, civic, populist, and neo-nationalist political subjects appear right-of-center and fight for constituency and for the dominance of the right. Here, morality politics emerges as the central issue of political competition on the right.

Examples of instrumentalized morality politics within the right wing abound, especially as regards polarizing votes, such as during presidential elections. In Poland's 2020 presidential elections, the incumbent A. Duda attempted to push his rival Trzaskowski into a 'liberal' corner by linking him with 'LGBT ideology.' Since they are both right-wing, conservative candidates, the dividing line between liberal and national conservativism is drawn over gender issues. In 2018, the candidate of the governing socialist party Smer in Slovakia presented himself as a candidate of family and tradition, and also attempted to push his rival, Zuzana Čaputová, into a liberal corner regarding adoption by same-sex couples. Namely, the nominally socialist Smer adopted a populist, nationalist, and conservative rhetoric. M. Šefčovič, however, was not a very credible as a Catholic candidate: He could not quote almost any of the Ten Commandments on a live show. Also, Zuzana Čaputová managed to subtly navigate the liberal-conservative divide and eventually won the vote. The shallow instrumentalization of moral conservativism showed that cultural issues have for a time replaced socioeconomic ones, but also that betting on the culturalist framing of political competition is not always an effective strategy.

Lacking the existence of other program issues, right-wing parties compete for leadership of the conservative or Christian camp by doubling up on morality policies. The respective conservative outbidding has entrenched and escalated morality politics. This tendency is most visible in Slovakia, where several populist and nationalist projects have built a conservative constitutional majority since the demise of the liberals at the 2020 elections. They now collectively adopt ever more conservative rhetoric.

4.4   Populism and politics of morality

Finally, a politics of morality has been a key element of the populist strategy in CEE. In a weak conceptualization by Rogers Brubaker, populism is defined as a discursive and stylis-

tic repertoire with an anti-elitist core (Brubaker, 2017b). For the populists, 'the people' is a 'bounded collectivity' defined in contrast to the 'threatening outside' or to 'internal outsiders' such as cosmopolitan elites. Further tropes involve 'antagonistic re-politicization: the claim to reassert democratic political control over domains of life that are seen, plausibly enough, as having been depoliticized and de-democratized'; additionally, majoritarianism, protectionism, and the rejection of expertise and institutional procedures (Brubaker, 2017b).

From this broad and non-ideological perspective, populism is defined as a vessel that specific populists fill with variable content. The politics of morality has provided populists with ready-made tropes and polarizing issues to employ. Migration and 'gender' were two major populist tropes in which anti-elitism, 'common sense,' and nativism came together. Morality entrepreneurs in Central Europe have indeed repoliticised marriage, feminism, abortion, and claimed to defend common sense, native, majoritarian values against 'foreign' cultural imports and liberal, post-communist elites. Andrea Pető coined the concept 'symbolic glue' to describe the hostile rhetoric concerning 'gender ideology,' emphasizing its ability to create broad electoral or protest platforms (Kováts & Põim, 2015: 126). The abstract, complicated, and therefore easily manipulated concept of gender and an array of new phenomena associated with changing gender roles (transgender rights, homosexual marriage, *#metoo,* etc.) were easily used by right-wing and populist mobilizations in the symbolic field of morality politics. Opposition to 'gender' has connected Catholics, LGBT opponents, pro-life activists, 'masculinists, and anti-feminists' on the one hand, and the extreme right and anti-globalists, but also some neoliberals on the other (Meyer & Sauer, 2017: 59).

The politics of morality has indeed offered a 'new rhetoric of identity formation' (Kováts & Põim, 2015: 126). The dual rejection of the cultural other (migrant, Muslim) and the social other (elitist, liberal, 'genderist') has helped to reformulate national identity in populist discourse as conservative, Western, and Catholic or Christian. A Christianist, nativist, anti-colonial national self-positioning has repeatedly and successfully been used by right-wing populists since 2013 to mobilize the public (Brubaker, 2017a). The protean nature of 'gender' and anti-gender politics has been extensively analyzed (Graff, 2016; Grzebalska & Pető, 2017).

5   Conclusion

Since 2013, the politics of morality have developed in Central and Eastern Europe in ways that have left durable traces: several countries have witnessed large conservative mobilizations; the idea of same-sex marriage and the concept of 'gender' have been problematized and restrictions on abortion have been put back on the agenda. However, we need not see in those developments proof of a generalized post-communist *illiberal turn* just yet.

The success of morality politics is due, in part, to a specific political dynamic. Conservative mobilizations developed under the condition of a fragmented right-wing opposition when morality issues could dynamize the opposition. Further, morality politics has become the field in which, for a lack of other issues, right-wing parties continue to outbid themselves in a struggle for the leadership of the right. Third, populist parties made ample use of this anti-colonial and anti-elite sentiment, and superimposed on it an anti-liberal one

to dominate and mobilize majorities. On the other hand, we may cautiously conclude that conservative mobilizations depend on the specific conditions of party dynamics. A presence of strong centrist parties, civil populism, or a substantial policy issue (such as public health or the economy) may easily sweep the rug from under the conservative outbidding and moralizing politics.

On the other hand, a possibly lasting effect of the new politics of morality is the culturalization of political competition. The latter is in part also due to situational reasons: the ability of conservative activist networks whose discursive strategies were not met with serious intellectual opposition, and whose claims were promptly legitimized by media and large parts of the political class. The conditions of this initial success may change. What seems to be a lasting change is the discursive shift in the framing of gender and women's rights and human rights in general. An anti-modernist culturalist discourse has shattered the discursive monopoly of a progressive universalism. Hence, creating a deeper understanding of conservative discourses and strategies remains an ongoing task.

Acknowledgements

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